

Sex in the Head

SEIRIOL MORGAN

ABSTRACT Recent philosophical writing on sexual desire divides broadly into two camps. Reductionists take sexual desire to aim at an essentially physical bodily pleasure, whereas intentionalist accounts take a focus upon the reciprocal interaction of the mental states of the partners to be crucial for understanding the phenomenon. I argue that the apparent plausibility of reductionism rests upon the flawed assumption that sexual pleasure has the same uniform bodily character in all sexual encounters, which rests in turn upon flawed assumptions in the philosophy of mind. Drawing on an Aristotelian understanding of persons as essentially embodied minds, I outline an alternative account of sexual desire, showing how the nature of the sexual pleasure we take in the body of another can be transformed by the significance the person or situation has for us. I proceed to show that my account of sexual desire is able to accommodate the entire range of sexual phenomena, including those that seem to undermine standard intentionalist accounts as well as those that reductionists have difficulty in fully explaining. Finally I make some brief remarks about the implications of my account of sexual desire for sexual morality, suggesting some reasons why it casts doubt on the view that universal participant consent is sufficient for a sexual act to be morally unproblematic.

1

My aim in this paper is to advance a number of arguments against an influential philosophical account of sexual desire, an account which has become known as the “plain sex” view, after Alan Goldman’s paper of the same name [1]. This view takes as its central observation the manifest fact that human beings experience through sexual activity intense physical sensations which are extremely pleasurable, and endorses our common-sense view that it is just these pleasurable physical sensations which are the object of sexual desire. When one human being desires to have sexual intercourse with another, what she primarily desires is to experience the physical pleasure that contact with his body and their mutual dynamic bodily interaction will bring. Sexual desire is “desire for contact with another person’s body and for the pleasure that such contact produces” [2]. Sexual desire is satisfied when that pleasure is experienced and frustrated when it is not, and is most effectively satisfied when pleasure reaches its maximum intensity, usually in orgasm. Sex is good as sex on those occasions and with those partners that provide us with the most pleasure, best when that pleasure is maximized. For this reason it is also known as the “hedonistic” account of sexual desire [3].

This is not to say that other things may not be going on during sex, some of which may be pleasurable in non-sexual ways. For instance, the sexual partners might be in love with one another, and taking pleasure in the mutually shared intimacy that the sexual encounter brings them. But this pleasure, although perhaps very important to

the experience overall, will not be sexual pleasure, but concurrently experienced emotional pleasure. Sexual pleasure is physical pleasure, and sexual desire *per se* is desire for that physical pleasure [4]. This is borne out by the observation that it is perfectly possible to experience really intense sexual pleasure through intercourse with someone one is not in love with, and to be in love with someone one does not desire to have sex with. Admittedly, on occasion this other factor might be a person's prime motive for engaging in sexual activity. But this just goes to show that people can have varied motives for engaging in sexual activity, and does not impugn the plain sex view as an account of sexual desire.

For reasons which will become clear, I will call this the "reductionist" account [5]. The view is widely held amongst the public in general, and has recently been defended by Igor Primoratz as part of a book-length study of sexual morality [6]. Nevertheless, as it is stated by its contemporary defenders, the view is mistaken. This is because it rests on an inadequate philosophy of mind, which misrepresents the relationship between our consciousness and our embodiment. At any rate, so I shall argue. The issue is important because the reductionist view of sexual desire has been taken by Primoratz and others to provide important support for an influential view of sexual morality, that (genuine) universal participant consent is sufficient for a sexual act to be morally unproblematic [7]. In my view, because Primoratz misunderstands the nature of sexual desire, he fails to see that some of it is pretty dark in character, and consequently that we can sometimes have good reason not to indulge it, even if everyone involved were to consent to its gratification. I will touch on the moral implications of my views on sexual desire at the end of the paper, but I will have to leave a fuller treatment of the issue to another occasion.

Apart from theological views emphasizing procreation, the main competitors of the plain sex view are a cluster of views which argue that understanding the interpersonal intentionality that occurs during sexual intercourse is essential for understanding sexual desire. I'll call these "intentionalist" accounts [8]. These views also take physical arousal to be central, but root that arousal not merely in a physical pleasure at contact with the body of another, but through the mutual inter-relation of the experiences of the partners. All these accounts claim that bodily arousal or "incarnation" is, at least in normal cases, necessarily connected through mutual perception and interaction with the experiences of one's sexual partner. Normal physical arousal is thus "double reciprocal," depending on and responding to the arousal of one's partner [9]. According to the intentionalists, then, sexual desire as humans experience it is not an "appetite," and its complex object precludes it being possessed except by creatures able to appreciate the significance of and respond to the mental states of others, something only persons can do.

Different intentionalist views disagree about the typical depth and focus of this mutual reciprocal intentionality. Roger Scruton for instance takes a primary focus on the particular individuality of a sexual partner to be of crucial importance for healthy arousal [10]. And Robert Solomon, whilst playing down individuality, thinks that other intentionalist accounts have failed to appreciate the complexity of sexual intentionality. In his view we are aroused not by the mere arousal of a partner, but by the complex interpersonal attitudes she aims to communicate and her arousal at the messages one oneself communicates, this communication taking place through a universally understood language of the body [11]. They also differ in whether they take the claim to be

solely descriptive or both descriptive and normative, and in the frequency and degree to which they think actual sex acts display intentionality. Thomas Nagel for example seems to take mutual reciprocal incarnation to take place in all normal human sexual encounters, whereas Scruton thinks that a lot of casual sex does not have the fully individualizing intentional structure that we are normatively required to aim at [12]. Nevertheless, despite these differences the views share enough in their essentials to be grouped together in opposition to the anti-intentionalist “plain sex” view, which takes sexual desire to be for a non-intentional bodily pleasure.

