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Are there virtues and vices that belong specifically to the sexual life?*

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Sommario: *1. Virtues and vices in the sexual life, and virtues and vices of the sexual life. 2. How is sex special? 3. Sex and biology. 4. Sex and dualism. 5. Sex and psychology.*

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1. Virtues and vices in the sexual life, and virtues and vices of the sexual life

The question-form of the title is deliberate. I am not going to say much about what I think those virtues and vices consist in: that will have to be considered at another moment. All I hope to do here is ask the question of whether there are such virtues and vices. In the terms of Aristotle's theory of science, what is being asked here is not "what is so-and-so?" but "do so-and-so's exist?".

The subject grows out of a discussion I was having recently, in which I gave it as my view that chastity is a virtue: a view which appeared to surprise my interlocutors, and which they asked me to explain. But I decided against the obvious title: "is chastity a virtue?". This was because that title is ambiguous in several different ways. For a start the word "chastity" is ambiguous. The dictionaries give roughly speaking two meanings. On the one hand, there is a general sense, in which chastity is the virtue of well-ordered sexual desire: and what this good ordering of sexual desire consists in will vary according to circumstances. On the other hand there is a more special sense in which chastity means just celibacy. I nearly always use the word in the general sense: quite a lot of people use it in the special sense. While the old Oxford English Dictionary and the latest Collins dictionary both give both senses, the older dictionary gives the general sense first, followed by the special sense, and the new dictionary gives the special sense first. So perhaps my usage on this point is a little old fashioned.

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Then there is another ambiguity. If I ask "is chastity a virtue?", I may be asking "is what is *traditionally considered as* chastity a virtue?" — i.e., does it contribute to human well-being to be celibate outside marriage, and faithful and fruitful inside it. Or I may be asking, "is there any virtue — and, therefore, any vice — that belongs specifically to the sexual life?": leaving aside what kind of behaviour that virtue demands, leaving aside the question of what the content of that virtue may be.

It is with this last question I wish particularly to deal: though I think that examining it will tend to push us towards certain ideas about what the content of those virtues should be. I am not entirely sure that the question that I am asking will immediately appear an important one: let me explain why I think it is. I have the impression that there is quite a widespread belief that there is no virtue that has to do with good dispositions towards sexuality as such: only an application in a particular field of other more general virtues such as justice, faithfulness, considerateness, etc. I don't want to deny that there are applications in this field of these other virtues. They are particularly important because this is a particularly important field. But I do want to deny that these applications of more general virtues and vices are the only moral considerations to be raised with regard to sexuality.

I want to discuss the question of whether there are, in fact, *specific* virtues and vices that have to do with sexuality, or whether the only good and bad that we can find in sexual behaviour and manners is an application in that (particularly important) field of general moral principles, general virtues and vices. My idea is that there are such specific virtues and vices, or at least that there ought to be. That is, I think it would be strange if for such an important and such a special part of one's life there were no specific kind of good and bad: that the only good and bad that could be established were applications of more general kinds of good and bad.

Am I attacking a man of straw here? I have the impression that most people nowadays think that there is no such special virtue, only the application in that (particularly important) field of general virtues. I have not read up carefully on the subject, but I took the trouble to consult a couple of moral philosophers, and they both gave the view I am disputing as their own. So: what is your view on this question? Consider this: do you think that there is anything wrong in any kind of sexual behaviour (between consenting adults, of course) which is not e.g. dishonest, cruel, irresponsible, exploitative, bad-mannered etc.? If you don't, then you share the modern view which I am disputing. I agree, let me stress, that it's wrong to display any of these vices in your sexual life: I think that it may even usually be worse to display these vices than what I think of as the specifically sexual vices. And it's in general worse to show these vices in your sexual life than in other, less important fields. It's usually worse to show these vices in your sexual life than in your relations with the person at the supermarket check-out, of course, but that would be because your sexual life is more important to you than your relations with the person at the supermarket check-out, and (presumably) your partners' sexual lives are more important to them than the supermarket employee's relation with you is to him or her. But the point is this: are ways of going wrong like this, which are ways of going wrong in other fields of life as well, the only ways of going wrong in your sexual life?

If you answer "yes" to this question, or think that most people would answer "yes" to that question, then we are faced with a disagreement that is worth disputing about. For this just is the idea which I think odd. It strikes me as being equivalent to

saying that sex is no more special than are cut flowers. Notice, I don't say: it's equivalent to thinking that sex is no more important than cut flowers. I don't suppose many people think that. It is the *specialness* of sex that I am interested in here, rather than its importance. Cut flowers aren't special: sex is. Cut flowers are certainly a thing about which you can go wrong. But you cannot go wrong about cut flowers in ways that are specific to cut flowers: there are no ways of going wrong about cut flowers that aren't ways of going wrong in other, probably more important, fields of life. (This example, by the way, is not my own: it comes from Anscombe.[1])

You can be dishonest about cut flowers: you can steal them or pretend they grew in your garden when they didn't, or that you arranged them yourself when you didn't. You can be irresponsible about cut flowers: you can spend too much time or money on getting them or arranging them, to the manifest detriment of other people you have a responsibility to. You can be cruel with cut flowers: you can be callously indifferent to the sufferings of other people in your home who suffer from hay fever and are therefore allergic to them. You can, at a pinch, I suppose, even beat someone to death with them. You can be exploitative with cut flowers. I remember hearing recently something horrible about the conditions in the fields and hot-houses in Colombia where carnations are grown for the U.S. and European markets: what with pesticides and other chemical treatments, the women who work there become sterile. I hope it isn't true, but I have tried to avoid buying carnations (a flower I am very fond of) since at least during the winter. And at a fairly trivial level you can be bad-mannered about cut flowers when you bark at people who go to admire them because you're afraid they'll disarrange them.

