Philosophy of Sex
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Abstract
Sex raises fundamental philosophical questions about topics such as personal identity and well-being, the relationship between emotion and reason, the nature of autonomy and consent, and the dual nature of persons as individuals but also social beings. This article serves as an overview of the philosophy of sex in the English-speaking philosophical tradition and explicates philosophical debate in several specific areas: sexual objectification, rape and consent, sex work, sexual identities and queer theory, the medicalization of sexuality, and polyamory. It situates these topics in a framework of shifting cultural attitudes and argues for the importance of the philosophy of sex. It ends with some suggestions about future research, particularly with regard to the changing nature of pornography and sexual justice in legal theory.

1. Introduction
This article is about the ‘sex’ that people have, not the ‘sex’ that they are. Sex is of obvious philosophical significance: around the world, no other personal activity is simultaneously so important to us as individuals, so widely moralized about, and so highly regulated by the state. For reasons of space and specificity, this article discusses philosophy of sex only as it’s been understood in the English-speaking philosophical tradition, focusing just on the associated culture of North America and the UK. In that philosophical tradition, sex is an understudied topic. This is striking, since the questions and issues sex raises are intertwined with the most central topics in philosophy, including those of personal identity and well-being, the relationship between emotion and reason, the nature of autonomy and consent, and the dual nature of persons as individual but also social beings.

Though philosophers of Ancient Greece discussed sex alongside other matters of everyday life, for centuries philosophers in the Western tradition generally had little or nothing to say about sex (though as we will see below, Kant was a notable exception). In the modern period and before the 20th century, cultural attitudes about sexual ethics were framed largely in terms of appropriateness and chastity: sex between a man and woman who were married was appropriate, other sex was not, and chastity meant governing one’s sexual impulses in a way appropriate to those norms. In the wake of the social changes of the 1960s, there was a surge of theorizing about the philosophy of sex, much of which concerned the contrast between views based on traditional norms and newer views dissociating sex from them. In this phase, several topics came to seem particularly salient: the question of ‘perverted’ versus ‘normal’ sex; the ethics of homosexuality, masturbation, abortion and casual sex; problems concerning rape and sexual harassment; and issues surrounding pornography and prostitution (the fourth edition of Alan Soble’s edited collection, Philosophy of Sex, published in 2002 and highly revised from the third, represents this phase of the field well.)

Social and cultural developments since then have led to substantive changes in views about which topics should be taken to be important and how those topics should be understood. First, it has become clearer that outside of a religious context, reasons for necessarily
associating sexual ethics with chastity and family life are obscure; the traditional framework has thus receded as a reasonable one in a secular context (for an exception, see Scruton 1986). This recession has had several implications. For many scholars, it is no longer philosophically plausible to say that sexual activity is morally wrong simply in virtue of being homosexual or that some kinds of sex are simply ‘perverted’. While homosexuality and same-sex marriage are controversial cultural and political topics, they are not controversial in philosophical discourse. Masturbation is not thought to raise deep ethical issues simply in virtue of being solitary sex for pleasure. While abortion is more controversial than ever, it is now discussed more in general philosophical terms, as a debate over personhood and our ethical obligations, than as something particularly related to the philosophy of sex.

As the traditional framework has receded, other values and theoretical approaches have gained in importance and salience. The rise of feminism as a cultural phenomenon and theoretical tool has led to increased interest in questions about how sex impacts women’s lives, particularly in understanding the ways that being valued or viewed primarily as sex objects harms them and the ways cultural attitudes affect our judgments about rape, consent, and the law. Sex is increasingly seen as a site of potential conflict between the rights of individuals and the good of communities, for example in the debate over sex work and pornography. The rise of queer culture and post-Foucauldian theory has meant increased attention to questions about the nature of sexual identities, the ways these may be biological, socially constructed, essential or chosen, and the resulting implications for the political struggle for equality and liberation. The rising involvement of the pharmaceutical industry in sexuality means complex cultural and bioethical questions about the medicalization of our sexuality are rapidly becoming pressing. Because sex can result in children, it is widely thought that the state appropriately takes some interest in the sexual lives of citizens, e.g., in its prohibition on adultery, but there is deep disagreement over what form this interest should take and over whether the common romantic model of monogamy in coupledom is right for everyone.