It seems to be generally agreed by the advocates of the competing views that a central test of the adequacy of any and all of them is their ability to give convincing accounts of the many and varied phenomena of human sexuality. There are a great many ways in which people behave which are obviously aimed at gratifying sexual desire. They range from penetrative vaginal intercourse between a fertile married couple to some of the more bizarre of the activities traditionally labelled perversions [13]. Each of the phenomena must be accounted for, as sexual, either completely by the account of sexual desire itself or by that account combined with a claim about factors external to sexual desire. Upon examination, they can be grouped, since some seem more amenable to construal in terms of purely physical pleasure, and others in terms of interpersonal intentional arousal. Positions emphasizing intentionality tend to point to those cases where an individual’s pleasure appears to depend on the individuality of a partner or the nature of her attitudes, such as the personal exclusivity of some individuals’ desires, the way arousal can be “mutual reciprocal,” or the way pleasure can quickly turn to disgust if our beliefs about the identity or attitudes of the person who has aroused us change. Their proponents argue that only accounts which place intentionality at the heart of desire can account for these phenomena. On the other hand, the advocates of the “plain sex” view point to a number of prevalent phenomena in which the object of desire most plausibly appears to be a purely physical pleasure. The participants in casual sexual encounters quickly initiated and lasting but a short time seem to be entirely unconcerned about the particular identity and sometimes even the thoughts of their sexual partners. So do most men who use the services of prostitutes. And solo masturbation is clearly sexual, but cannot involve interpersonal intentionality for obvious reasons. Such phenomena are highly problematic for accounts of sexual desire in which such intentionality is central.

This seeming inability of intentionalist accounts to capture the obviously sexual nature of these phenomena is a central plank in the reductionists’ case against them. In their view it is obvious that human beings frequently engage in sexual activity which can only be seen as motivated by a desire for physical pleasure, unconnected with love or communication or reproduction or anything else. So accounts which locate the essence of sexual desire in something beyond simple bodily pleasure must be mistaken [14]. By contrast, they observe, the participants in sexual encounters where the individuality of the partners or the beliefs of the participants about each others’ experiences seem important still experience bodily pleasure, and still seem to aim at it. They therefore take themselves to have identified the common denominator in all these cases of sexual desire, and accordingly conclude that the essence of sexual desire is a desire for the peculiar bodily pleasure that sexual activity brings. Some concede that intentionalist accounts have made important and interesting observations. Participants in a sexual act may indeed communicate attitudes to one another, or experience sex as

strengthening their loving bond. But reductionists take these to be observations about additional things that take place during sexual encounters, which are extraneous to the gratification of sexual desire itself [15].

Of course, the hedonistic view of sexual desire as aiming at bodily pleasure does not of itself entail the liberal sexual morality that Primoratz and Goldman advocate. After all, this is exactly how traditional anti-eroticists like Plato and Augustine are supposed to have thought of sexual desire. As far as they were concerned this is exactly what is wrong with it — it focuses our attention on fleeting bodily pleasures and distracts us from what is truly important, God or the Good. But the hedonistic view does entail the liberal morality in conjunction with various claims that have been thought in the modern period to be highly plausible, for example the view that pleasure is intrinsically good. And indeed Goldman in particular suspects that the spectre of pre-modern anti-eroticism lingers within intentionalism [16]. In his view all these accounts share an inability to acknowledge the animality of our sexual nature. This is due to an unwillingness to accept that the essence of human sexuality lies in the sensual embodiment we share with the animals, because of the unacknowledged hangover from a pre-modern Christian-Platonic mind/body dualism, which denigrates the “merely” bodily in favour of the mental. On this view Augustine, for example, accepted the evaluative contrast between mind and body, placed sex firmly on the bodily side of the divide and accordingly denigrated sexuality [17]. Goldman’s charge is that intentionalists secretly accept the evaluative contrast, but, unwilling to denigrate sex, attempt to give an account of our sexual desire which locates its essence in the higher human faculties, so assimilating sex to the privileged mental side of the dualism. In so doing they misrepresent its nature. But there is no need to so assimilate it in order to avoid denigrating it. All that needs to be done is to reject the negative evaluative connotations that have traditionally been associated with the body and its pleasures [18].

2

These arguments rest upon a crucial but flawed assumption, however. The assumption is one about the uniformity of the phenomenon of sexual pleasure. The reductionists observe that there are obviously types of human sexual behaviour which express a sexual desire which appears at best marginally connected with intentionality. In such cases the participants are clearly best interpreted as aiming at uncomplicated bodily pleasure. They then conclude from this observation that the essence of sexual desire is a desire for bodily pleasure, taking the pleasure aimed at in these encounters as paradigmatic of sexual pleasure as such. But this is a mistake, because it assumes without argument that sexual pleasure is a simple phenomenon which manifests a uniform essentially physical character in all its instances. As I will soon show, sexual pleasure is in fact often much more complicated than this. As it turns out, in accepting the account Primoratz makes just the same kind of mistake as he detects in the accounts of all his rivals. As far as he is concerned, each of his rivals successfully identifies a genuine phenomenon of human sexuality. Unfortunately, however, they then all obsessively focus on the particular chosen phenomena, and attempt to build accounts of sexual desire based on their implausible generalization to all cases. His own account avoids this, he thinks, because the element of sexual encounters upon which he focuses

is sufficiently simple and general to be present both in the kind of highly personalized encounters that impress the intentionalists, and in the very impersonal encounters their accounts have difficulty with. And his mistake is indeed much harder to see, because sexual pleasure as an aim does seem to be common to all these cases. But he is in fact doing the same thing, by generalizing the *nature* of the pleasure which is the aim of impersonal sex across the entire field of sexual desire. This is why it is a reductionist account.

To see this, consider Aristotle's account of desire and action [19]. All animal action for Aristotle is rooted in desire (*orexis*, literally a "reaching out for"), including that of ourselves, the special animals possessing language and rationality (*logos*). Non-human action is prompted by a combination of appetite (*epithumia*) and immediate perception (*aisthesis*). The animal feels a desire, sees how the desire can be satisfied and automatically acts to do so. Much human action is very similar. Human beings are cleverer, of course, so we can use effective means-end calculation (*deimotes*) in order to more efficiently gratify our appetites, and gratify more complex appetites. But in Aristotle's view a being possessing *logos* can do more than this. For us *epithumia* does not exhaust the category of *orexis*. A human being can reflect upon his appetites, asking which ones it is appropriate to gratify. He can also over time transform his desires from mere animalistic appetites to desires which are in accord with these deliverances of reason (*boulesis*). For example, the natural human appetite is for food that is bad for one, in quantities which are bad for one. But a person possessing the virtue of temperance (*sophrosune*) has transformed her desires under the influence of proper habituation and right reason, and now desires only that food that it is good for her to desire. She could not have the desires she now has without bodily urges "reaching out" towards food. But nonetheless under the influence of reason the object of her desire (*orekton*) will be subtly different, as will the pleasure she takes in its gratification.

