

Book Reviews

Igor Primoratz, *Ethics and Sex* (London: Routledge, 1999), xi + 205 pp.

We are all familiar with the feeling that our judgments on a certain matter are far from being supported by sufficiently rational argumentation. At the same time, in some cases, we also sense a strong reluctance to examine such argumentation. One of the areas we tend to do so the most, I believe, is in matters relating to sex. This is precisely what Igor Primoratz, in his *Ethics and Sex*, won't allow us to do. He demands that we test our notions in this area with the same rigor and incisiveness that we apply to other fields of thought. The book consists of two parts. The first examines four general conceptions of human sexuality: (a) the traditional view of sex as related to, and justified by, procreation (and considered best limited to the institution of marriage); (b) the romantic view of sex as bound up with love; (c) a more recent understanding of sex as interpersonal communication; and (d) the hedonist view, which links sex with pleasure and explains sexual activity by the joy it produces.

The first attitude towards sex, which perceives it as properly related to procreation and marriage, has been the prevalent one in the West over the past two millennia, and although less fashionable today, it still remains significant in shaping our cultural perception on sexual intercourse. As in the past, this view continues to be espoused today by religious (especially monotheistic) thinkers. However, recently (and inconsistently, Primoratz shows), this concept of sexual activity has been combined, in Pope Paul VI's "Humanae Vitae" (especially sections 9 and 12) with the romantic view of sex. Primoratz rejects this attitude to sex because, among other difficulties, it relies on highly problematic religious assumptions.

The second, romantically inclined view of "sex as bound up with love" is probably the one most popular in current Western perception. Primoratz considers this notion of sex along the lines of what may be the strongest case made for it, Roger Scruton's book, *Sexual Desire*.¹ He points out problems in Scruton's phenomenological account of sexual arousal (esp. pp. 73-79 in Scruton) as related to individualizing intentionally; the normative assumptions implicit in what Scruton presents as merely descriptive accounts; and Scruton's equivocation of the term "interpersonal," and thus his equivocation between the requirement to respect others' wishes in sexual encounters and the requirement that love should (at least potentially) be part of all sexual encounters.

¹Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986).

A third general understanding considers sex to be a form of communication. Such an understanding does appeal to our intuitions, but unlike the other understandings presented by Primoratz, it has not gained a foothold in popular culture, nor is it prevalent in philosophical literature. Only one philosopher, Robert Solomon, has supported this notion.² Primoratz shows that notwithstanding the insight and ingenuity of this thesis, Solomon makes too much of it. Some characteristics of sex do parallel those of communication, but others do not. Solomon would have done better to offer his account as an attempt to deepen our understanding of certain aspects of sexual activity, rather than as a complete account of the phenomenon.

The fourth general conception of sex discussed is the hedonistic notion of sex-as-pleasure. This view of sex, Primoratz shows, does not suffer from the problems implicit in the previous attitudes. He presents Alan Goldman's thesis in his "Plain Sex" as representative of this attitude towards sex, and suggests certain improvements to Goldman's views.³

In all these discussions Primoratz distinguishes between the morally permissible and the morally ideal. He does not commit himself, but for the purpose of argument is ready to grant that some of the previously discussed views may have identified some commendable ideals. This does not entail, however, that what is less than ideal is to be condemned. As in other areas, so in the philosophy of sex, taking only the ideal to be acceptable involves too many empirical and conceptual problems.

The discussions of these four general attitudes towards sexual morality in the first part of the book inform many of the discussions on specific sexual themes in the second part. Here Primoratz considers marriage, adultery, jealousy, monogamy, prostitution, homosexuality, pedophilia, sexual harassment, and rape. (Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, there is no discussion of pornography.) In his treatment of each of these, Primoratz examines what precisely, if anything, makes them morally wrong. As in the first part of the book, he distinguishes here between what is morally permissible even if not ideal, and what is morally wrong; between morality and prudence; between well-established empirical facts and widely accepted, but unexamined, views; and between moral assessment of the acts themselves and the moral assessment of various nonessential circumstances that may, but do not necessarily, accompany them. Thus, for example, Primoratz points out that although commitment to monogamy may be morally ideal, it does not follow that rejecting monogamy is morally condemnable. He points out that while it may be prudent to refrain from adultery, this in itself is no reason to condemn it

²See Robert Solomon, "Sexual Paradigms," *Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1974): 336-45.

³See Alan Goldman, "Plain Sex," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1976): 267-87.

morally. Furthermore, he distinguishes between what may or may not be harmful in prostitution itself, and the harm caused by the degrading conditions in which many prostitutes are forced to work. Such conditions are not inherent to prostitution. In fact, some of the injury caused by these conditions is an outcome of the moral and legal sanctions against the practice. Similarly, with regard to pedophilia, he distinguishes between the damage that may or may not be inherent in pedophilia itself, and that caused by incestuous pedophilia, or by the reactions to it by a highly anxious social environment.

Based on such considerations, and on a close examination of the validity of accepted arguments, and as well as on distinctions between similar but different meanings of various terms, Primoratz reaches the conclusion that there is nothing morally reprehensible in prostitution, homosexuality, and adultery. Sexual harassment, rape, and pedophilia are morally condemnable, but not always in the ways, or for the reasons, that they are commonly claimed to be so. Primoratz argues that pedophilia is wrong because children are in no position to really consent to or refuse sexual activities that adults propose to them. While I agree with the conclusion, the argument may require further elaboration regarding the difference between the sexual and non-sexual activities that adults propose to children; after all, children are also incapable of real consent when it comes to many non-sexual activities.

In many discussions in sexual ethics, the question of sexual perversion recurs: should pedophilia, homosexuality, sadism, masochism, or exhibitionism be condemned as perversions? Primoratz argues that the frequently confused and inconsistent notion of perversion is best discarded. None of the philosophical analyses of perversion succeed in presenting a plausible interpretation of it. Descriptively, they all amount to no more than "atypical inclination or behavior." Normatively, the moral status of the behaviors mentioned above is not related to their preponderance, and they should be analyzed using explicitly normative arguments, where the notion "perversion" is unhelpful.

There is much to learn from this unorthodox, carefully argued, and thoughtful book. One of the characteristics of the literature on the philosophy of sex is the radical difference in the quality of the works. While some of them measure up to the highest philosophical standards, others are deeply unsatisfying from the philosophical point of view. Primoratz's book clearly belongs to the first group, and will surely remain a major achievement in the field for a long time to come.

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