So my idea is that in the case of cut flowers there's nothing you can do wrong which wouldn't be wrong in any other circumstances: and nothing you can do right, either. There is and probably can be no special virtue, no special vice, to do with cut flowers. Is sex in the same position? This strikes me as incredible.

One reason why it strikes me as incredible is that on this point most other societies disagree with ours. By "our society" I mean contemporary affluent Western society, and by "most other societies" I mean most other societies throughout history and throughout the world at present. Most societies throughout history disagree with ours on whether the sun goes round the earth or vice-versa, of course, so this isn't conclusive. But in the case of the earth and the sun we can give some kind of explanation of how it comes about that we are right on this question while everyone else is wrong. Can we give some such explanation in the case of whether there is a virtue which has specially to do with sexuality? What is it that we have discovered? How have improved techniques of investigation helped us to discover that there is no such virtue, that sex isn't special?

A suggestion might be that what makes the difference are the discoveries made this century by Freud. But these would make a difference the other way, surely. If Freud is right then we've discovered in this century just how special sex is. If Freud

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[1] I am at present unable to trace the article where Anscombe makes this point: I seem to recall that it appeared in *New Blackfriars Review* some time in the early 1970's. An analogous contrast is drawn by P. GEACH, in *Marriage: Arguing to a First Principle in Sexual Ethics*, in L. Gormally, (ed.), *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, Four Courts, Dublin 1994, p. 181.

is right then moral considerations drawn from sexuality ought to apply in other fields, not vice-versa.

The widespread availability of reliable contraception might make a difference. But do technical changes normally alter the moral status of an activity? If you're going to try to kill everyone living in a city, does it make any moral difference if the name of the city is Magdeburg or Limerick, and you do the killing with swords and pikes, or if the name is Hiroshima or Dresden and you do the killing with an atomic bomb or thousands of tons of T.N.T.? It is true that this new technical advance has made a very definite sociological difference, given that it means that the possibility of effective contraception is now in women's hands. But has it altered the nature of sexuality itself? Maybe you think it has: but if you do you should offer arguments for this. What kind of arguments should be used? And, lastly, if the nature of sexuality has radically changed, maybe we should think of inventing a new term to express this new reality. Certainly there's going to be a lot of confusion if we continue to use the same words for quite different realities.

Well, I don't think that either the morality or any other aspect of a natural phenomenon can be radically changed by technical advance: and, given that people continue to use the same words, I think that the burden of proof is on those who think it has been so changed. But in any case some such story has to be told, or at least sketched, to explain how it comes about that we've got this difficult question right while nearly everyone else has got it wrong. If we can't sketch such a story then we have to fall back on the theory of the natural rational superiority of God's Englishman, or, in this case, God's twentieth century affluent Western person.

I perhaps ought to point out, in a sort of parenthesis, that this modern mistake, of thinking there's nothing special about sexuality, may be a hangover of an older mistake. The same mistake was sometimes made in some commentaries on traditional moral teaching on sexuality. The virtue to do with sexuality was brought under temperance: that is, sexuality was treated as if it were just one bodily appetite among many, and to be dealt with as such. So just as you shouldn't go to excess in eating or drinking, you shouldn't go to excess in sexual activity. I don't know who would win, me or my typical modern opponent, in a race to be the first one to point out that this goes practically nowhere in justifying the traditional teaching on sexuality and in any case treats sex as if it wasn't special.

2. How is sex special?

So how does sex differ from cut flowers? How is sex special? I don't think it's just a question of importance: that sex is far more important than cut flowers are, but there's no other difference of kind between them, only a question of degree of importance. Of course all reasonable people think sex is more important than cut flowers, and most people give far more importance to sex than they do to cut flowers. I give the example because everyone knows that cut flowers are trivial, and also because, since we know they're trivial, we know they aren't special. Can anything be as important as sex is without being in some way special? If you think it can be, I think you owe us an argument.

What counts as being something special? is a question that seems to be looming

here. I intend to get round to it later. Let me first give an excursus on the sort of ethical theory I think could or should be helpful here, a sort of neo-Aristotelian virtue based ethics. This is, to my mind, quite generally helpful, and may be especially helpful here.

Why is it especially helpful here? One reason is that such a system ignores the contemporary distinction between theoretical and applied ethics. I think that this distinction is an unreliable one in any case, and in this case it supports the view of an application to particular fields of general principles, a view which I am worried about here especially. I have a sneaking feeling that this distinction is a sort of ghost of God. When people had a divine-law conception of ethics, they naturally thought of, e.g., the Ten Commandments as general principles of law which needed to be applied to individual cases and individual fields. Take away the divine-law model, and I can see no reason for this way of structuring your moral thought.

Let me try to give you an idea of the way in which I think a neo—Aristotelian theory of ethics works or ought to work. A grasp of what is good or bad for human beings arises from a reflection on, e.g., the sort of social roles a human being has or has to have. It might be objected here that a grasp of what is good or bad for human beings ought to arise from a reflection on human nature: but as it is a part of human nature to live in a society, and living in a society means the adoption of certain roles, the two approaches boil down to the same thing, and my way of putting it is a little more definite[2].