In these topics, there are several common threads. Is it possible, or desirable, to try to distinguish a ‘healthy’ kind of sexuality beyond simply saying that whatever consenting adults choose to do is their own concern? Do certain forms of sexual expression in the media, in sex markets, and in hook-up culture lead to the harm and mistreatment of women and to the commodification of persons more generally? When it comes to non-sexual domains, much of North American and European legal structures and cultural attitudes employ an almost-Millianism: everyone is free to do as they please as long as they are not harming anyone else. But many people fail to apply this attitude to sex. Is there something about sex that indicates a need for differential treatment, or is this a holdover from the traditional view?

In this entry, I discuss in more detail several specific topics of particular interest in the contemporary study of the philosophy of sex. Because the topic of objectification raises broad foundational issues and is connected with many others, I start with a substantial discussion of this. I follow with discussions of three areas that have inspired significant philosophical attention and disagreement: rape and consent, sex work, and sexual identities and queer theory. Toward the end, I give brief overviews of two emerging areas likely to be the subject of much theorizing in the years to come: the medicalization of sexuality and polyamory. I end with a few suggestions about the future.

2. Sexual Objectification

Over the past few decades, ‘sexual objectification’ has gone from a relatively technical concept deployed by feminist theorists to one frequently used in many disciplines and in everyday discussion (Nussbaum 1995: 249). Though it is used in a wide range of contexts
including discussions of media representations and fashion, in the philosophy of sex, it is often appealed to in debates over pornography, sex work, and what I call ‘commodified casual sex’, which is sex undertaken for the explicit purposes of an exchange of sexual pleasure and excitement – without other elements such as love. It is often understood to implicate the way a society harms women by treating them only, or primarily, as objects of actual or potential sexual appeal.

Though the specific terminology of objectification is relatively recent, sex has long been thought to be connected to a problematic using of a person or treating them as an object. In some passages, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) seems to suggest that all sex involves people using others as mere means to their ends: ‘In loving from sexual inclination,’ he says, ‘they make the person into an object of their appetite. As soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away, as one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it (1997: 156).’ Because of the nature of the appetite, this thinking goes, sexual desire drives us to ignore the humanity of our partners and to use them for our own purposes; our drive to do this is so strong that we are willing to be used as objects ourselves in return for the chance to use another. But this reciprocity, Kant thought, could not itself make objectification, and thus sex, moral. Kant’s proposed treatment of this problem of making sex morally permissible rested on the way uniting in legally protected, monogamous marriage could make people permanently and formally committed to caring for one another’s ends (see Herman 1993). Sex outside of marriage would thus be morally wrong; though as Helga Varden (2008) explains, this does not mean it should be made illegal.

Feminist theorists of the 1970s and 80s, such as Andrea Dworkin (1987) and Catherine MacKinnon (1987), approach the problem in a different, gender-focused way: in their view, the problem isn’t sex itself but rather the way our society treats women only as sexual objects, which harms them in profound ways. Pornography, in particular, dangerously reinforces men’s mental habit of regarding women as mere objects for their enjoyment and not as full persons with thoughts, feelings, and desires of their own. Marriage, with its historical connections to gender inequality and female dependence, only exacerbates the problem. Ultimately, this view maintains that the only way to overcome these difficulties is to fight contemporary gender inequality, in part through the eradication of pornography.

More recently, philosophers such as Sandra Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993) have extended the concept of objectification to analyze sexist pressures for women’s appearances and bodies to conform to societal ideals; Bartky invokes Marx’s idea of a false consciousness to explain women’s felt desire for participation in their own objectification. In contrast, much recent work in this area focuses more squarely on the twin problems of properly characterizing what, exactly, sexual objectification is, and in understanding its complex ethical aspects. Noting that sometimes focusing on one’s sexual partner as an object of sexual pleasure can be a wonderful part of sexuality, philosophers try to tease apart the problematic aspects of objectification from those that we should welcome and enjoy.