Similar accounts of the transformation of desire and pleasure under the influence of self-consciousness are provided by a number of major philosophers [20]. I argue that sexual desire must be understood in a similar way, and the failure of the reductionist account lies in its failure to do so. To borrow Aristotle's very useful term, the plain sex account insists on modelling all sexual desire upon *epithumia*, simply because some sexual desire must be understood as *epithumia*. To do this is to assume without argument that the phenomenon is simple and uniform, and not subject to transformation as it interacts with the faculties of a self-conscious being. This is not to say that there aren't very significant differences between *boulesis* and sexual desire, of course. In particular, sexual desire in any of its forms is a notoriously arational force, often opaque to our understanding and sometimes running counter to values we generally endorse. And whereas *logos* is universal, sexual desire is frequently highly personal and idiosyncratic. The similarity is that neither Aristotle's moral psychology nor an adequate account of sexual desire can be understood without properly grasping how the "bodily" and the "mental" mutually interact.

It is precisely this that the intentionalist accounts are variously trying to capture, of course. Their proponents see clearly that there are numerous sexual phenomena which are quite unintelligible unless the nature of our bodily experiences is bound up with our mental lives. Much of our sexual desire is individualizing in just the way Scruton describes, for example. The person whose desire is for one particular person desires sexual bodily experiences, but these experiences are desired in a particular way, which

make them subtly different from the experiences desired by the sensualist. The sensualist wants the pleasure of sexual contact with another, the devoted lover wants the pleasure of contact with *her* body, which he experiences as *pleasure at contact with her body*. Bodily pleasure as such is not what he wants — this kind of lover would find a sexual experience with another unsatisfying or even downright unpleasant. Because of her significance for him, the physical experiences he has with her have a particular nature for him — it is these he wants, and he can have them with no other.

The reductionist view has little to say about such phenomena. All it can say about these cases is that the sexual desire of the participants is a desire for physical pleasure. As far as it goes, this is right, in the sense that in a large majority of cases the participants would not engage in the sexual activity if they did not anticipate physical pleasure from it, and would cease to desire the activity if that pleasure were not forthcoming for whatever reason. But the complex nature of that pleasure is invisible from the plain sex perspective. At best it can simply stipulate that for a particular person it is a contingent fact that bodily pleasure can only be achieved with a particular person or in particular circumstances. It must be silent about the nature of that contingency. And because it under-describes the phenomena, it misunderstands the phenomena. Sexual pleasure in a great many encounters does not have the uncomplicated physical nature that the reductionists ascribe to it. Their account achieves the generality they see the other accounts as failing to achieve, but only at the price of inarticulacy and distortion, because the fact is that sexual relations can be and frequently are *meaningful* for their participants, and this significance feeds into and shapes the nature of the pleasure taken in them, both in quality and in intensity. So in order to understand sexual desire and sexual pleasure we need to appreciate that it is essentially open to meaning, in that it can be bound up with issues of significance. Precisely who or what has significance for a person, and the extent to which any individual's sexual pleasure is so bound up, is a variable and idiosyncratic matter.

It turns out then, ironically, that the problems the reductionists have in accounting for such phenomena stem from their implicit acceptance of just that pre-modern mind/body dualism which they accused the intentionalists of having failed to overcome. But it is they who have more signally failed to overcome it, since they take themselves to have done so merely by rejecting the normative connotations the tradition attached to the bodily side of the dualism. This is not enough. To properly overcome it we need to reject it altogether, since, as the Aristotelian and phenomenological traditions have long understood, what we are is not a dualist fusion of the mental and the physical but *essentially embodied minds*. It is not possible to understand many of the “bodily” elements of our nature in abstraction from our mentality, nor many of our “mental” elements in abstraction from our embodiment. We need to give up the old mind/body dualist habit of classifying experience into the mutually exclusive categories of “mental” and “physical,” and replace it with the idea that many of the phenomena of our experience form continua, in which both our embodiment and our self-consciousness can be implicated to greater or lesser degrees. For some instances of each phenomenon the mental element is minimal, for others it is central. Sexual desire forms just such a continuum. We can explain some sexual activity simply in terms of the body and its capacity to experience pleasurable physical sensations. A little further along the continuum we find we need to make reference to a minimal level of intentional awareness of the mental states of others. But as we proceed further, we discover that some sexual

desire is an extremely complex affair, which we cannot understand without making essential reference to complex cognitive capacities and intentional awareness, which often reach out to cultural and personal meanings associated with individuals, objects and situations.

3

As I mentioned earlier, the accepted test of adequacy for any account of sexual desire is its ability to deal with the multitude of sexual phenomena. I claim that my account does this better than any of the accounts I have been discussing, and it is precisely my observation that the content of sexual desire is not unitary but forms a continuum that underlies this. First, my account plausibly explains the motivations of people pursuing the gratification of sexual desire through casual sex and the like. Because my account does not claim that sexual desire is essentially intentional or essentially individualizing or essentially meaningful, but rather that it is essentially *open* to significance, I can acknowledge that a great deal of sexual desire is desire for a kind of raw bodily pleasure unmediated by complex considerations about individuality and the experiences of one's partner, analogous to Aristotle's *epithumia*. And I can give just the same description of the motivations behind such behaviour as the reductionists. So I am not forced into implausibly attempting to attribute greater complexity to these people's motives than they in fact possess [21].