One advantage of this neo–Aristotelian way of thinking is that it works against a particularly odd, but for a time particularly influential liberal view in moral philosophy: the idea that moral values and judgements on good and bad are, as it were, "up for grabs": that subject to certain purely formal constraints of generality, etc., one's ethical stance wholly depends on one's own personal commitments[3]. I'm not going to discuss this view now, but it seems to be ridiculous. If it were true, then if my basic moral commitment were not to look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon, that would be the end of all possible discussion. This view is simply bizarre[4].

One trouble, one reason why we find it easier to be liberals than neo–Aristotelians, is that we actually live in a modern liberal society. Things were much easier for Aristotle, where he was able simply to observe that the gentleman, the *kalos kagathos*, the well–off male, the citizen in a well–ordered state, had the best possible sort of life. When one looks at the sort of lives led by, e.g., slaves, foreigners, women, etc. in ancient Greek society, it is hard not to agree with Aristotle. But our society is not as clearly structured as his was. Can we make any headway with neo–Aristotelianism or should we be content with being Harean liberals?

Some headway we can make. There still are some fairly clearly defined social roles: and by considering them we can work out what qualities someone needs to be a good player of that role — that is, what virtues they need. This device can be used fairly well for some points of professional ethics: we know what this or that profession is for, what its role in society is — e.g. teacher, doctor — and it is clear that

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[2] For an excellent account of neo-Aristotelian ethics, see R. HURSTHOUSE, *Beginning Lives*, Blackwell's, Oxford 1988, ch. 6 (pp. 218-259).

[3] See e.g. R.M. HARE, *The Language of Morals*, O.U.P, Oxford 1964, pp. 96-7.

[4] For this example, see P. FOOT, *Virtues and Vices*, Blackwell, Oxford 1978, p. 107.

there are at least some virtues that the teacher or doctor needs in order to be a good teacher or doctor. What counts as a good doctor is not "up for grabs". It sometimes looks as if it might be possible to build up a universal ethical system from such considerations, together with the point that to live well you need to play some such social roles.

But such a project of building up a universal ethical system from the virtues required by a particular role, would pretty soon run into difficulties. It is not so easy, for example, to make out what the professional virtues of business people are. The reason for this is that it's not quite so clear what business people are for — what the end or *telos* of business is, as Aristotle would say. The *telos* of teaching is fairly clear, the *telos* of medicine is fairly clear: but not all the ends of all social roles are so clear.

Notice, though, that we can work towards a solution to this problem from the other end. Let us consider the quite general Aristotelian virtues of practical wisdom, justice, courage and well-ordered appetite. It is not hard to make out a case that whatever social roles we play, our exercise of them will be hampered and the achievement of their *telos* will be prevented if we do not have at least some degree of these virtues[5].

So I want to try to apply some such considerations to the field of sexuality. Take the following social roles: lover, husband, wife, mother, father. These are quite clear social roles, each of them with a fairly clear *telos*. They all have their ends, their points. There is something that these roles are for, and there is something that counts as achieving those ends, and therefore performing the role well. And there are clearly qualities — which we all have, alas — which will hamper us in the pursuit of those ends. (I mention this because it is always easier to identify vices than to identify virtues.)

What makes a good lover, husband, wife, mother or father, is not up for grabs: though it is up for serious discussion. I am quite amenable to the suggestion that we have had foisted on us specifically male views of what makes for a good player of one of these roles, and that it's time to hear the female side. I think that suggestion would probably be correct.

(Another remark someone may want to make here is: it is true that these roles exist, but maybe they should not exist. There used to be public hangmen, but we decided we could do without them. Can we not do without these roles? This is a perfectly serious question and I will attempt an answer to it shortly.)

3. Sex and biology

The question for the time being is, is there anything special about these roles? and if so, what? The answer is that these roles are special because they are sexual roles. What makes being a sexual role something special? We have come back again to the same question, what is special about sexuality, at another level. What I want to suggest is that there is no chance of making sense of the specialness of sexuality

[5] Compare P.T. GEACH, *Why men need the virtues* ch. 1 of *The Virtues*, C.U.P, Cambridge 1977.

unless you look at it teleologically and biologically. This seems to be something that people are in general nowadays not all that willing to do. It seems to be a widely accepted objection to, e.g., traditional Catholic teaching on this question that it insists on the biological and teleological side[6]. I do think, nevertheless, that this aspect needs looking at. This is not part of a conjuring trick, to make the audience accept what they do not want to accept. It will still be open for anyone, after having taken that look at biology, to pull back and say: "very well, the biological element is indeed the special element, but it turns out to be morally irrelevant". I only would point out here that anyone who wants thus to pull back will need to give some kind of an argument why this important fact is morally irrelevant, and will need also to find some other reason for the moral specialness of sexuality. And, incidentally, I do not deny that there may be other such reasons.

Broadly speaking I want to put the biology back into sexuality. Or, as I would put it, I want to put the sex back into sexuality. This works on a number of levels. First, we have to admit sex is a biological and teleological notion. Suppose we met a race of creatures — fairly clearly non-rational animals — that was very different from us: on Mars, say. And the question arises: are these creatures sexed? and if so, can we distinguish male and female? We need to think now how we would go about finding out these answers. We would not do it by investigating their psyches, nor even merely by just looking at (or cutting up) individuals. We would try to find out how they reproduced and what was the role of the different organs of the different individuals involved in reproduction. Thus, sex is a biological and teleological notion. Anything else which is called sexual is so called because ultimately it has some relation to this process, to these organs[7].

