

SEXUAL LIBERATION

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1. Foreword

In what follows, whenever I talk of sexual practices, sexual activities, etc., I want always to be understood as talking about sex involving only consenting adults, unless of course I give an explicit indication to the contrary (e.g. I mention rape a few times). This is to avoid circumlocution.

2. Positive Sexual Freedom

A person who is sexually free, in the positive sense, is a person for whom the range of sexual activities in which he or she is willing and happy to engage, is determined by his/her honest appraisal and exploration of his/her sexual desires and interests. Such a person will have an open mind in regard to matters sexual, being receptive to novel ideas and willing (even keen) to experiment. He or she will feel free to pursue any avenue of sexual enjoyment that appeals to him/her. This is positive sexual freedom or, for short, *sexual autonomy*.

The opposite of sexual autonomy is *sexual heteronomy*: it characterises the person suffering from positive sexual oppression. For this sort of person, the range of sexual activities in which he/she is willing and happy to engage, is determined by some outside authority. Such a person will have a closed mind, and may be unable to admit some of their sexual desires even to themselves. Positive sexual oppression manifests itself in a number of different ways. For example:

- (a) someone who refrains from satisfying certain of his/her sexual desires, even though a willing partner is available, because he/she thinks such activities may be wrong, or degrading;
- (b) someone who is worried about engaging in some kind of sexual activity for fear that it might not be 'normal';

- (c) someone who refuses to engage in some novel form of sex because he/she has never heard of anyone else doing it;
- (d) someone who fails to consider new types of sexual activity because he/she is subservient to custom.

3. Negative Sexual Freedom

Negative sexual freedom obtains when consenting adults are allowed to engage in their desired sexual practices (whatever they may be) without obstruction or interference from the state or other individuals.

This is not the case in present-day Britain: its citizens are negatively sexually oppressed because there are many barriers to sexual behaviour between consenting adults. For example:

- (a) in December 1990 several gay men were imprisoned for engaging in sado-masochistic sex between consenting adults because the activities offended the judge's sense of what is acceptable in a civilised society;¹
- (b) the Obscene Publications Act places tight constraints on the publication of sexually explicit material (consumption of pornography is a form of sexual behaviour);
- (c) the British Board of Film Classification censors films and video recordings to prevent people from viewing any sexually explicit scenes;²
- (d) every week there are people who have their private sexual behaviour (between consenting adults) 'exposed' by certain of the Sunday newspapers, with the consequence that the people concerned lose their jobs, are ostracised, or suffer some other form of discrimination or persecution.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

4. Sexual Liberation

Sexual liberation requires the realisation of both positive and negative sexual freedom. Negative freedom is obviously necessary since without it people will be barred from doing the things they want to do. However, positive freedom is also required so that people are able to take advantage of the absence of restraints to the development of their individual natures. A sexually liberated person is one who has attained to sexual autonomy in a society in which negative sexual freedom obtains. In Britain today, no-one is sexually liberated.

A fully sexually liberated society would be one in which negative sexual freedom is guaranteed and in which all the citizens are sexually autonomous. Such a society is an ideal: in the real world there will always be some people who do not think for themselves but just copy what others do (or what others say they do).

If we are to move closer to the ideal of a sexually liberated society, two types of change are required:

- (1) abolition of state interference in, or obstruction to, sexual activities between consenting adults;
- (2) creation of a culture of sexual autonomy.

The two are clearly connected. First, if people are educated and encouraged to think for themselves in sexual matters, then social sanctions on sexual behaviour will recede; as a consequence, the demand for abolition of state controls will increase and government will have to respond. Second, if legal restrictions on sexual activity, including government barriers to the free interchange of sexual ideas (especially via film, video, and printed matter), are removed, this should open people's minds and stimulate sexual autonomy.

5. Perversion is Normal

One of the major obstacles to be overcome in the attainment of sexual autonomy is the notion of sexual 'normality'. The idea that some sorts of sexual activity are 'normal', and thus OK, while others are 'abnormal' or 'kinky' or 'perverted', and thus to be disapproved of or discouraged - this idea is an expression of sexual heteronomy. The sexually autonomous person recognises that there is no such thing as 'normal' in sex: people's sexual tastes differ, even to the extent that what one person enjoys another may find repulsive; but it's just a matter of what you like, and this varies from person to person.