My account is also able to deal with the phenomena which underpin the views of the reductionists' intentionalist opponents. My claim is that sexual desire is essentially open to being caught up in intentional significance, and that its nature is partially transformed when this happens. But amongst the things that human beings tend to find most significant in their lives is their relationships with others, how they feel about others and how those others feel about them. It should be no surprise, then, that facts about the identity and mental states of our partners can be central to our experience of sexual desire. It is also no surprise that this is sufficiently common that various intentionalist writers on sexual desire have come to see it as the essence of sex. We can explain exclusive desire for sex with a particular person, the way pleasure can deepen and become more intense with the perception of one's partner's pleasure and the disgust people feel upon discovering that a touch initially felt as pleasurable originated from an unwelcome source by citing a person's desire for an intentionalized pleasure-pleasure at contact with *him*, or in *her excitement*.

The account really comes into its own when we consider the more complex phenomena, however. Here are two interesting anecdotal examples illustrating how personal significance can be central to human sexual experience:

i) "*Fucking the Police.*" When I was a young man I had a friend who for obvious reasons was popularly known as "Johnny Drugs." One summer, to everyone's astonishment, Johnny had a brief sexual relationship with a female police officer. He cheerfully told me that his attraction to her was dramatically enhanced by the fact that she was in the police force, to the extent that he found himself repeating the inner mantra "I'm fucking the Police! I'm fucking the Police!," as he was penetrating her. This activity, I was informed, had the effect of dramatically increasing the intensity of his physical

pleasure, in particular his eventual orgasm. (“Fucking the Police” was clearly an idea that very much appealed to Johnny. [22])

ii) *Victory*. I was once told the story of a rather messy love triangle, in which my interlocutor had left one woman for another, before subsequently returning to the first. At the culmination of the episode he made love to the first woman in the bed in which he’d had the majority of his encounters with the second, the significance of which was initially lost on him. (Indeed, it hadn’t occurred to him when they commenced intercourse). Their recent intercourse had been pretty strained and unsatisfactory, as one might expect when partners get back together after infidelity. To his surprise, their lovemaking on this occasion was the most intense it had ever been, and his partner’s orgasms the most violent. Astonished, he was forcefully presented with the impression that the reason the experience was so intense for her was that it was replete with significance. That she was making love to *him, now, in this bed*, signified her personal and sexual defeat of the other woman, a victory which struck her with incredible emotional force, and which immensely intensified her physical experiences.

I could have taken examples from philosophy and literature to illustrate the point, since they are present in the work of a number of writers who have a profound understanding of the complexity of sexual desire, or at least some of its manifestations—Laclos, de Sade, Sacher-Masoch, Nin, Sartre, Kundera and others. But I think the above examples are particularly striking, and they clearly show the very personal and idiosyncratic nature of the sources of certain individuals’ arousal [23]. These examples show that we find social and personal facts about our partners sexually attractive and arousing, and that these facts affect both the intensity and the quality of our sexual pleasure. We can desire someone because of *who* they are, “who” being cashed out under various possible increasingly individualizing descriptions. Sometimes a fact about someone is very widely taken to have sexual significance. Someone can be desired because they are socially powerful or famous or widely desired (“I’m fucking the best-looking girl in town! I’m fucking the best-looking girl in town!”). Other facts about a person may be of great significance, but to a smaller number of people or just to particular individuals. The specific nature of Johnny Drugs’ arousal is very personal to who he is. Although many men would no doubt experience some kind of frisson having sex with a policewoman, it is Johnny’s history and self-image that give the sexual situation he finds himself in its extreme erotic significance for him. Very frequently, the significance structuring an individual’s desire and experience is the individuality of her partner, of course. In “Victory” the personal identity and recent history of the individuals involved is obviously absolutely central to understanding the woman’s arousal. But this is not always the case. The individuality of Johnny’s partner is not particularly prominent, for example. Any woman of the right kind of age and general attractiveness with the property of being a policewoman would likely have had much the same effect on him.

Interestingly, some of the phenomena which at first glance seem to be most easily accounted for by the plain sex account turn out to be much better construed on an intentionalist model, once we have broadened our understanding of sexual intentionality. Consider the highly impersonal and anonymous sex engaged in by some gay men, for example. They certainly don’t care about the particular individuality of their

partners, nor do they seem to be interested in communicating complex interpersonal attitudes. It looks as though they are pursuing plain sexual pleasure, then. But in some cases their behaviour is such that it can only be adequately understood if we see their sexual pleasure as mediated by their arousal at the sheer anonymity of their sexual partners, an essentially intentional arousal. Apparently, for instance, in certain of the gay bathhouses that flourished in San Francisco in the '70s and early '80s, men could be found lying face down on benches in side rooms with their heads covered by towels. Other men would enter, mount and penetrate a prone man, in due course ejaculate, withdraw and leave, and at no time during an encounter would either of the participants see the face of the other [24].

How should we construe this phenomenon? The reductionist account will have to point to the physical pleasure that the participants will experience as motivating their behaviour. But once again the account under-describes the situation. Clearly they will experience sexual pleasure, but if what they desire is merely an essentially bodily satisfaction what is the point of going through this bizarre ritual? The only explanation of the rationale behind the ritual is that for these men the very anonymity of the encounter is part of what is *sexually* enjoyable about it. The prone man will not experience himself as feeling the physical sensation of a moving penis penetrating his anus, he will experience the sensation of the moving penis *of a stranger* penetrating his anus. The significance of the situation feeds into the physical, transforming and enhancing the experience for him. The reductionist account has no resources to articulate this. It is only with essential reference to the participants' intentional understanding that we can give an account of their behaviour which doesn't leave its motivation entirely opaque [25].

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On reflection, the fact that the transformation of a bodily urge through mentality is implicated in all manner of desires should be obvious in both the social and the sexual spheres [26]. A vast number of the desires of twenty-first century human beings are for the contingent products of human culture, things that no-one could possibly have wanted outside of the cultural milieu in which they became possible and were given meaning. Many such desires and meanings are incorporated into people's sexual fantasies, producing desires that are only possible for highly intelligent imperfectly rational beings existing in a social context saturated with significance. One clearly cannot have a brute animal urge to be beaten with a horse crop by a woman clad only in a fur coat standing on one's chest in stilettos, both because such a fantasy involves essential reference to the contingent products of culture and the contingent significances they have come to possess, and because of the obvious roots of such desires in the idiosyncratic psychological histories of those who possess them [27]. Numerous phenomena of human sexuality illustrate this — sadomasochism, people's attraction to celebrities, people dressing up in various ways, and all the other weird and wonderful (and perfectly ordinary) highly individual sexual fantasies that people have.