Given that fact, I want to give priority, among the sexual roles I mentioned, to those of mother and father: first of all, in a purely biological sense. It might be more important in the long run to consider mother and father as educative roles: there is a very clear *telos* involved here, and very clear virtues, clearly related to the general good of society. But it is important to stress that we have to have a baby before we can bring it up. Start with mother and father, I say, because clearly the sexual roles make no sense — do not count as sexual roles at all — except in a context where reproduction at least occasionally occurs, that is, where some people become mothers and fathers. Hence I think all sexual roles must be defined in some way relative to this fact: directly or indirectly, otherwise they can't count as sexual roles. Even the most far-fetched and least biological roles are going to include in their definition some reference to sexual pleasure, which will bring us back to the the sexual organs, and these will eventually bring us back to the concept of reproduction.

I think that these considerations give us reason to suppose that what makes sexuality special is its biological teleology: its reference to reproduction. And it might very well be said that nowadays we can separate it from reproduction reliably, and so we have genuinely changed the concept. I am not going to try to argue against

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6 Cf. the fact that a writer such as R.A. MacCormick, can speak of "physicalism" so dismissively as to suggest that it is too absurd to be discussed: e.g., at *Notes on Moral Theology, 1981 through 1984*, University Press of America, Lanham 1984, p. 168.

7 See G.E.M. Anscombe, *You can have sex without children; Christianity and the new offer*, in *Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe, Vol. 3*, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, p. 85.

this just now. All I can do is to repeat that given that we continue to use the same word or words the burden of proof is on the one who says that the concept has changed: or at least the burden of inventing new terminology.

This does not, in fact, get us very far. The claim is that one of the things that makes sexuality special is its (frustratable) reference to reproduction. Thus, that the central cases of sexual roles are those of mother and father. Here the order is clearly important: mothers, biologically, seem to me more important than fathers, though in general both are necessary. I'm not going to pursue this line in particular detail. All I want to say is that if this is true, we seem to have some reason to associate the specialness of sex, and thus the special goodness of sex, with reproduction. If we can take a further step — which I cannot discuss here — of showing reason to associate the educative roles of mother and father with the biological roles, then we've got some basis for suggesting that part of the content of the specific virtue to do with sexuality is stability, continuity. That is not meant to be even an apology for a conclusive argument: only a statement of where I think the arguments should be searched for.

For a moment I want to go back to something I left undealt with a short while back. I spoke of different social and sexual roles, and I said it was still an open question about whether or not these roles should continue to exist. Well, if the human race is to continue, for the moment there must be fathers and mothers in the biological sense. Though I suppose this could change. I wonder, would we really want it to? Is not the picture of the hatcheries in *Brave New World* one of the most unpleasant features of that unpleasant (and brilliant) book? It's also an open question about whether the human race would do well to survive, but that's another question that I think we cannot deal with here. What about mothers and fathers in the educative sense? It used to be argued at the beginning of the century that these should be abolished, but experience with totalitarian regimes has made us a bit more cautious now. Still, I saw Germaine Greer suggesting something of the sort a few months ago, so I suppose it's questionable. But I do think, myself, that the human race will thrive far better if the educative social roles of mother and father continue. What about the social roles of husbands and wives? Quite a lot of people want these abolished or at least changed beyond all recognition. There are economic considerations about the structure of our society that come in here, and Heaven forbid I should suggest that the economic structure of our society should not change. I should say that I've got nothing against the idea in principle of the father staying at home to look after the children, and becoming a house-husband. It usually doesn't work very well at present, because women still tend to be socially conditioned and trained for this work, and men aren't, but I don't see why this shouldn't change. Equally well, maybe I'm wrong on this: I am open to conviction either way.

But now I notice something a tiny bit odd. People are apparently willing to regard these social roles as merely conventional, questionable, suitable cases for abolition, etc: even though if we abolished the biological and even educative roles of mothers and fathers we would be doing something very drastic indeed. But I very seldom see this suggested about the social role of the lover. Why not? What does the lover contribute to human well-being? Lovers contribute to their own well-being, at best: very seldom to anyone else's. And that's only when both are good lovers — in a fairly thick sense of "good lovers". Even good lovers often hurt each other a great

deal, to say nothing of weak and poor lovers, which is what most of us are at the best of times. Why, then, should we not consider seriously whether we ought not to abolish lovers? Possible replies might be: it wouldn't be natural, or it wouldn't be possible, or it wouldn't be advisable. I would be inclined to agree with all these replies. But the same kind of reply can clearly be made on even stronger grounds for the retention of the social roles of mothers and fathers and husbands and wives.

But let me push on a little bit further. Before I got distracted by social roles I was saying that I thought that I'd given reason to suppose that what makes sexuality special is its biological teleology: its reference to reproduction. For some reason, as I have mentioned, some people get very upset when this sort of point is mentioned. There seems to be a certain squeamishness about the concept of reproduction. I can't understand why. It seems to me to be more of a male reaction, which again is odd, given that it's women who have to suffer. It seems to me a perfectly fair comment for a woman to say to a man: "stop talking about childbirth, we know all about it, you don't have to put up with it". But it does not seem to be women who are squeamish about talking about childbirth: a desire to ignore childbirth seems to be more a male thing. Of course males have the chance to ignore childbirth, while women don't. So it strikes me that ignoring childbirth is just one of those specifically male ways of looking at things which we were objecting to a moment ago. And it's not hard to see a plausible reason why this should be so: bearing a child is clearly an achievement, but it's one that men can't perform, so they naturally tend either to belittle it — which is not easy — or to ignore it[8]. I must say that this seems to me one of the most unpleasant psychological characteristics of my sex.

