



## **Ethics Bites**

*Sex And Perversion*

### **David Edmonds**

This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds.

### **Nigel Warburton**

And me Nigel Warburton.

### **David**

*Ethics Bites* is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

### **Nigel**

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### **David**

Sexual intercourse may have begun, as the poet Philip Larkin claimed, in 1963, but philosophers have been discussing it for a bit longer – about 2 and a half millennia, in Aristotle's case. The renowned but contentious conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton, takes a kind of Aristotelian approach to sex. His book, *Sexual Desire*, examines what it is to have a fulfilling sexual life, what distinguishes human from animal sexuality, and what human sexual practices should be defined as abnormal, or to use his term, perverted.

### **Nigel**

Roger Scruton, welcome to *Ethics Bites*.

### **Roger Scruton**

Thank you for inviting me.

### **Nigel**

The topic we're focusing on today is philosophy and sex. Lots of people have things to say about sex. Psychiatrists talk about sex, social scientists, but what can a philosopher offer?

### **Roger Scruton**

Philosophers are interested in the generality of the human condition. Understanding what it is to be a thing like us in the most comprehensive terms. For instance, they're interested in self consciousness, in rationality, in these broad distinguishing features that characterize our condition and also fill our condition with problems. Plato was the first really to take sex seriously in the philosophical tradition and for him it was the most fundamental aspect of the human condition: the thing about which there were the most problems to solve and concerning the solution of which there was the most interesting of all metaphysical outcomes.

### **Nigel**

But your approach to philosophical issues about sex differs considerably from a psychologist doesn't it?

### **Roger**

Yes, it does. Although of course psychology is relevant, inevitably, because it's relevant to the philosophy of mind, it produces a lot of the empirical input from which the philosophical argument will depart. But certainly my approach begins from understanding the intentionality of sexual desire; what is it that we want? And that is a difficult question philosophically, because it means understanding how that desire is directed towards the world as such.

**Nigel**

So, sexual desire typically occurs in the presence of two people, that's a paradigm case of sexual interaction, though there are solo and multiple possibilities as well. So how would you describe a normal progress of sexual desire?

**Roger**

I would say the first thing to be clear about is that sexual desire in the human case has an individualizing intentionality. That is to say, I desire another person as the person he or she is. That is not the case with animals; they have sexual instincts and sexual pleasures and they pursue them. But they do not have desire for the other individual in that way, partly because they don't have the concept of the individual.

Now once you are set on this path of desiring another individual there are all kinds of obstacles along the way and also unclarity, often, as to what it is you want to do with that other person. You can desire somebody without having the first desire to perform the sexual act. And indeed Plato thought that, in the normal case, we are under an obligation to somehow transcend that carnal appetite and unite with the other person in a completely different way. Now I don't think that is normal. But I do think the normal course of sexual desire does involve courtship, the soliciting of consent from the other as an individual to you as an individual so that when you do finally achieve the result it is in the way of a mutual possession where each gives himself to the other. And that of course is something that doesn't always occur. But if you define normality in that way, that gives you a grip on the moral essence of the thing.

**Nigel**

So would it be fair to summarise that to say that reciprocity is part of the normal sexual relationship?

**Roger**

Reciprocity and also non-transferability. What you are offering the other person you are offering to him as he is for himself; and this is not something that you regard him as a means to the satisfaction of; something that could equally be bestowed on somebody else. Even though we all know that you could bestow it on somebody else - in this act it is a self-giving which is uniquely focusing on that person.

**Nigel**

And, in contrast, animals having sex are not thinking about the nature of what they're doing.

**Roger**

Sex for animals is not a relation between one animal and another. It's a performance which changes things for both of them; but it isn't a relation-forming device.

**Nigel**

So one way of bringing out more about that relationship is to think about what happens when sexual desire becomes perverted from its normal course.

**Roger**

Yes, we all have concepts or ideas about perversion, to the extent that we have an idea of normality. Now the idea I've just given of normality is obviously rooted in a particular tradition and like every version of normality you can easily find other communities that don't see it in that way. But all communities do seem to have this idea that there is a normal course of desire and ways of deviating from it.

I would say that the principal idea of perversion that we have inherited is one in which that individualizing non-transferable intentionality has been set aside; so that it's not the other person that is the object of your interest but for example the sexual organs regarded as impersonal attributes that could be put on offer from anybody to anybody. Or the immature person, the person who is not fully responsible self-giving being yet; or the dead person, as in necrophilia. These are paradigm cases, for me, of perversion.

**Nigel**

What about masturbation? Because that's a case where there's not the possibility of reciprocity and may not be genuinely individualized as well.

**Roger**

Yes, it's an interesting case because we do live in an ever more masturbatory culture thanks to pornography and the difficulty that people have being brought up on the screen, so to speak, in making genuine relations, genuine outgoing gestures towards others. You can call it a perversion for the reasons you say that it does have a lot in common with it. There are harmful and harmless perversions, there are things which destroy the possibility of human relationships and full sexual fulfilment and things that don't and there's a big question about masturbation where it stands on that spectrum. Everybody does it at some stage in their life. Most people get over it or manage to mature into a full human relation. But it could be that if it becomes addictive it will prevent that.

**Nigel**

When you use the word perversion are you using it to condemn the activity?

**Roger**

Not necessarily. Although perversion as I've described it is clearly a morally relevant feature of something. But I think we need more concepts than just that in order to give the moral framework in which the sexual act is and ought to be situated. For instance, I think we need the concept of addiction in which you are enslaved by sexual appetites which take you away from the fulfilling relationship with the other which is the true norm of sexual conduct.