The immense variability of the phenomena shows us the futility of attempting to give a unitary account of the nature of sexual desire, as virtually everyone contributing to the debate so far seems to have done. All the intentionalist accounts in play go wrong

somewhere, either by making too narrow a claim about the normative parameters of sex, or by crediting all sexual desire with complicated interpersonal intentionality, since much of what humans find attractive about one another can be located in essentially physical factors, and these physical factors are sometimes the main or only thing that we find attractive about each other [28]. They also all fail to capture the range of complicated intentionality itself. *Pace* Nagel, what a person finds significant need not be the mutual reciprocal arousal of his partner. It might be something entirely unrelated to his partner's experiences, or perhaps the experiences of his partner he finds arousing might not themselves be ones of arousal. *Pace* Scruton, the significance underlying a person's arousal need not be individually intentionalizing. And *pace* Solomon, it need not lie in anything communicated from either partner to the other [29]. But each of these accounts gets something right and identifies a genuine facet of sexual desire, since all of these things can play the meaningful role that transforms *epithumia* into something more complicated.

One interesting question is why the reductionists miss the importance of intentionality in an adequate characterization of sexual desire, since the phenomena which intentionalists see as calling for an intentionalist construal are so prevalent. And of course, they are not unaware of them. All reductionists agree that things are aimed at and things are expressed during sexual activity which are not raw physical pleasure. How they characterize these phenomena varies, and it seems to me that characterizations vary within individual accounts. Sometimes they are characterized as occurrences parallel to the main aim of gratifying physical sexual desire [30]. Sometimes they can be read as implying that love or communication or mutual reciprocity can enhance *sexual* pleasure [31]. The latter move would seem to me like an attempt to have things both ways. But at root reductionists are committed to the view that the person's desires are for independently specifiable sexual pleasure and (say) emotional communion, so that the reason the individual's desire is exclusive is that they aim through sleeping with the other person to satisfy a non-sexual desire as well as sexual desire, a non-sexual desire which can only be satisfied by that particular person.

I want to be clear that this description of the phenomenon of exclusive sexual desire fails to capture crucial elements of it. Consider the idiosyncratic tastes and smells of one's partners. In certain situations these can be extremely erotic — for example, if one sleeps with a former lover after a lengthy period of separation, perhaps someone one still feels great fondness for, coupled with nostalgia for the former relationship. In such a situation the particular smell and taste of that person can be intensely present to one's consciousness, and intensely sexually exciting. On the face of it, a taste or a smell is just a raw non-intentional sensation. But it would be totally wrong to describe this kind of experience as finding a raw non-intentional sensation pleasurable. Indeed, this would be to get things entirely the wrong way around. The person doesn't want to have sex with someone who smells and tastes like that, he finds the sensation pleasurable because it is the scent of that particular person. If there were someone else who happened to smell exactly the same, the effect would not be the same at all [32]. Nor is the sensation *as sensation* in itself particularly interesting- it is not a precondition of this phenomenon that one was struck by it on sleeping with the person for the first time, for instance. This is a very clear example of how experiences can be "psycho-somatic," straddling the boundary of sensation and thought, for it is clear that one could experience this sensation non-intentionally, if one were to encounter it in a

situation in which it held no significance. Saturated with significance as it is, it is experienced very differently, though it is still *that sensation* that is being experienced [33].

What the reductionist account does get right is the essential role of the body and its capacity to experience pleasurable sensations in sexual desire. As Primoratz rightly points out, in focusing too exclusively on the mental some intentionalist accounts can seem to lose the sexual element of desire altogether. Solomon's excessive emphasis on communication, for example, leaves it mysterious why we would bother with bodily communion, since many of the attitudes he claims it is the primary aim of sexual activity to communicate seem perfectly easily and often more effectively communicated in other ways. His claim that sex communicates them best is hardly convincing. He also has considerable trouble in explaining why much of our body language, including that involving bodily contact, is obviously non-sexual [34]. The reductionists are quite right that what we desire has an essentially bodily element, and it is that which gives sex its peculiar intensity and sexual desire its strength. The person who wants sex with a particular person and to express and share a communicated intimacy with him wants *sexual* intimacy, not intimacy as such. And of course, if we were not the kinds of creatures capable of experiencing the kind of essentially pleasurable physical experiences the reductionists focus on, there would be no phenomenon anything like sexuality in our lives. This is the other side of the dualist coin. Just as we can't properly understand the physical element of some sexual desire without paying attention to the mental, so we misunderstand its mental element if we try to abstract it from the physical in which it is manifested [35].

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I want to conclude by making some brief remarks about the implications of my account for sexual morality. We can begin to see now how the complexity of human sexual desire might introduce specifically sexual moral considerations. What worries me is the fact that human beings can find significance in some very dark things indeed. My worry is therefore quite different from that of some other intentionalists, for instance Scruton, who is worried by the gratification of sexual desire which expresses itself as *epithumia*. I don't find this morally problematic at all, assuming it is circumscribed by a minimal level of intentional awareness and concern (which nevertheless leaves its bodily character untransformed). In this I entirely agree with Goldman and Primoratz, who see nothing whatever wrong with the pursuit of purely physical pleasure [36]. What I find much more worrying are complex intentional desires loaded with the wrong kind of significance. As we saw, it should be no surprise to find intentionalists trying to provide accounts of sexual desire which essentially connect it to love, the individuality of our partners and our partners' mental states, since our relationships with and concern for other people are amongst the most significant things in our lives. But human beings also take victories, vengeance, envies, hatreds and their desires that others should suffer as being of great significance, and such things can be eroticized in just the same kind of way as "morally wholesome" things like love.