For example, Martha Nussbaum’s widely cited (1995) essay ‘Objectification’ distinguishes various kinds of objectification: *instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership,* and *denial of subjectivity,* and argues that these present varying ethical aspects in varying situations. Drawing on literary examples, Nussbaum argues that when it comes to people, some forms of sexual objectification can be joyous and wonderful even while others are obviously immoral. In the work of D. H. Lawrence, for example, she finds people who experience a ‘surrender of autonomy and even of agency and subjectivity’ in sex yet are treating one another with respect because the surrender is mutual and symmetrical and there is a certain kind of caring relationship among the participants. Sinister examples of objectification occur in *Story of O,* in which female O is a sexually submissive slave to a male master,
pornographic depictions of women, and sex that aims to demean or violate. Ultimately, she concludes that instrumentalization – or using a person as a mere means to one’s purposes – is the kind of objectification that is the central moral problem. But as long as it’s in the context of the right kind of mutual and respectful relationship, she says, one can use a lover as a means without using them merely or primarily as means.

Other attempts to avoid a purely negative view of objectification can be found in my own work (Marino 2008) as well as that of Ann Cahill (2011). In my view autonomy, rather than instrumentalization, is the crux of the matter ethically. One can, I claim, choose to be used, and when the choice to do so is fully autonomous, the objectification is unproblematic. Because social and cultural pressures can make autonomous choices impossible – for example, in a world in which women are valued only as sex objects, they have no choice about the matter – social context is essential to determining the ethical aspects of an act of objectification. In her book, Overcoming Objectification (2011), Ann Cahill argues for getting rid of the concept of objectification altogether. The problem with ‘objectification’, she says, is that it is rooted in a narrow Kantian conception of people as rational autonomous agents; this fails to appreciate the way people are embodied, and sex is an essentially bodily activity. The problems we encounter have to do not with objecthood but rather with the way female sexuality is defined in relation to, and as a projection of, male sexuality – this is ‘derivatization’ and is the real difficulty. In derivatization, women are harmed because they are not recognized for the full and complex people that they are.

But the attempt to explicate the concept of objectification in a broad and inclusive way have been criticized on the grounds that divorcing objectification from its negative connotations may weaken the fight against problematic forms, and this would be a bad consequence. For example, Evangelina Papadaki (2010) argues that Nussbaum’s concept of objectification is too broad; if using a person as a means, but not a mere means, is objectifying them, then we are objectifying one another constantly: when we employ people, go to restaurants, and so on. If this is so, how can we make sense of the way that objectifying women in dehumanizing ways is genuinely problematic in virtue of objectifying them? Papadaki says that objectification should be understood as that which fundamentally denies a person’s humanity; objectification is thus always morally problematic.

3. Rape and Consent

Although rape is generally understood as sexual penetration by force in the absence of consent, there is disagreement about this characterization. What is force? What is consent? Are both necessary to say a sex act was rape? Reflecting the scholarship, most of my discussion in this section focuses on rape of women by men. But in general the theoretical remarks are relevant for other contexts such as same-sex rape.

Traditionally, rape was characterized as sex by force and against a woman’s will (by, e.g., the foundational Commentaries of William Blackstone (1723–1780)). Before the mid-twentieth century, rape laws were structured so that obvious signs of vigorous and even extraordinary physical resistance were required as evidence for prosecution because it was widely assumed that a woman would always offer token resistance and that it was the man’s proper role to overcome this. In many areas, reforms removed these resistance requirements, acknowledging that a woman being threatened should not have to risk serious injury and death to establish that she was raped (see Schulhofer 1992: 37).