4. Sex and dualism

This squeamishness about reproduction may have deeper roots, though. I have a feeling that one defect of a great deal of talk about sexuality is a sort of dualism: not an explicit dualism, usually, but one which is there none the less. It is a sort of romantic or even Cartesian wish to keep the mind separate from the body. I often hear it said that one owns one's body. One understands something of what is meant by this phrase, of course, and one can sympathise with the point which is being made, to a certain extent, but it seems to me to be just inaccurate. One doesn't *own* one's body: one *is* one's body. Who and what is this "I" supposed to be who is supposed to possess this curious appendage? (Mention of curious appendages makes me think that again there may be a specifically male psychological quirk at work. The male sexual organs are not inside the male's body but dangle on the outside — as a curious appendage. I think this seems to make it quite easy for men to think of themselves as separate from their sexuality. I would think of this kind of dualism as being more a male tendency than a female tendency, and I have recently heard feminist philosophers making the same claim.)

But one finds this sort of dualism very widely. I remember noticing in some glossy magazine (aimed at a female readership, and mostly written by women, appa-

[8] For a good account of childbearing as an achievement, see R. HURSTHOUSE, *Beginning lives*, Blackwell, Oxford 1988, ch. 8 (pp. 307-317).

rently) the statement that "sex is all in the mind". I must say I disagree: and it seems to me a perfect example of dualism. The form of dualism which is more common would probably suggest that sex is all in the body: this is just as big a mistake. But let me concentrate on the "all in the mind" side for a minute. More recently I was reading an article about this new technique of virtual reality. The crude idea is that you wear a special helmet and gloves and boots and they can give you the impression that you're skiing, or playing tennis, or something. The article I was reading mentioned the possibility of applying the technique in other fields: particularly that of sexual activity.

The old moral philosophy example of the experience machine is well known. This is supposed to be a machine which can give one any kind of experience — experiences one might have no chance of having in one's real life — but the drawback is that one has to plug in for a life-time or not at all. The conclusion that we are supposed to draw, intuitively, is that such a "life" of experience would not really be worth living. It might be an attractive alternative to death, but not to life, which is more than experience.

So let's imagine a sexual experience machine: maybe a virtual reality machine, or one that acts directly on your brain, or even a pill. (I think that this kind of thought-experiment might be of more widespread interest, too: do the same considerations apply to the experience as to the reality? Fighting, for example.) But to stay with the sexual experience machine. Let us place no restriction on the machine which obliges us to plug in for a lifetime or not at all: but let us add the not unreasonable warning that if you play with the sex experience machine too much it may disenchant you with real sex, as your experiences in the real world in this line will probably not be half so pleasurable.

Do we use the machine? Let me explain why I ask this question. I'm trying to find out what's special about sexuality, and one line I'm trying is to establish what the point of sex is, what its *telos* is: on the general Aristotelian grounds that once we have discovered what the *telos* of an activity is, what its point is, what it's for, we are in a fair way to finding out what counts as doing it well. So do we plug in?

I think not, if you're at all like me. Or, at least, one might plug in for a short while, now and then, as a bit of a joke or celebration or party, in the way that one sometimes drinks too much or smokes a joint or uses some pharmacological product in a way the doctor never prescribed, now and then, as a bit of a joke or a celebration. But one would take good care that the use of the machine didn't become addictive, or didn't disenchant one with the real thing. I am pretty sure that we would all feel sorry for someone who did get addicted, as it were: and still more for someone who from the beginning could not see any difference: who said it was just the same as the real thing, only better. Nearly everyone wants to say something like: there is more to sex than the experience. The experience is not the point — it may be *a* point, but it is not the only point and it cannot be a substitute for the others. If someone were to disagree, if someone were to think that they could get out of the machine everything that they can get out of real sex, then I don't think they mean the same by "sex" as most people do. After all, there are, I am told, all kinds of things that one can buy at the sort of shop that specialises in these things which will give you pleasant experiences of that kind: but most of us do not make very much use of them, and we look down or feel sorry for those who do.

So what is there about real sex which is lacking in experiences with a virtual reality machine or with sex-aids? What's the point of it all? I'm not sure I can answer. But I can say first that sexuality has got a point in the life of the species: we have talked about this already. Here we only have to say that this shouldn't be neglected. I don't know, though, whether any individual is likely to care much for the life of the species: one could ask, after all, what has posterity ever done for me? But what about the life of the individual? Is there a point to sex which is distinct from the experience? I think we can say *yes* to this question.

Different people can take different things as the point, the special thing, of course. But one thing which I think the experience machine story tells us is that sex is *not* all in the mind: one's own physical reality and the physical reality of one's partner is important. It isn't just one's experience that matters — nor one's partner's experience, either.

Any anti-dualist will find this quite natural, of course: but I'm afraid that serious anti-dualists are rarer than you might think. A serious anti-dualist is going to say: your physical reality is your reality, full stop. Your partner's physical reality is the reality of your partner, full stop. Your physical identity is your identity: your partner's physical identity is your partner's identity. It is surprising how rare it is to find people who are willing to say this. But it is implied in the reaction, which I certainly have, and which I take it most people share, of finding pathetic and sad those men who, I hear, can't perform sexually in an adequate way without imagining that their partner is someone else: ms. Stone, I believe, is the current favourite. The Pope got laughed at thoroughly the other year for saying that a man could commit adultery even with his own wife. But the existence of the men I've just mentioned seems to suggest that the Pope had a point, much as most people seem to dislike having to admit it[9].