An element of unease might introduce itself with the examples I gave above. They might be thought to be "borderline cases," although I actually think the desire of neither Johnny Drugs nor the woman in "Victory" was such that it should not have

been indulged. I must admit that I have always found the “Fucking the Police” story amusing, although I wouldn’t have found it amusing if the woman involved were not clearly fully self-possessed, in control and, so it seemed to me, using him in just the same kind of way he was using her (a “bit of rough”). Similarly with “Victory.” Granted what the woman had been through, I think it would be a very harsh person who took her reaction to the situation as evidence of a bad character. We have no reason to think that her experience of her victory was along the lines of a malicious delight at her rival’s misfortune, rather than, say, joy that it was to be her who would have him. And in neither case does it seem that the significance in question was the central psychological focus of the individual, because the pleasure in the significance was taken in the course of a sexual encounter which had already been embarked on for other reasons. But one can well imagine both individuals who have eroticized much darker significances than these, so that what they take pleasure in is entirely unwholesome, and individuals for whom this is the central psychological focus of their sexual desire. At the extreme, we know perfectly well that there are individuals who are aroused (and only really aroused) by domination, violence, even murder.

Of course, reductionists who deny that anything other than universal participant consent is required for a sex act to be morally unproblematic will not have a problem with accounting for the wrongness of much of this kind of thing. The desires of those who eroticize domination or violence or injury will be such that they cannot be satisfied without violating the autonomy and bodily integrity of other people. Genuine consent to such behaviour will clearly not be forthcoming, and so it is easy to see why acting on such desires is wrong on any plausible general moral view. But it seems to me that it is quite possible for individuals to take pleasure in dark significances which are less extreme than this and do not need to be satisfied through coercion. Some people clearly eroticize contempt, for example, and take pleasure in the thought that they are doing something to someone which degrades them, or somebody else [37]. Various common misogynist attitudes spring to mind. Or one might take a kind of narcissistic contemptuous delight in seducing someone, revelling in one’s success, entirely unconcerned with their pleasure and happiness except as testament to one’s own desirability. Such pleasure need not involve violating the autonomy and consent of the other person, since it is quite possible to consent to something that is bad for one, or for which one’s partner holds one in contempt. These possibilities raise moral issues, moral issues which are perhaps best exhibited not through the broadly deontological ethical framework which Primoratz endorses, but through a virtue ethics framework focusing on character and human flourishing. However I will have to attempt a fuller investigation of this issue elsewhere [38].

Seiriol Morgan, School of Philosophy, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom. phldsm@leeds.ac.uk

NOTES

- [1] ALAN GOLDMAN (1977) Plain sex, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6. Reprinted in ALAN SOBLE (ed.) *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary readings*, 3rd edition (Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 1997). All page references are to this reprint.
- [2] Goldman *op. cit.*, p. 40.

- [3] Goldman describes sex as “a physical activity immensely pleasurable in itself” (*op. cit.*, p. 46), emphasizes that “central to the definition is the fact that the goal of sexual desire is bodily contact itself” (p. 40) and criticizes the “means-end” accounts of sexual desire he opposes for “attempting to extend it conceptually beyond the physical” (p. 48).
- [4] Goldman *op. cit.*, p. 42: “One may derive pleasure in a sex act from expressing certain feelings, . . . but sexual desire is essentially the desire for physical contact itself: it is bodily desire for the body of another that dominates our mental life for more or less brief periods.”
- [5] The term is borrowed from ALAN SOBLE (1980) An introduction to the philosophy of sex, in A. Soble (ed.) *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary readings* (Totowa, Rowman and Littlefield).
- [6] IGOR PRIMORATZ (1999) *Ethics and Sex* (London, Routledge). Primoratz describes sex as “simply a bodily activity intensely pleasurable in itself” (p. 42), describes his notion of sexuality as “essentially physical, . . . reducing sex to bodily activity” (p. 42), claims that sexual desire is “sufficiently defined as the desire for certain bodily pleasures, period” (p. 46) and describes sexual pleasure as “a distinctive type of pleasure” (p. 41, my emphasis), “basically physical” (p. 43), “the sort of bodily pleasure experienced in the sexual parts of the body” (p. 46). He also agrees with Goldman that we can aim at more than bodily pleasure in sexual acts- e.g. procreation, the expression of love- but that such aims “are possible uses of sex, or additions to it, not something that belongs to its intrinsic nature” (p. 43).
- [7] IGOR PRIMORATZ (2001) Sexual morality: is consent enough? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4.
- [8] A mental state is an intentional one if it has the quality it has because it is in some way “about” the world. The difference between intentional and non-intentional mental states can be usefully illustrated by contrasting itches and shame. Both these states are unpleasant, but the nature of the unpleasantness is significantly different. Itches are non-intentional. They are not about anything, they just are. By contrast, one cannot “just feel shame.” One feels shame *about* something one has done or failed to do. It is therefore dependent both upon one’s beliefs about how the world is, and on what one values. So whereas no change in my beliefs will cause an itch to disappear, a change in my beliefs (e.g. it wasn’t me after all who offended the duchess) can eliminate shame. See e.g. LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, Blackwell, 1963), p. 174: “‘For a second he felt violent pain.’ Why does it sound queer to say ‘For a second he felt deep grief’? Only because it so seldom happens?”
- [9] THOMAS NAGEL (1969) Sexual perversion, *Journal of Philosophy*, 66. Reprinted in Soble (ed.), *op. cit.* note [1] All page references are to this reprint. This quotation is on page 13.
- [10] ROGER SCRUTON (1986) *Sexual Desire* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson).
- [11] ROBERT SOLOMON (1974) Sexual paradigms, *Journal of Philosophy*, 71. Reprinted in Soble (ed.) *op. cit.* note [1] All page references are to this reprint.
- [12] Nagel *op. cit.*, p. 15. Scruton *op. cit.*, e.g. p. 344.
- [13] Thus the sexual phenomena include the following: some people are highly promiscuous for at least some periods of their lives, and clearly aim to have sex with as many different people as possible. A very large number of people masturbate. Some people are only interested in having sex with one particular person. Sometimes this is required, sometimes not. Human beings have been known to copulate with animals and corpses. We can be intensely aroused if a sexual partner wears a certain kind of attire, or if intercourse occurs in a particular place. Some people enjoy sexual activity involving more than two partners, others are repelled by this. Certain bodily gestures are “eloquent,” for instance, a kiss can convey anything from love to indifference and irritation. Some people are sexually aroused by receiving or inflicting pain, or by playing dominant or submissive sexual roles. People are frequently intensely jealous of their sexual partners. And so on.
- [14] Goldman (rather confusingly) calls these “means-end” accounts of desire, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
- [15] Primoratz *op. cit.* note 6, pp. 41, 43.
- [16] Goldman *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.
- [17] See e.g. *Marriage and Desire* 4.5, trans. R. J. Teske, in John Rotelle (ed.) *Answer to the Pelagians II* (New York, New City Press, 1998), where the pursuit of sexual pleasure is explicitly described as “animal,” and *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London, Penguin, 1972) 14.16, where he describes the “almost total extinction of mental alertness” in orgasm. In actual fact, although Augustine constantly emphasizes the bodily focus of sexual desire (referring throughout *Marriage and Desire* to the “concupiscence of the flesh,” for example), he is a subtle observer of the phenomenology of sexuality, and many of his observations anticipate those of modern intentionalists, in particular about the crucial connections between arousal and passivity (*The City of God* 14.26) and its possible emotional intensification (14.16).