But many North American jurisdictions still require evidence of both force and non-consent, and often, ‘force’ is interpreted as physical force. This gives rise to several problems. Here, even a woman’s clearly stated ‘no’ would not suffice to establish that sex was rape, as long as physical
force is absent, a result that strikes many people as counterintuitive. Also, forms of coercion and deception beyond physical force often seem relevant. In one US case, a foster father threatened a child in his care with being sent back to a detention home unless she submitted to sex. A Pennsylvania court found she had not been raped because there was no physical force; but isn’t such coercion just as wrong (Schulhofer 1992: 48)? Furthermore, it is often assumed that lack of consent must be manifested, but in many rapes, the victim is silent or passive out of fear. Finally, rape convictions typically require showing mens rea—that the accused intended to rape, and this means making judgments not only about whether the victim consented but also about whether the accused believed she consented—or, more commonly now, had a reasonable belief that she did. This reliance on the reasonableness of a man’s beliefs can be problematic, however, in a culture in which many people still think a woman can ‘ask for it’ merely by dressing or acting provocatively (Schulhofer 1992: 40; see also Pineau 1989).

One model for further reform focuses on “No” means no’. In this model, whenever a woman does not consent, it is rape; force is not required (see, e.g., Estrich 1987). In addition to an intuitive simplicity, this model might seem apt for the very common situation of date-rape, in which rape occurs between people who know one another and are spending time together on purpose. But critics point to several difficulties. First, in many cases, including many date-rape situations, women are silent or passive, out of fear or other mental distress, or their responses are equivocal; the “no” means no’ framework does not address this (Schulhofer 1992; Anderson 2005). Second, there are many ways a ‘yes’ can be coerced, as with the foster child mentioned above. Finally, what should we say about a ‘no’ followed by a ‘yes’? Much depends on the intervening activity: there is a difference between badgering and harassment and a fun evening with conversation and laughs; “no” means no’ does not say much about what, exactly, ‘no’ rules out and when (Schulhofer 1992; see also Soble 1997).

Other reform models focus on requiring affirmative consent. In an influential 1989 article, ‘Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis,’ Lois Pineau argues that our common ‘contractual’ model, in which a woman can be interpreted as having ‘asked for it’ through certain behaviors, rests on false myths about male and female sexuality. Pineau proposes a ‘communicative’ version of an affirmative model, in which the burden would be on all participants to have positive reason to believe their partner was enjoying themselves or have reason to believe they were wanting to continue despite not enjoying themselves. (The sexual offense policy of the now-defunct Antioch College specified a verbal yes was required for every new activity on every occasion. For analysis, see Soble 1997).

Stephen Schulhofer criticizes the communicative model for setting itself ‘the difficult and probably undesirable goal of settling by collective decision and legal enforcement the content of “healthy relationships” and “good” sex’ (1992: 70). He argues that a focus on respecting sexual autonomy should ground reforms; coercion and deception are wrong not because they are a kind of ‘force’ but because they violate the victim’s autonomy in unacceptable ways. With respect to the question of consent and silence in particular, Schulhofer says that just as silence would not be treated as consent in, say, surgery, it should not be treated as consent for sexual intercourse; instead only an affirmative ‘crystallized attitude of positive willingness’, should count as consent (1992: 76). But Michelle Anderson argues that Schulhofer’s emphasis on autonomy fails to take into account the utterly dehumanizing effect of rape.

Some philosophical questions about rape concern rape’s particular harms and effects and more broadly the nature of the crime itself. In the 1970s, Susan Brownmiller proposed that rape is fundamentally a crime of violence rather than sex: rape harms a victim much as other assaults do, and through rape, men use violence to exert dominance and control over women. Cahill (2001) and others have challenged the idea that sex is like other assaults,
on grounds that rape has specifically sexual meanings and harms (for more on the particular harms of rape, see Brison 2002). In these views, it is partly because rape is special in this way that where it is prevalent it functions to keep women in a state of fear.