So the experience isn't everything: part of the point seems bound up with the physical reality of the partner. This does not get us very near to anything that looks like a detailed content to the virtue which has to do with sexuality, but it seems to provide some constraint on that content. Anything which goes against that special point, that seems to make the partner's physical reality unimportant, is a sexual defect: a sort of specific sexual vice. This might have quite far-reaching consequences, which I don't want to follow up here. It is enough for me to have established the likelihood of there being such a thing as a specifically sexual vice. Now, having dealt with the physical, I want to go on to the psychological.

I don't mean to deny the reality of the psychological, by the way. I don't think that an anti-dualist need do that. Nor need I refuse to treat it separately from the physical: clearly it's often going to be useful to treat the physical and the psychological separately. But I do think it's essential to remember always that they are not really separate. Psychological activities and affections are things that are done by, or happen to, these same physical biological animals that we are. They don't happen anywhere else, in the soul or mind. The soul or mind just is, for us, certain powers, activities, affections of these animals, these physical and biological realities.

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[9] Pope JOHN PAUL II, general audience, 8-X-1980.

5. Sex and psychology

Let me get on, then, to the psychology of sexuality: always remembering that I refuse to separate it entirely from the physical reality. And the question we asked some time ago, the one about the abolition of the lover, is interesting here. Why do we refuse to consider the abolition of the social role of the lover? What's special about being a lover — or having a lover? I need to go a little into what I think is still a common phenomenon. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, and maybe I don't keep up with things. But I get the impression that lovers still swear undying, eternal affection — however falsely. A question which I think we need to look at is why this should be so. And there is a related question, on which I think I am on firmer ground: the question of exclusivity. If one is going to count as a lover, in any sense stronger than that euphemistic newspaper sense where the verb "love" is used instead of another four-letter verb, one is surely committed to exclusivity in one's sexual relations, at least so long as the lover-relationship continues. I don't mean that people always act as lovers ought to: but even if they are only pretending to be lovers they are at least pretending to exclusivity. Why should this be so?

I'm doubtful about the vows of eternal devotion, though. Maybe I just am old-fashioned. But in favour of this we do have the (to me surprising) resilience of marriage as an institution, even when the partners have no idea of having children. I mean, it looks as if people — lovers in particular — do want to commit themselves one to the other for life, or at least to pretend to. There seems to be some fairly deep compulsion involved. We can dodge this by saying it's all social conditioning, I suppose. But we can dodge facing up to any surprising phenomenon in the same way, so this remark does not really contribute much of special interest to this debate in particular. In any case the exclusivity on its own is enough, I think, to make my point.

My point is this: this consideration should make us realise that the idea that "there's nothing good or bad in sexuality except what comes from the application of general principles" is not true. There's something special about sexuality here. General principles say, if you've given your word, you've got to keep it. This is quite right, and it applies here too. But here there seems some kind of a compulsion actually to *give* one's word: to promise exclusivity at least, and probably some kind of continuity.

The point I've made applies to those who enter the determinate social role of lovers. But maybe not everyone's sexuality is manifested in being a lover, in this strong sense. Maybe there are people who don't become lovers. If they pretend they are becoming lovers, and don't accept the constraints of the role, then of course we have a case of the application of general principles. But you can have a clear agreement, no doubt, on both sides from the start of the affair that there is no commitment between the pair. I have to stress this, as otherwise people might find themselves agreeing with me for the wrong reasons. Take a case where there's no deceit, and so the partners in a free and easy relationship which has no commitment to continuity or to exclusivity, don't offend against general moral principles. Can we say this is bad?

Well, I can and do, of course, but it's not so clear that I've given any reason to say so. The reason I want to push towards is the idea that even if there is agreement from the beginning that they are not lovers, that there is no commitment, so that they

are not cheating one on the other, there is nevertheless something that they are missing that others have got: or at least something that others want. Every husband, every wife, and every lover at least wants commitment: from both parties. It seems that there is a widespread idea that the special goodness of sex arises in a particular relationship: that of being lovers. And this relationship involves some commitment to exclusivity and perhaps some commitment to continuity.

The reason for the lovers' commitment to exclusivity might well be some of the reflections that we've made about personal and physical identity. I'm not sure how far this could be pushed. But I think that there are some psychological considerations which could be made, which have more bearing on continuity, but which also bear on exclusivity.

So I go on to some considerations about personal identity from another point of view: not, this time, a purely biological point of view, but a pragmatic, phenomenological, lived point of view. This comes at some distance from Gadamer through Macintyre[10]. The identity of a life, I want to say, is in some sense given by a unifying narrative: by the story that you tell yourself about your life. There are some rock-bottom constraints, of course, on how this narrative can be. It has to be consistent, or it won't be true. It has to be true, or it won't help you to make sense of your life, but rather of some other life that maybe no-one has ever lived: which is not a lot of use. It also (let me insist) ought to be the story of the life of an animal, which is what you are. A purely intellectual biography is going to give you a wrong understanding of who and what you are. There is also arguably some important constraint on continuity through the narrative: one-off events on their own don't contribute to making sense. If they have long-lasting consequences they will do: but precisely to that extent they aren't really one-off.

But beyond these constraints, one might want to say, everything is up for grabs: what kind of story it's going to be, and what kind of importance one gives to what element. I don't know how true this is: maybe there are other constraints on what is going to count as an intelligible narrative that I haven't thought of. But one thing is clear: a complete chronological list of all the events of your life, though no doubt consistent and true, is not going to establish who you are, or help make sense of your life: it would be just like living your life again, and if your life was incomprehensible the first time round it will be the same second time around.