A consequence of the notion of sexual 'normality' is that deviations from this norm need to be explained. Explanations for supposed 'perversions' abound, and are often proffered by the people who engage in them. In so far as there is any truth in these explana-

tions, I maintain that what they explain is *not* how the person came to have a certain sexual nature, but *rather* how the person came to *realise* that he/she had a certain sexual nature. In other words, their particular sexual nature should not be viewed as an abnormality induced by some unfortunate childhood experience; rather it was the sexual nature that he/she was born with and which was brought to light in childhood by the experience in question. I said 'in so far as there is any truth in these explanations' because I believe that often there is no truth in them at all. In most cases, the supposed sexual abnormality will have surfaced spontaneously at adolescence or after; and it is only the tyrannous idea of normality which seduces the person to fasten on some early experience (which in fact had no connection with sex at all) as being the 'explanation' for something which, in reality, doesn't need to be explained.

For example, consider the following case. Mr A is a masochist who enjoys having his bottom smacked or caned by his female partner(s). If such masochism is deemed 'abnormal' or 'perverted' then two things follow:

- (i) Mr A is a sad case to be either pitied or despised;
- (ii) there must be some explanation of how Mr A came to have his strange desires.

Mr A might reminisce on his childhood and remember that he used to have a female babysitter who smacked his bottom when he was naughty; he might also remember that he quite enjoyed the experience; and this may then be seized on as the explanation of his 'deviant' behaviour.

In opposition to this, I maintain that Mr A's masochism is not abnormal or perverted or deviant at all: it is perfectly natural. This is not to say that *everybody* is a masochist: eating cabbage is perfectly natural, but some people detest it. That a person enjoys masochistic sex is not something that requires an explanation. The significance of Mr A's slap-happy babysitter is not that she made him a masochist, but *at most* that she did him the service of making him cognisant of his masochistic desires. That is, the most that can be said of this childhood experience is that it brought Mr A's until-then-latent desire into the open.

What holds for masochism holds also, of course, for all other kinds of sexual activity between consenting adults which have been thought of as 'perversions' standing in need of explanation - thus for sadism, bondage, domination, submission, transvestism, homosexuality, bisexuality, sodomy, oral sex, group sex, to name but a few.

6. The Sex Slave is Sexually Free

Some people enjoy participating in a sexual relationship in which they are under the domination of one or more other people: they have to sexually 'service' the dominant(s) and/or others, as commanded, and they may have restrictions placed on their own sexual pleasures by the dominant(s). They may also have to obey other sorts of instructions (to generally do as they are told), and they may be tied up or otherwise restrained at the dominant's will. They might also be beaten. People who willingly and happily become such a submissive 'sex slave' will actually be sexually liberated, provided that they have made a frank assessment of their own desires and thus realise that this is what they want (positive sexual freedom), and provided that such relationships are permitted by state and society (negative sexual freedom).

7. Sexual Equality and Sexual Liberation

There are many obstacles to be overcome in the furtherance of sexual liberation but perhaps the main one, and the one which to some extent underlies all the others, is the puritanical idea that sex is dirty and ought to be eschewed (except, of course, when it is undertaken for the purpose of procreation). This is an attitude that persists even in the present day, though usually in an attenuated and not fully conscious form. It is an attitude that influences people's thinking and behaviour often without them being aware of it. It is a background presupposition to many people's thinking. As such, it prevents people who are subject to it from being sexually autonomous, from making an honest assessment of their sexual needs; and thus it is an obstacle to positive sexual freedom. It is also an obstacle to negative sexual freedom, since external barriers to free sexual activity will be encouraged, or at least acquiesced in, for as long as this attitude prevails.

A particular source of misery for women has been, and still is, their sexual oppression, the denial of their sexual liberty to an even greater extent than that of men. Women are less sexually free than men, both negatively and positively.

The root of this sexual oppression is the invidious application of the puritanical attitude, the idea that sex should be particularly eschewed by women; that *women* should not be interested in sex but should engage in it only for the sake of their partners (and preferably only when babies are on the agenda); that it is wrong or abnormal or indecorous for a woman to have an interest in sex, and unthinkable that a woman could enjoy a healthy sex life, especially engaging in 'deviant' activities in no way connected with procreation.

This invidious puritanism issues in both negative and positive sexual oppression of women. The negative oppression manifests itself most abundantly in cultural barriers to women's sexual freedom. A sexually autonomous woman who pursues her sexual interests as far as is possible within current constraints, is liable to be treated adversely by some sexual partners, some acquaintances and society generally. Perhaps the most striking type of instance of this is the rape victim who is virtually judged guilty because she previously enjoyed an active sex life.

Oppression of women's negative sexual freedom also, however, manifests itself in government interference in the sex lives of women. An illustration of this is the British Board of Film Classification's practice of censoring rape scenes which are in any way erotic. The rape fantasy is more especially a female than a male fantasy, so the effect of this practice is to discriminate against women. (Anyone who thinks that I have just said that women enjoy being raped just doesn't understand *anything* about sexual fantasy.)

With respect to the oppression of women's positive sexual freedom, it is sufficient to point out that the attitude of invidious puritanism still resides in many women. Being the subject of this attitude disadvantages a woman more than it disadvantages a man in the striving for sexual autonomy.