4. Sex Work

Sex work is sexual activity engaged in by a person in exchange for money or other goods. This can include not only what most people think of as typical or standard ‘prostitution’, in which a man pays to have sex with a woman but also a range of other activities, such as posing for or acting in pornographic representations or agreeing to be a master or slave in a paid dominance or submission interaction. Roughly speaking, in contemporary philosophy, the ethics of sex work is typically understood in one of three ways.

First, it is sometimes thought that there is inherently and universally wrong with buying and selling sex, regardless of the social context or the way the activity is carried out. Justification of this idea typically appeals to the way sex work is by nature either objectifying or commodifying. For example, a buyer of sex often has a desire that the seller be passive or easily controlled (see Dworkin 1997); Yolanda Estes (2001) says that the very fact of payment renders interaction with the true self of the sex worker impossible and that the result is a ‘fragmentation’ of the sex worker’s personality. Elizabeth Anderson (1993) argues that sex work entails valuing something in the wrong sort of way: sex should not be subject to market values, but that is what sex work applies to it.

A second view is that while there is nothing inherently wrong with buying and selling sex, particular aspects of our culture render it problematic. For example, Laurie Shrage (1989) points out that sex work in its typical form plays into and reinforces current stereotypes about sex: that it is natural in sex for men to be dominant and for women to serve their needs, that sexual contact pollutes women so that sex work is degrading, and so on.

A third view is that sex work is like any other form of work: the coercion and deception involved in some kinds of trafficking and pimping are wrong for the same reasons that coercion and deception are wrong in any other domain. As Nussbaum (1998) points out, it is not only sex workers who accept payment for embodied services that are intimate and involve expressions of the self; plausibly, philosophy professors do as well. In this direction, some sex workers have argued that decriminalization and better regulation would improve the lives of sex workers (see Almodovar 1999).

Critics of the first kind of view point out that a sex worker making a choice should not be seen as lacking in agency. New arguments against the second and third views focus on the ways sex work is unlike other forms of work. Scott Anderson (2002) argues that because sexual desires are integral to a person’s identity, sex work is not like other forms of work: for example, to compel welfare recipients to perform sex work would be radically unlike compelling them to serve at other jobs. Jeffrey Gauthier (2011) emphasizes the ways deception is an essential part of sex work, because one must show different responses from one’s own, and he argues that this prevents sex work from being understood along the lines of other forms of work.

5. Sexual Identities and Queer Theory

As I mentioned in the Introduction, although cultural attitudes against homosexuality were once massive and are still widespread, secular arguments for its wrongness are widely felt to be implausible in the philosophical community. The central exception to this generality is natural law theorists (see, e.g., Finnis 1994; George 1999), whose most common justificatory move is to say that because heterosexual intercourse is tied to reproduction, it forms part of
an integrated natural sexuality in a way homosexual sex does not. But to maintain this view, one must commit to saying either that heterosexual sex among sterile partners is also wrong, or that heterosexual intercourse is acceptable because it is a type of act, if not a specific act, that is potentially reproductive. The first seems implausible. The second requires saying that sex between sterile partners is, in a moral sense, behavior-suitable for procreation, even though it does not lead to it. But as Stephen Macedo (1996) has argued, we do not use similar reasoning in other kinds of cases, e.g., pointing a loaded gun at someone and pulling the trigger is behavior-suitable for murder in a moral sense, but pointing an unloaded gun is not.

Because of widespread cultural attitudes against homosexuality, the theory of sexual identities – such as ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and so on – has long been related to the struggle for equality and liberation. Before Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work (1980, 1985, 1986), it was commonly thought that taking identities as fixed and the related concepts as straightforward was not only commonsensical but would also aid in that struggle: by identifying under a common label, people could band together for political solidarity. But Foucault’s work challenged the plausibility of fixed identities, arguing that sexual concepts categorizing people are culturally contingent and socially constructed. Analyzing the history of these concepts, Foucault argued that in some cultures, such as that of Ancient Greece, people were not generally categorized by their sexual tastes: a person might sometimes have sex with another-sex partner or a same-sex one, but this would not make them ‘straight’ or ‘gay’, since those concepts didn’t exist.