- [18] Goldman *op. cit.*, p. 42: “Traditional writings were right to emphasize the purely physical or animal aspect of sex; they were wrong only in condemning it.”
- [19] See especially *Nicomachean Ethics* books 2 and 3, *De Motu Animalium* 6 and 7 and *De Anima* III 9–11. For a discussion see MARTHA NUSSBAUM (1986) *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), chapter 9.
- [20] Most notably by Kant, who describes in his later work the way that a free being is able to reflect upon its inclinations as presented to it by the faculty of sensibility, extending and transforming them by exercise of the imagination. For Kant our animality is a prerequisite for each and every one of our inclinations, but the inclinations we actually have are not determined by our animality, but rather our animality as mediated by our mentality. And as he clearly sees, our mentality can transform our sensibility in dramatic ways, producing inclinations very different from the animal urges with which they began. “But reason soon began to stir, and sought, by means of comparing food with what some sense other than those to which instinct was tied- the sense of sight perhaps- presented to it as similar to those foods, so as to extend the knowledge of the sources of nourishment beyond the limits of instinct. If only this attempt had not contradicted nature it could, with luck, have turned out well enough, even though instinct did not advise it. However, it is a characteristic of reason that it will with the aid of the imagination cook up desires for things for which there is no natural urge, but even an urge to avoid . . .” *Speculative Beginning of Human History* 8: 111, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1983).
- [21] I actually think that intentionality is in fact central to sexual pleasure in the vast majority of sexual encounters. Perhaps the reason Primoratz misses this is that both his main intentionalist targets overstate its standard complexity, insisting that sexual intentionality as such displays the characteristics it displays only on certain occasions. On Scruton’s understanding of it, for instance, intentionality is essentially individualizing, in the sense that it focuses on the individuality of a sexual partner as the very particular person she is. And clearly there are people for whom the individuality of their partner is so central that they are incapable of becoming aroused by anyone else. But Primoratz rightly notes that there are many sexual encounters in which the partner’s personal individuality has little importance. The person looking for casual sex, for example, aims to find a partner possessing characteristics of an entirely general nature. An unwillingness to accept this natural description leads Scruton into absurdities such as his claim that such a person “desires to desire” to have sex, rather than desires sex, *op. cit.*, p. 90. Similarly, Solomon’s account of sexual desire as aiming at the communication of complex interpersonal attitudes appropriately describes some “eloquent” lovemaking, but seems quite implausible as a description of much impersonal or routine sex. So Primoratz rejects intentionalist accounts. But sexual pleasure in fact depends on intentionalist considerations, albeit much less specific and complicated ones, in a vastly greater number of cases. Uncomplicated bodily pleasure may be what the participants are pursuing in casual or routine encounters, but that pursuit is circumscribed in normal people by a number of minimal beliefs about their partner’s mental states. Most minimally, most people’s sexual pleasure is dependent on their belief that their partner consents to the activity. Slightly less minimally, an individual’s own sexual pleasure is by and large dependent on the belief that his or her partner is finding the experience pleasurable. It is also dependent on the absence of any number of beliefs, for example that one is held in contempt by one’s partner. So whilst Goldman may be right to point out that in some particularly satisfying sexual encounters complicated intentionality would just get in the way (*op. cit.*, p. 47), minimal intentionality is necessary for the kind of bodily immersion which he describes. If a normal person were to come to believe that his partner was not finding an encounter or some activity within it enjoyable, his pleasure would be quickly “deflated.” *Epithumia* remains *epithumia* (or something not very far removed from it) in these sexual encounters, but certain intentional conditions need to be satisfied for *epithumia* to be satisfied.
- [22] Names have been changed to protect the guilty. “Fuck the Police” is the title of a controversial track on the album “Straight Outta Compton,” released by the rap group NWA (Priority Records, 1988).
- [23] A literary parallel for the first case can be found in DE SADE’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (London, Arrow Books, 1965), pp. 250–251, where the character Dolmancé describes how blaspheming and desecrating religious icons during sexual acts brings a peculiarly “sweet” and intense pleasure which “actively affects my imagination.” This seems to be straightforward autobiography on Sade’s part. See the prostitute Jeanne Testard’s testimony regarding Sade’s “first outrage” of 1763, discussed in FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY (2000) *At Home with the Marquis de Sade* (London, Pimlico), pp. 64–66. See also GEORGES BATALLE (1979) *Story of the Eye* (London, Penguin). A literary parallel to the second example is the subject matter of MILAN KUNDERA’s *The Joke* (London, Penguin, 1970), although the case is slightly different, because the entire *raison d’être* of the main character’s