8. Some Feminists Promote the Sexual Oppression of Women

Some feminists campaign against sexual images of women, whether in pornography, advertising, or even half-naked women in the daily papers. There are different strands to this campaign. One strand claims that such images constitute an incitement to rape. I am not going to discuss this claim except to say that my own experience tells me that it is ludicrously false, and that the question has been studied by a number of official committees which have concluded that there is no scientific evidence in favour of the claim.³

A different, and more popular, strand maintains that such images degrade women (or exploit women, or are offensive to women). I contend that this strand of the campaign is an expression not only of puritanism, but of the invidious puritanism identified above as the principal barrier to women's sexual liberation. In consequence, the self-styled feminists who take this line are actually promoting the continued and further sexual oppression of women.

Consider first the sort of sexual image of women which is typified by page 3 of *The Sun*. If these images degrade women, then what is to be said of the corresponding sort of images of men (often to be

seen on page 7 of *The Sun*)? The feminist has four options. He/she can say:

- (i) that they degrade men;
- (ii) that they degrade women;
- (iii) that they degrade both men and women;
- (iv) that they degrade neither men nor women.

If he/she says (i), this is tantamount to the plain old-fashioned puritanism that sees sex as degrading. It would be absurd to hold that sex is not degrading but images of it are.

If he/she maintains (ii), this would be to hold that sexual images, whether of men or of women, are degrading to *women*. This would be an expression of the invidious puritanism that regards sex as being not for women at all. This does, though, seem to be the feminists' position since they apply the label 'sexist' to pictures of half-naked men as well as to pictures of half-naked women.

If he/she maintains (iii) while holding that sexual images of women degrade only women, this would again be to express the invidious puritanical attitude. On the other hand, if he/she maintains (iii) while holding that sexual images of women also degrade both men and women, this would be equivalent to plain puritanism.

Finally, if he/she says (iv), this would be an emphatic expression of invidious puritanism, regarding sex as being dirty or shameful *only* for women.

In short, then, these feminists can only be either puritans or invidious puritans. As their actual position appears to be (ii), they must be invidious puritans, and thus stand opposed to the sexual liberation of women.

A similar argument can be gone through with respect to pornography. If heterosexual pornography degrades women, what is to be said of gay pornography? It obviously cannot be said to degrade women (it's not about them and it's not for them). To say it degrades men would be just an expression of puritanism. To say that it doesn't degrade men would be an emphatic expression of invidious puritanism, seeing sex as being degrading only when women are involved. Indeed, it would involve the ironic contention that pornography is OK for homosexual men but not for heterosexual men.

With respect to the use of sexual images in advertising, similar things again can be said. To object to it on the grounds that it degrades, exploits, offends, etc., *women*, is invidious puritanism. To merely have objections to gratuitous sex in advertising is just plain puritanism. The sexually liberated individual would *love* gratuitous sex in advertising. He/she

would see nothing at all wrong with gratuitous sex. Indeed, he/she would relish encountering gratuitous sex here, there, and everywhere, seeing in it a celebration of one of life's highest activities. The suppression of gratuitous sex is a blight on the spiritual development of humanity.

Let me end this section by summarising the thrust of this argument. An objection to sexual images of women on the grounds of sexual equality can be expressed in either of two alternative demands:

- (a) it can demand that there be just as many sexual images of men;
- (b) it can demand that all sexual images be suppressed.

Demand (a) is reasonable and would be met in a sexually liberated society. Demand (b) is just puritanical; and to connect such puritanism specifically with women is an expression of the invidious puritanism that promotes the sexual oppression of women.

9. Conclusion

Positive sexual freedom, or sexual autonomy, belongs to the person who is honest about his/her sexual desires and interests, who has an open mind and is willing to experiment, who recognises that forms of sexuality are person-relative and is thus tolerant and respectful of other people's tastes and pursuits.

Negative sexual freedom belongs to the person who is permitted to engage in the sexual activities of his/her choice with willing partners, no matter what those activities may be, without hindrance or interference from government or others in society.

The combination of positive and negative sexual freedom is sexual liberation.

The unfettered development of our sexual natures is not only an end in itself, but is one of the highest forms of activity open to us as spiritual beings. It is thus that sexual liberation is so important.

NOTES

1. For an informative discussion, see Anthony Furlong, *Sado-Masochism and the Law*, Legal Notes No. 12, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1991.
2. See Ted Goodman, *Censorship: The Current Legal Position in Britain (March 1991)*, Legal Notes No. 14, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1991, for a review of the many forms of censorship to which individuals in Britain are subject.
3. See, e.g., the Williams Report, *Obscenity and Film Censorship*, HMSO, 1979, chapter 6.