Queer theory arose partly in response to these difficulties over the nature of ‘identities’. Since ‘queer’ is whatever is ‘at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’ (Halperin 1995: 62), it is a relational term and can be used to describe people with many different tastes – such as dominance and submission – without concern for how those are related to paradigmatic standard identities such as ‘lesbian’. There is still debate over whether the ‘queer’ framework serves political ends as it ought to (see, e.g., Jagose 1996).

It is also unclear how, and to what extent, the biological or socially constructed nature of identities relates to cultural and political debate. It is sometimes suggested, particularly in popular culture, that if orientations are biologically based, this would provide ammunition in the liberation struggle: if one is ‘born that way’, one must be accepted for being that way. But as Ed Stein (2002) points out, a person’s being ‘born that way’ does not prevent people from enacting laws against behavior they don’t like. In a different ethical direction, Nussbaum (2010) suggests that such laws reflect a ‘politics of disgust’, which cannot be justified and must be rejected.

6. Medicalization of Sex and Desire

As I write this, the search for a ‘female Viagra’ is rapidly intensifying, reflecting the ongoing medicalization of sex and desire. On the one hand, there is clearly demand for these drugs: in addition to women who simply want to feel more lustful, they are sought by women whose libido is weakened from other drugs’ side-effects or diseases. On the other hand, several theorists have voiced concern over the harm these drugs may cause.

In a 2006 essay, Leonore Tiefer observes the cultural shifts that accompanied the introduction of erectile dysfunction drugs for men. She argues that marketing Viagra required inducing a cultural shift, making ‘what the penis needed to do’ become more and more important and demanding, so that most men would interpret their bodies as failing them and ‘erectile insecurity’ would escalate. As the search for female desire drugs was on, the industry appropriated a feminist rhetoric of ‘equality’ and ‘choice’ to make the case that women ‘deserved’ to have desire-enhancing drugs. But, Tiefer says, this is ultimately going to be bad for women as it’s been bad for men, turning ordinary and healthy parts of life into dysfunctions.
A 2002 article by John Bancroft suggests that we should be especially cautious about the medicalization of female sexuality, because it is particularly susceptible to social control and to the distortions of relabeling healthy responses as dysfunctions. Bancroft traces this greater susceptibility partly to biological sex differences, such as the fact that female orgasm is not necessary for reproduction and not even typically a result of the sex act needed for reproduction.

A 2013 book by journalist Daniel Bergner says empirical research suggests that female sexual desire often wanes from boredom, especially in the context of monogamy; if this is right libido drugs for women may be ultimately directed at preserving marriages. And in a recent paper, Brian Earp, Anders Sandberg, and Julian Savulescu argue that if in the future ‘love drugs’ enable us to love our spouses more faithfully over longer periods of time, we might be obligated to take them. It is clear that further pharmaceutical developments will lead to an increased need for a ‘bioethics of sexuality.’

A closely related set of issues concerns the expanding industry of sex therapy, which cannot help but make normative judgments about sex. For example, should a client troubled by his foot fetish be helped to eliminate his desire or be counseled toward self-acceptance and open communication? What about a married person with a longing for a polyamorous relationship, a longing his/her spouse does not share? Or a person who fantasizes about harming others? These questions about sexual health, sexual dysfunction, and sexual well-being are all much in need of further research.

7. Polyamory

‘Polyamory’ refers to a range of practices that involve multiple intimate relationships among more than two people. In contrast to most forms of ‘polygamy’, which traditionally involve patriarchal arrangements with one man married to multiple wives, polyamory is associated with non–hierarchical modes and can involve any gender arrangements. Among the models of polyamory are ones in which more than two people are in a long-term stable love and sex relationship with one another and ones in which couples have love and/or sex relationships also with other people. ‘Polyamory’ is also called ‘ethical non-monogamy’ (Emens 2004).

