

Sex, Temperance and Virtue

Abstract

According to Raja Halwani, “The virtue of temperance and the vice of intemperance are *the* virtue and *the* vice when it comes to sex and sexual activity because they hit at the core of the issues of sex, namely sexual desire itself.” The purpose of my paper is to explore Halwani’s neo-Aristotelian account of temperance, arguing that it fails to capture what is distinctive about sexuality and that it fails to raise specifically virtue-ethical concerns as opposed to moral ones. Halwani’s dependence on the notion of moral wrongness in relation to sexuality cannot be supported in an Aristotelian framework. Moreover, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that if temperance is *the* virtue in relation to sex, then sensual pleasure is *the* issue in that domain. This view would ignore important aspects of sex. To explore these, I invoke Michel Foucault to argue that the sphere of sexuality is marked by distinctive ethical constraints that even Aristotle had not noticed. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s general conception of virtue can lead us to recognise a distinctive virtue relevant to sex: namely, tenderness.

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According to Raja Halwani, “The virtue of temperance and the vice of intemperance are *the* virtue and *the* vice when it comes to sex and sexual activity because they hit at the core of the issues of sex, namely sexual desire itself.”¹ The purpose of the present paper is to elaborate on this claim, critique parts of it, and suggest a fuller account of the virtues that pertain to sex.

The most striking feature of Halwani’s account is that he interprets Aristotle as offering us two readings of what temperance might be. Halwani labels these two accounts of temperance, T1 and T2, and the corresponding accounts of intemperance, IT1 and IT2. According to him a person who lacks T1 in the sexual domain, “has neither rational control, nor, more importantly, rational regulation over how much sex she has and desires to have. To the extent that her sexual desires undermine her rationality, she is leading a defective human life.” On this reading, temperance is primarily a matter of moderating how much and how often one enjoys sexual pleasure. In contrast, a person who evinces IT2, “is one who is willing to lie, steal, deceive, rape, behave unjustly, unkindly and/or [sic] with cowardice in order to achieve sexual gratification.”² On this reading, temperance consists in avoiding wrongdoing in relation to sex.

The first of these forms of temperance, T1, will be familiar to any reader of Aristotle. It involves a mean position between too much and too little. For Aristotle the temperate person is one who desires and delights in pleasure without doing so excessively on the one hand, and without being insensitive to the attractions of the pleasures in question on the other. What counts as excess or deficiency is judged by the virtuous person on the basis of their prudent judgement or *phronesis*.³

The faults of excess would be exemplified by addiction to alcohol, licentiousness and gluttony, while

¹ Raja Halwani, *Philosophy of Love, Sex, and Marriage: An Introduction*, New York and London: Routledge, 2010, 181.

² Halwani, 2003 op cit, 190.

³ Aristotle, NE, 1118b26

the fault of deficiency – which Aristotle admits is rare – is that of not having the capacity or willingness to enjoy pleasure even when it is socially acceptable to do so. Halwani interprets Aristotle as offering this scale of values because enjoying the relevant pleasures to a moderate degree is conducive to a person's health⁴ and thus indirectly to their *eudaimonia*, and also because pursuing such pleasures excessively is destructive of social order. Pursuing adulterous sexual relationships, for example, disrupts proper social relationships.

Indeed it is this sort of consideration that leads Halwani to his second conception of temperance. Noting that one of the ways a person can go wrong in relation to sexual and other desires is to commit wrong acts in the pursuit of them – such as an act of adultery – Halwani offers his second notion of temperance, T2, as the settled disposition to avoid actions which are morally wrong in the sphere of pleasure. An example that Halwani explores is paedophilia. Beginning from the premise that paedophilia is morally wrong, Halwani argues that a person who avoids engaging in acts of paedophilia is thereby evincing the virtue of temperance. Halwani's T2 is the settled disposition to avoid actions which are morally wrong or criminal in the sphere of pleasure.

My first comment on this would be that paedophilia is just morally wrong and the person doing it is committing a crime. Whether that person has the vice of intemperance is a different issue. As I will show presently, the issue of what constitutes the virtue of temperance in the sphere of sex is a very different one from what constitutes the wrongness of sexual crime. While we should not feel overly bound to ordinary usage of English, it just seems to be a misuse of the word to describe a person who avoids acting criminally as on that account "temperate", even when the relevant actions are in the sexual domain.