So I can't talk about narrative as such: I'm going to concentrate on a particular form of narrative, a narrative of inquiry, a story of "how I came to discover ...". I choose this kind of narrative because I think it's one which we all ought to be interested in, being philosophers. Secondly because I think it's the most perspicuous form of narrative: one which most clearly aids understanding — provided the inquiry consists of the right questions, of course. But even negative answers are answers, and something has been understood. This point derives, also indirectly, from an idea of Collingwood, expressed in his *Autobiography*[11]: that there is no learning, no under-

[10] See A. MACINTYRE, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, Duckworth, London 1990, esp. pp. 80-81 and 91-94; also H.-G. GADAMER,*Wahrheit und Method*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1965, Part II, section 1: *Erbehung der Geschichtlichkeit zum hermeneutischen Prinzip*, pp. 250-290.

[11] R.G. COLLINGWOOD, *An autobiography*, O.U.P., Oxford 1939, pp. 29-43.

standing, without questioning. And the only thing you can learn from a question is the answer to that question. He made this discovery first when working as an archaeologist: there is no point in just digging up a site and seeing what you learn from it. You have to know what questions you're asking, what questions you're trying to find an answer to. When was this site first occupied? When was it abandoned? Who made it?

This at first sight only argues weakly for the importance of continuity. I have argued, firstly, that there is an important connection between sexuality and physical reality, physical identity. I'm trying to move towards there being an important connection between sexuality and psychological identity: this is going to mean both identity through time and at one given time. Hence it will connect with exclusivity and with continuity.

The idea that there is an important connection between sexuality and psychological identity might be challenged. Let me just say that a shock in one's sexual life — the discovery of infidelity, say — often seems more overwhelming than a comparable shock in other aspects of one's life. That one's business partner is cheating on one is bad news, but it doesn't affect you quite so badly. Is there a reason for this?

The reason, I want to suggest, is provided by the idea of sexuality as providing an important strand in the on-going narrative by which one makes sense of one's life. This idea is not as easy as it seems: or at least, it doesn't bring us to the conclusions I want to come to about the importance of exclusivity and continuity as quickly as you might think. What about the narrative of the life of Don Juan, or Casanova? Clearly there is some kind of continuity in the sexual life there, though not much exclusivity: he ends up with a narrative which we can all understand and which presumably he can understand. But it is not a very nice story, to say the least. What we need to identify is, what is wrong with it?

I can't say that there's no continuity: there is a continuity, a continuity of project, if you like. But the problem may be that it's a merely technical project: a question of technique we seduction. It's also not clear what counts as success in the project, even if you allot points on an arbitrary score-chart: five points for a milkmaid, ten for a farmer's wife, twenty for a countess, fifty for a princess on the day of her wedding etc. The idea of such a score-chart is disgusting, and in one sense I should apologise for bring it up, but I did it on purpose. I used the disgusting example to show how Casanova's life trivialises the narrative of sexuality by turning into the narrative of a purely technical project.

The idea of a narrative of inquiry should help here, if we are seeking to understand why this trivialisation is a bad thing. Casanova's life is comprehensible as a narrative, but it's pretty thin as a narrative of inquiry. What questions does he ask of his partners on his series of one-night-stands? And so, what does he come to discover? Not a lot. "How was it for you?" is about as far as he gets, and the only information he gets from that is whether his technique is keeping up.

And the other problem, to do with exclusivity, comes in here. Who is he asking his questions to? A lot of people. It's a dialogued inquiry, of course, but not one in which the participants are on terms of equality. He knows far more than any of his partners: he's making them thin and trivial instruments, sounding-boards, in his thin and trivial technical inquiry. This is not a real dialogued inquiry.

Contrast the questions that you can ask of a lover — a real lover, one with some

commitment — or, still more, of a husband or wife. Questions about the whole of their lives: the whole of your life: the lives of other people that you know jointly. As a narrative of inquiry, a narrative of a life of faithfulness wins hands down over the life of Casanova. You can discover a lot more, and far more important things.

This is not just Gadamer, Macintyre and Collingwood. It fits in well with Aristotle, too. Aristotle tells us that a good life or a bad life can only be really judged as a whole: call no-one happy till they are dead[12]. This can be exaggerated: but it is clear that it is a lot easier to judge whether a life as a whole was a good one or not, than to judge whether an individual action was. There is an important weakness here, by the way, in all neo-Aristotelian virtue-based systems: they give us a reason to seek virtue and avoid vice, sure enough, but they do not give us much reason to avoid each and every vicious action, etc. This needs working on, and I'm doing some work on it[13]. I mention this to try and dismiss the suspicion that I am trying to reach some unwarrantably strong conclusions. Let me stress: I am only trying to establish that there is something special about sexuality, and that, therefore, there is a specific way of doing well with regard to it, and specific ways of doing badly with regard to it, in addition to all the applications in that field of general ways of doing well and doing badly. And I have argued that the specific ways of doing well and doing badly ought to have to do with reproduction, with physical reality, with continuity and with exclusivity.

Accepting the arguments that I have given does not mean that one is by that very fact committed to all my views on sexuality. It does not even mean that one is committed to avoiding each and every action in this field that does not seem to involve, or seems to exclude, reproduction, physical reality, continuity and exclusivity. But I think it does commit one to recognising these points as the sketch of a reasonable ideal to be sought for in sexuality, as the outlines of what the special virtue with regard to sexuality ought to be. Maybe not everyone can be virtuous: there seems no philosophical reason to suppose this must be so. Maybe the connection between this kind of ideal, or virtue, and individual actions is not so clear-cut: this is something that needs working on.