Elizabeth Emens’s work (2004) explores the political, social, and legal hostility polyamory currently faces – hostility evidenced by the fact that opponents of same-sex marriage in the US introduce the possibility of legal polyamory as an evidently unacceptable valley in their proposed slippery slope of marriage equality. Emens explains that although many people associate non–monogamy with adultery, lack of commitment, and thus immorality, many contemporary practitioners of polyamory embrace a rich set of values with an emphasis on five principles: self-knowledge, radical honesty, consent, self-possession, and privileging love and sex over jealousy (321; see also Easton and Liszt 1997). She argues that the hostility polyamory faces may be explained by what she calls a ‘paradox of prevalence’: although many people aim at monogamy, many fail, and the possibility that a polyamorous life could be widely appealing and accepted is frightening rather than reassuring. This raises the possibility that a political fight for acceptance of polyamorous relationships might succeed by emphasizing that there might be a minority for whom polyamory is particularly appropriate.

8. Conclusion

I end with a few thoughts about the future. One area in which the culture of sex is rapidly changing is in the nature of visual pornography and its role in our lives. Much philosophical research on visual pornography was written when it was produced by an industry and relatively difficult for consumers to access. Now, the internet and the availability of inexpensive
high-quality cameras and video equipment means visual pornography has changed: there are more and more image and videos produced by amateurs at home, the range of offerings has skyrocketed, and it is accessible for viewing by virtually any one at almost any time. How are these changes affecting us? Some, such as journalist Pamela Paul (2005), think that the omnipresence of pornography is seriously harmful, since it structures and frames our desires in unfortunate ways. On the other hand, the wider range of options and the involvement of amateurs suggest the possibility of pornography from different sensibilities, such as a feminist one. Might these changes allow us to help fulfill Ann Garry’s 2002 dream of pornography that is ‘non-degrading’, and ‘non-sexist’? Could self-produced porn signal more self-directed, even emancipatory, forms of sexual exploration?

Philosophers should also play a role in articulating a conception of sexual justice that would bring coherence to sexual laws, which currently reflect a patchwork of traditional values and liberal ones and introduce various inconsistencies. For example, age of consent laws have created situations in which teens serve substantial jail time for sex with other teens, because one of them is underage; reformers argue that these are used in arbitrary and unjust ways, particularly to prosecute relationships that are same-sex or interracial (see, e.g., Brydum 2013). In the US, even minor sex crimes such as touching the buttocks or breasts of a stranger through his or her clothes can require registration as a sex offender. Since there are many areas where sex offenders cannot live, and since no one wants them in their community, many are homeless; in addition to raising questions of justice and fair punishment, homelessness frustrates a primary goal of registration – that the state knows where sex offenders are. For those with problematic sexual urges, such as pedophiles, some US states allow indefinite incarceration based on diagnosis and likelihood of future acts (see Kansas v. Hendricks 1997).

I mentioned in the Introduction that sex is understudied in the English language philosophical tradition. I’d like to end by pointing out that sex is at the center of some of the most intense contemporary disputes among cultures. Just as one example, the sexual independence and autonomy of women and equality and respect for homosexuality are two of the central flashpoints of disagreement and violence world-wide. This shows that the philosophy of sex is of global importance. It deserves to be a central area in contemporary philosophy.¹

**Short Biography**

Patricia Marino’s current research is in the areas of ethics, philosophy of sex, and philosophy of economics; she has also written on ambivalence and theories of truth. Her work has appeared in various journals including *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Journal of Moral Philosophy,* and *Philosophical Studies,* and she is a contributor to the recently published *International Encyclopedia of Ethics.* Current projects include a book in progress, *Moral Reasoning in a Pluralistic World,* an investigation of sexual autonomy and politics that builds on her previous work on sexual objectification and work on values and concepts in economic reasoning. She is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Waterloo; before taking this position she was a Humanities Fellow at Stanford University. She holds a BA in Mathematics from Wesleyan University, an MA in Mathematics from Tulane University, an MS in Mathematics from the University at Buffalo, and a PhD in Philosophy from the University of California, Irvine.

**Notes**

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