But there is a further point. Halwani admits that there are many actions within the sexual domain, aside from sexual crimes, that are morally wrong. His list of examples quoted above includes

⁴ On this he cites Aristotle, NE, 1119a16-20

stealing, being unkind, deception and rape. But notice that stealing, being unkind and deception would be wrong in circumstances which need involve no sexual desire or activity, while rape is a crime specific to the sexual domain. That suggests that there might be two conceptions of temperance involved in T2: the disposition to avoid sexual crime and, as well, the disposition to avoid any morally wrong means of attaining sexual pleasure. Halwani's account of what such morally wrong means might consist in is not always sexual in nature. The wrongness of stealing, being unkind and deception would not arise exclusively from any sexual context in which they are perpetrated. In his later text, Halwani says, "Disloyalty, unfaithfulness, dishonesty, vengefulness, humiliation, greed, vanity and arrogance form a partial list of reasons why sexual acts can be wrong *even if* they were consensual."⁵ But he admits that these wrongs are not intrinsic to sex as such. They are wrongs in any context. If the wrongness in such examples can be found in non-sexual features of the acts in question, it becomes doubtful whether Halwani has succeeded in developing an account of intemperance that is specifically sexual in nature when he offers IT2.

Positing T2 shows that Halwani thinks that norms of morality, understood in a modern non-Aristotelian sense, apply to sexual desire and sexual activity as constraints on what one may do in pursuit of sexual gratification or in the way that one engages in sexual activity. But these constraints arise from morality in general and are not intrinsic to sex. In contrast, T1 posits the Aristotelian ethical constraint of moderation in the enjoyment of pleasures such as eating, drinking and sex. The only ethical problems arising from sex, on this account, are those of too much or too little.

Contemporary discussions of sex can be grouped into two accounts of sexual desire: the "intentionalist" account, and the "hedonistic" account. The intentionalist account says that sexual pleasure "is essentially open to meaning".⁶ This account places desire, of which the culmination is

⁵ Halwani, op.cit., 2010, 178.

⁶ Seiriol Morgan, 'Sex in the head', *Journal of applied philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1-16, 2.

pleasure, into contexts of meaning and narrative in such a way as to change the very nature and content of the desire and of the pleasure that fulfils it. The desire is not a desire just for sexual contact with another's body, but a desire to express one's love for that other, or the desire to have an exciting night with an attractive and willing partner, or a desire to produce a baby. A negative example would be the desire to hurt one's spouse by engaging in adultery. The notion of "desire" that is involved in such cases is distinct from that of "appetite". An appetite is a biologically based inclination such as hunger, while a desire is a conscious state with an intentional object such as a steak dinner.⁷ A desire for sexual contact with another's body may be simply a biologically grounded appetite directed at a specific other on a specific occasion, but our sexual desire in the intentionalist account is to achieve, through such contact, a variety of human goods – including those of pleasure for its own sake and of some form of mutual exchange between participants. The various interpretations of what mutual exchange in sex involves include the giving of pleasure, expression of emotions such as love,⁸ arousal,⁹ excitement and adventure, relief from boredom, a sense of transgression, romance, expression of domination, and so on. The possibilities are endless (and not all are virtuous). The intentionalist account is able to understand these various goods as intrinsic objects of sexual desire.

The hedonistic account – sometimes referred to as the "plain sex" view – focuses on the body. For example, Alan Goldman says: "Sexual desire is desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces; sexual activity is activity which tends to fulfil such desire

⁷ Tallis, R 2008, 'The hunger for others', *Hunger* 2008, Acumen, Stocksfield, UK, 75-98.

⁸ Solomon, RC 1990, 'Self, love and self-love', *Love: emotion, myth, & metaphor* 1990, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, pp. 148-161. See also, Nozick, Robert 1989, 'Love's bond', *The examined life: philosophical meditations* 1989, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 68-86.