Be that as it may, if, as Aristotle suggests, a life is judgeable, and an individual action may well not be, then what about sexuality? Sexuality is, roughly speaking, a long continuing vertical slice of your life. It ought to lie in between a life as a whole and an individual action in terms of judgeability: perhaps nearer the judgeability of the whole life. Your sexuality is quite a big part of you — part of your physical identity, after all. It makes quite a thick and quite a central vertical slice of your life. Those who make of their sexual life a long, rich, continuing project of a narrative of inquiry, have thereby made more sense of their life than those who don't. So what is one's sexual life? And how does one's behaviour fit into it? Is there a desire for a comprehensible and important narrative of inquiry about important things: about other persons, about the survival and the education of the human race? Or can one be happy to have a series of ever-repeated "How was it for you?" — type questions?

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[12] See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1100a 10-12.

[13] See C.F.J. MARTIN, *Virtues, Motivation and the End of Life*, in L. GORMALLY (ed.), *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, Four Courts, Dublin 1994, esp. pp. 120-121.

That kind of argument is not going to convince anyone that the traditional estimate of what the special virtues and vices of the sexual life are is correct. But it might go some way to making some people think that there are, or at least may be, special virtues and vices that relate specifically to the sexual life. And I think this is something that ought to be accepted: that it is better to have some idea of a specific virtue and dispute about its content than to have none. Greatly daring, I would suggest that cultures with an idea that such a virtue exists and about its content, even if that culture's views about the content of the virtue are disputable, may be better off than ones like ours which has a tendency to ignore the possibility of the existence of such a virtue altogether. Thus, I would say that I have given reason to hold that traditional teaching about sexuality, as upheld still by the Catholic Church and by some of the sterner Protestant groups, say, is the right sort of teaching: it gives importance to what is important in the right way, while practically nobody else gives any importance to it at all. I am not here arguing that the traditional teaching is correct: but I am arguing that whatever is correct will express a view on the questions which the traditional teaching regards as important, and not just ignore them, as most of the modern world seems to want to do.

Before I finish, let me say one thing. Someone who accepts my view on sexuality, and the virtue of sexuality, may or may not decide to commit themselves to that virtue. It's a question to be dealt with another time, just how much in terms of individual actions that would commit one to[14]. But one thing is clear. People who are committed to this idea of the virtue that relates to sexuality, to its association with reproduction, with physical reality, with continuity and with exclusivity, may find themselves seriously unlucky, and without any possibility of the usual expressions of sexuality which are consistent with this conception of the virtue. I mean by this that they just may not find anyone with whom they can relate sexually in a way that is consistent with that view of the virtue. Such people may end up constrained, by their view of the virtue, to adopt a celibate manner of existence.

That sounds like pretty bad news. But can I suggest that this may happen to anyone, even if they have a different view of the virtue that relates specifically to sexuality, and even if they believe that there is no such virtue? For example, bad luck can strike anyone. Imagine someone whose wife is stricken down by a chronic, crippling, but non-fatal disease. This is bad luck for her, but it's also bad luck for him. He is committed to her, he has given his word, and the application of general moral principles demands that he isn't unfaithful to her and that he doesn't abandon her. He is then committed to celibacy by bad luck and the application of general moral principles. Or it might well happen that there could be someone in my situation, say, that of a university lecturer, who thought that there was no virtue specific to sexuality. But he might well hold that other general moral considerations applied in the sexual life. He might hold, rightly, that it is not good to sleep with female students, as this would be exploitative. And he might well hold, rightly, that it is not good to sleep with married women, as this would be a breach of trust.

Who can he sleep with, consistently with his own moral principles? An unmar-

[14] See C.F.J. MARTIN, *Virtues, motivation and the end of life*, in L. GORMALLY (ed.), *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, Four Courts, Dublin 1994, esp. pp. 120-121.

ried female colleague, perhaps. But maybe he hasn't got any: we all know that the proportion of women teaching in universities is far lower than it ought to be. Or maybe he just finds the few unmarried female colleagues he has got uncongenial. What can he do? Is he not also committed to celibacy by his own moral principles?

Well, what he has to do is to sign up for a computer dating service, or join the tennis club, or even (if really desperate) the Young Conservatives, as soon as possible. But he's a hard-working lecturer: where will he find the time? And maybe somehow he's fallen in love with someone in the categories that he has agreed to exclude on general moral principles. Hard decisions are not the prerogative of my own theory: others have them too. The only way you can avoid hard decisions is by not being moral at all.

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Abstract: *È una idea comune, oggigiorno, che non ci sono virtù e vizi concernenti in modo specifico la vita sessuale. L'autore dell'articolo ritiene che ciò sia un errore; pensare così è ridurre la sessualità al livello di banalità dei fiori tagliati: la moralità dei fiori tagliati è sempre l'applicazione, in un campo specifico, di virtù e vizi generali. L'opinione moderna significa che il sesso non è affatto speciale; invece è speciale: biologicamente, in rapporto alla specie; e fisicamente, in rapporto all'individuo, poiché coinvolge l'identità e la realtà fisica dei partners. La realtà e l'identità fisica di un essere umano sono la sua realtà e identità personale; pensare altrimenti è dualismo. Il sesso è speciale anche psicologicamente, quale elemento importante nella narrazione che costituisce l'identità psicologica della persona. Possiamo così individuare, come errori o vizi specificamente sessuali, quelle tendenze che minano gli elementi biologici, fisici e psicologici che rendono il sesso speciale; e, come virtù specificamente sessuali, quelle tendenze che li affermano o rafforzano.*