- seduction of a particular woman is to revenge himself upon a third party. He has no interest in the woman herself; indeed, in herself she disgusts him. Kundera is a writer acutely aware of the connection between sexuality and contingent meaning. See especially *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London, Faber and Faber, 1984), part 3 section 2. Another reason I prefer to discuss my examples is to show that complex idiosyncratic significance can be central to the arousal of perfectly ordinary people, and not just moral and sexual monsters like de Sade and Bataille's Simone.
- [24] I've unfortunately been unable to locate the source in which I read about this, but it is not at all unbelievable. Indeed it seems that in some establishments this behaviour would be somewhat on the tame side. See e.g. EDMUND WHITE (1986) *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (London, Picador), in particular his description of "The Mine Shaft," pp. 282–285. There are a number of literary and autobiographical accounts detailing the particular excitement that can accompany anonymous sexual encounters. See for instance JOE ORTON's diary entry for Saturday March 4th 1967 in *The Orton Diaries*, ed. John Lahr (London, Methuen, 1986).
- [25] Obviously there's an important sense in which the account I am outlining leaves matters opaque, since it provides no explanation of the natural history of desires of this nature. I don't pretend to be able to offer an explanation of why some people eroticize anonymity or pain or domination or stiletto heels or anything else. Perhaps we must turn to psychology for this. For instance, see the interesting speculative account of the origins of sadomasochism in ROGER LEE (1995) *Sadomasochism: an ethical analysis*, in *Philosophical Perspectives on Sex and Love* ed. ROBERT STEWART (Oxford, Oxford University Press). But unlike the reductionist account my account accurately characterizes the nature of the desire, which explains the activity. The prone man does not want bodily pleasure caused by a penis in his anus, he wants to be buggered by a stranger, which he anticipates will provide him with a very particular pleasure of great physical intensity.
- [26] An interesting example of the effect of significance on a non-sexual appetite is ALEX DE JONGE's story of the henchman of Stalin who described how his steak tasted that much more delicious when he recalled that others didn't have any. *Stalin* (London, Collins, 1986), p. 513.
- [27] See LEOPOLD VON SACHER-MASOCH's fascinating account of the development of his own sexual obsessions, reprinted in ROBERT NYE (ed.) *Sexuality: A Reader* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1999), extract 75.
- [28] This is clear from a number of phenomena. We find individuals attractive or unattractive simply by looking at photographs of their faces or bodies, whilst knowing nothing about their personalities or social standing. Individuals have particular preferences about physical types, going out with a string of slim brunettes, for example. Some individuals are seen as attractive by large numbers of other individuals, who vary dramatically in their values, and preferences regarding personality traits. And so on.
- [29] Solomon's account (*op. cit.*) seems to come closest to capturing some of the more complex phenomena. See the list of highly complex interpersonal attitudes that Solomon believes are sexually communicable, p. 28, and also his attack on Nagel for assuming that we should take a very particular (and basic) sexual scenario as our "sexual paradigm," p. 22. But he is wrong that these significances need to be communicated. The woman in "Victory" was not communicating her triumph but revelling privately in it, though the intensity of its physical manifestation alerted her partner. Johnny Drugs hardly wants to communicate the significance to him of his partner's job, since that significance at least in part lies precisely in the fact that she does not know he is "on the other side of the law." Besides, there was presumably a good chance she wouldn't have been impressed if he had.
- [30] E.g. Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 46; Primoratz *op. cit.* note 6, p. 43.
- [31] E.g. Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 45: "... sex can express love and take on heightened significance when it does . . ."; Primoratz *op. cit.* note 6, p. 39: "The fact that one's sexual touch expresses certain feelings for the other may well add to the other's pleasure . . .". Note however that Primoratz does not clearly state that it is the other's sexual pleasure which is enhanced, and that Goldman is not at all explicit about the relationship between sexual pleasure and significance.
- [32] Indeed, it might be quite the opposite. One can find it unpleasant if someone wears the same perfume as a former partner, for example, since this can be intrusive and distracting, bringing quite unwanted thoughts of the other person into one's head at an entirely inopportune moment.
- [33] The fact that someone's idiosyncratic taste is not in itself pleasurable makes this an especially good example. One can easily miss the way a tactile sexual sensation is eroticized through sexual significance, by insisting on focusing on its intrinsic pleasurableness. But it is hard to believe that the taste of a mixture of whisky, cigarettes and a particular flavour of saliva could be in itself intrinsically pleasant, let alone erotic. It is so because that is how *she* always used to taste, all that time ago.

[34] Primoratz, *op. cit.*, note 6, pp. 39–40.

[35] It would I think be unfair to accuse the intentionalists I have been discussing of missing this. Nagel and Scruton are quite clear that we seek mutual reciprocal *arousal*, for instance. The impression that reductionists seem to have that intentionalism loses the bodily element of sex lies in the refusal of some of them to see that a great deal of normal sexual pleasure has minimal intentionality associated with it, and in the impression their writings can convey that everything is going on at some rarified mental level. (Solomon is the worst offender here.) So even though I have been claiming that my account incorporates the insights of all the positions, it is clearly much closer to the accounts of Scruton, Solomon and Nagel than to those of Goldman and Primoratz. Since I think that we cannot understand the phenomenon of sexual desire without grasping its potential intentionality, mine is clearly an intentionalist account. I take mine to be an advance on the others because it incorporates a much greater range of relevant intentional factors than theirs.

[36] Indeed, one gets the feeling from their writing that it is their conviction that there is nothing wrong with this that drives their view that “means-end” accounts of desire must be mistaken, rather than the other way around. See e.g. Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 49: “Any analysis of sex which imputes a moral character to sex acts in themselves is wrong for that reason.”

[37] Here’s an interesting example: I was once told by a married woman who frequently indulged in extra-marital affairs that she’d had to ditch one particular lover because he was obviously turned on by the fact that she was married, paying attention to her wedding ring and mentioning her husband during lovemaking and the like. (This quite turned her off, presumably because he was excited by a very impersonal fact about her, and in any case, it reminded her she was cheating on her husband.)

[38] Thanks to Matthew Kieran, Mark Nelson and Bryan Frances for helpful comments. Bryan in particular was a very stern critic, and he is unlikely to think I have made any great effort to address his concerns.