⁹ Nagel, T 1969, 'Sexual perversion', *Journal of philosophy*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 5-17. See also, Scruton, Roger 1986, 'Arousal', *Sexual desire: a philosophical investigation*, Phoenix, London, pp. 16-35.

of the agent.”¹⁰ This minimalist account of sexual pleasure entails that the only sexual fault that might be committed in sexual activity is to fail to produce or feel the desired bodily pleasure. Sexual activity is morally neutral in itself and moral judgements apply only to the actions that lead up to it or surround it. Accordingly, faults such as exploitation, objectification, deception or force will be non-sexual in nature and thus extraneous to the sexual nature of the act. They are moral faults in any context and lend their moral quality to the sex from the outside, as it were. In this way the hedonistic account seeks to de-moralise sex completely.

Accordingly, if there are any considerations of an ethical sort that attach to sex as such, they do so only because sex is an instance of pleasure and, as such, subject to the ethical constraints that apply to pleasure more generally – namely, the problems of excess or deficiency. If the central issue is hedonism, then the central ethical problem is that of avoiding extremes. If sexual desire is simply bodily desire, then it needs to be moderated in order to be civilised in the way that any bodily desire is. The focus will be almost inevitably on the appropriate *amount*, so that intemperance takes on such forms as promiscuity or licentiousness. On this view, the only relevant concept of temperance would be Halwani’s T1. Saying that temperance is *the* virtue in relation to sex implies that sensual pleasure is *the* issue in that domain, and that T1 is the kind of temperance which is required in it.

If I am right in arguing that Halwani’s conception of T2 posits moral considerations that are extrinsic to sexual acts, then his account would be consistent with the hedonistic view. And yet he does not want to be a complete amoralist in relation to sex. By re-introducing moral concepts into his account of temperance with his T2, he seems to be acknowledging that there are values and norms other than moderation that are relevant to the sexual domain. But it seems that these norms are not intrinsic to sex.

¹⁰ Goldman, AH 1977, ‘Plain Sex’, *Philosophy and public affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 267-287, 268.

They weren't for Aristotle either. Aristotle sees the virtue of temperance as being relevant to the pleasures of touch. The problem of hedonism arises in much the same way for eating, drinking and sex. What Aristotle does not do is distinguish sexual pleasure as a distinctive kind of pleasure, and hence sexual temperance as a specific kind of temperance. Should he have made such a distinction?

If sex raised only the same ethical problems as eating and drinking, the paradigm case of sexual activity would be masturbation. In this form of sex physical pleasure is the only issue, and temperance in the form of T1 is the only relevant virtue. It has to be said, however, that this is a seriously deficient conception of sex. Whereas the objects of such desires as hunger and thirst are a steak or a drink, the object of sexual desire is most frequently another person. Even masturbation frequently involves fantasies about others. The ethical issues which this raises must surely go beyond those of amount and frequency. Moreover, if sex involves relationships with other people, it involves relationships of a very special kind. There may be many forms of such relationships, ranging from the love of married couples to the contractual relationship between prostitutes and their clients, but the presence of sex in those relationships sets them apart in a category of their own. Sex is not just about sensual pleasure. It is about intimate relationships with other people.

Moreover, sex differs from eating and drinking in that it does not only involve a passive receipt of pleasure. While one has to be actively engaged with eating and drinking, the pleasure is something which one receives passively from the food and drink. In sex one receives pleasure from the activity but, when the sex is with others, one also gives pleasure. This element of giving is absent from eating and drinking and marks an important difference in the associated values.

So what values other than passive pleasure are specific to the sexual domain? In the thinking of ancient Greece, values such as nobility, dignity and honour figure very largely in the domain of sexual pleasure. Michel Foucault has made a study of this matter drawing upon the writings not only of such ancient Greek philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenic thinkers, but also dramatists

and poets. In this study he details a number of values and standards which aristocratic Greek males felt themselves obliged to observe in the sphere of sexuality, or of what was called the *aphrodisia*, in order to maintain their good reputations among their fellows. One of them was temperance understood as Halwani's T1. Profligacy, lecherousness and libidinousness were not admired qualities in the Greek nobility. Another value was agency. It was more admirable to be active in sexual activity than to be a passive recipient of sexual attention. While there was no blanket condemnation of homosexuality – or of any activity according to its type – it was deemed dishonourable for a young man to be receptive to sexual advances beyond a certain age – an age when being proactive in sex acts was deemed more appropriate. As Foucault puts it, "For a man, excess and passivity were the two main forms of immorality in the practice of the *aphrodisia*."¹¹ It should be noted that by "immorality" here Foucault refers to what is deemed honourable and noble. Other standards that figure in the ancient Greek approaches to the *aphrodisia*, according to Foucault, are that such pleasures should be pursued only in response to felt need rather than for their own sake, that they should be enjoyed only at appropriate times such as at night, that they should be engaged in in private, that they should be engaged in with partners of commensurate social status with that of the agent, and that they should be engaged in with modesty.

While some of these ethical requirements will seem vague and others somewhat prudish, it should be noted that these standards are not moral in the modern sense. They do not speak to the issue of what would be deemed criminal or why. They are more closely linked to etiquette than to morality. They are also linked to the sense of self-mastery which constituted an ideal of excellence for Greek men. But most importantly they serve to delineate a sphere of ethical concern which is distinct from the other pleasures of touch such as eating and drinking. While there are standards of decorum, etiquette and avoiding excess which obtain in relation to all the hedonistic pleasures, the standards

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin Books, 1985, 47.

that apply to sexual pleasure constitute a distinct subclass of them. The norms of etiquette and decorousness that apply to eating and drinking serve primarily to lend dignity to processes of physical satiation. But sex is not just a process of physical satiation, whether alone or with others. Sex is surrounded by a set of norms specific to it and these norms constitute the field of a distinctive virtue: a virtue which I will call, “tenderness”.

Aristotle’s account of the virtues sees them as consisting in sensitivity to the values inherent in the matter at hand. Insofar as *phronesis* is the virtue which, if you have it, you have all the others,¹² and insofar as *phronesis* is a sensitive and rational appraisal of what is called for in a given situation, we can see that the virtuous person is one who responds appropriately to the values that are present in that situation. Indeed, modern virtue ethicists such as Christine Swanton define virtue as responsiveness to the values inherent in the situation in which that virtue is to be exercised. As she puts it, “A *virtue* is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way.”¹³

How are the standards that Foucault has described responses to the value of sex, and what do they tell us about what those values are? The value of agency demonstrates how sex will be seen through gendered lenses. It is typically the male who valorises agency in the sexual act. A corresponding value from a woman’s perspective will have to be delineated by women. But either way, such values will have to combine the conflicting tendencies of passionate abandon and masterly control that constitute the excitement of sex. The values of privacy and timeliness are not gendered in this way. These speak to the value of intimacy involved in the giving of bodies to each other through nakedness and the most secret, mutual explorations. Such giving avoids exposure and publicity. Intimacy involves trust and self-giving as well as the deepest reverence for the beauty of the other.

¹² 1144b10-1145a11

¹³ Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralist View*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, 19.

The egalitarianism and modesty which Foucault's Greeks called for speaks to the respect that partners in sexual activity should show each other: a respect which precludes self-assertion in private and boasting in public.

A great deal more can be said about all this, but this is perhaps enough to show that the sphere of sexuality is not just the sphere of hedonistic pleasure. It is a distinctively private sphere marked by intimacy, generosity, considerateness and trust. Halwani is right to say that there must be more involved than T1, but his T2 does not capture what this is. His T2 consists in the avoidance of sexual crime and other moral wrongs. What he has missed is sensitivity to sexual values. I would argue that tenderness consists in acknowledging, valuing and responding to those values. While it is a virtue that may also be shown in other domains, such as the parenting of young children, it is in sex with others that it is especially called for. Contemporary hedonistic theorists may be right in insisting that the values inherent in such sexual activities need not include procreation or committed love, but this does not entail that a non-moralistic account of such values might not be given.

While I can agree with the "plain sex" theorists and with Halwani that moral condemnation has no role in the evaluation of such practices as masturbation, prostitution, promiscuity or any sexual practice that involves no harm to others, I can still ask to what extent they honour the intrinsic values of sexuality. The virtue-ethics standard of tenderness points towards honouring values such as intimacy, respect and affection. People engaged in sex with each other should display sincerity, generosity, caring, considerateness, and tenderness.¹⁴ As Paul Ricoeur puts it, "In tenderness, the relationship to the other becomes dominant and can enlist eroticism as the sensual component of sexuality."¹⁵

¹⁴ Martin, MW, 'Caring', *Love's Virtues*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1996. But his list of virtues focuses on love rather than on sex.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, P 1970, 'Wonder, eroticism, and enigma', Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, editor, *Sexuality and identity* 1970, Dell, New York, pp. 13-24, 19.