And I think there are many cases of sex addiction, through pornography obviously, certain kinds of masturbation, which all of us recognize as being a violation of human freedom. One feature of addiction, which I think is manifest in drug addiction too, is this loss not just of self control but loss of a full conception in self integrity, in what you are doing. That this is me doing this, and I'm committing myself to it. That sense that the self is being disintegrated by its own activities is something which is shared between drug addiction and certain kinds of sex addiction.

**Nigel**

What about somebody who freely chooses to live a life of what you would call perversion; they might choose an inanimate object as their object of desire. Say somebody had a very realistic love doll that became the focus of all their sexual attention and they freely chose that?

**Roger**

Well, certainly you could say that from the point of view of others this is a relatively innocent activity. Maybe they're less likely to do harm to others, and to vent their frustrated sexual appetites on people who won't consent to them. There are all kinds of therapeutic reasons for endorsing this behaviour. But that isn't the whole of morality, what you're doing to others. What you're doing to yourself is also part of morality. Indeed for someone like Aristotle that was the primary focus of morality, the acquisition of virtue: being the fulfilled human being which it is in our rational nature to be. And I think Aristotle was right; that is the basis of moral thinking in the end. And sex is part of that fulfilling of the self because it is also part of the giving of the self.

**Nigel**

Does it follow that somebody who is willingly celibate and doesn't need to be is in some sense not achieving everything they might as a human being?

**Roger**

Well there are two types of celibacy. There is the celibacy of the person who is so unattractive that nobody else will consent to have sex with them. But there's the celibacy of the person who has overcome sexual desire and renounced it for some other good, like the celibacy of the priest or the monk. And there I'm always full of admiration for someone who's been able

to do that. Provided it isn't like Klingsor in Parsifal through self emasculation. If still the sexual instinct is there and the desire for that kind of thing is there, but nevertheless it has been overcome in order to establish a higher relationship with God, then I don't see that in any way as an unfulfilling thing.

**Nigel**

It seems to follow from what have you said so far about reciprocity and interpersonal relations that homosexuality is just another normal kind of sex. Is that your view?

**Roger**

It's not entirely my view, no. In my book on this I explore the topic of homosexuality in the chapter on perversion and come to the conclusion that it can't be described as a perversion at least not in the sense that necrophilia and paedophilia are; but as I said we need more concepts than just that of perversion to fully understand the moral framework in which the sexual act should be situated. And I do think that it's important to recognize the differences between homosexual desire and heterosexual desire. The differences between homosexual desire in men and women, and so on. And this is a topic which it's very difficult to speak about and write about sincerely because we know that there's quite a lot of pressure to normalize homosexuality and to grant it all the public recognition that heterosexuality has always had. But I think we shouldn't overlook the important differences.

In particular, the tendency of male homosexuality to focus on the genitals and the sexual act as a transferable commodity rather than as a form of relationship. This is where psychologists do have something to say. It doesn't mean that a homosexual can't transcend that. Heterosexuals have to transcend that too, and emerge in some kind of genuine faithful relationship of the kind that all of us have many friends engaged in.

**Nigel**

I would imagine some people listening to that would think when you use the word 'faithful' relationship that's a particular view of an idealized relationship which is not necessarily shared. Some people choose not to be in faithful monogamous relationships, they may choose serial monogamy or they may choose to have multiple partners.

**Roger**

Absolutely true. And it's one very important reason why male homosexuality is so different from female homosexuality, because women don't make that choice on the whole. Men can; for very obvious reasons, economically and in every other way, they're not constrained as women are. But then we go back to what I was saying about Aristotle. Is that a way to live a fulfilled and fulfilling life? And I would say it isn't. But of course we're now beginning the topic of real sexual morality. People can disagree, as we know, about these moral questions, and therefore it's necessary to argue them out.

**Nigel**

I don't have the empirical data to hand. But I imagine there are plenty of lesbians who are not in a monogamous relationship and have many partners. I don't see there is anything intrinsic to being a woman that stops you having a series of different sexual relationships.

**Roger**

Certainly there's nothing about being a woman that stops you doing it, but there might be something in being a woman that stops you being fulfilled by it. And maybe if you knew more about women you'd agree.

**Nigel**

You've mentioned Aristotle several times already; Aristotle's conception of what it is to be human is ultimately grounded in biology and the kinds of things that make a human being flourish. Is it fair to say that you are Aristotelian in that respect?

**Roger**

It's not entirely true to say that Aristotle's view of the human being is grounded in biology. Of course he took the biological aspect of human beings seriously, but he also said the flesh is the matter of the human being, but the soul is the form. The soul is the principle of activity which animates that matter. And it's that which is at risk in our moral endeavours. I would go along with Aristotle in thinking that the biological aspects of the human being is all important in understanding the limits and the premises from which the moral life begins, but the moral life is more than simply leading a fulfilled biological life. And I think Aristotle would have said that too.

**Nigel**

You've clearly got a sophisticated framework for understanding different kinds of sexual desire and judging which activities are appropriate and inappropriate for a human being and which are likely to fulfil a human being. Is there anything that follows in terms of our practice from your framework?

**Roger**

I think a lot follows concerning the bringing up of children. I think the old idea of sex education is that you bring up children not to do it. The new idea is that you teach them how. And I think the new idea is completely wrong. I don't entirely endorse the old idea either. But I do believe that we must bring up children in such a way that when they do finally engage in this wonderful activity, it's with the whole being. And I think that's really the most important lesson to be learnt in the times in which we live.

**Nigel**

But how do you achieve that? That's a noble aim, but it's difficult to imagine how you could teach somebody to be fully a sexual being in the sense that you describe?

**Roger**

Well, it has been done. And if you look at the past of mankind it was done regularly. And it's one reason why we're all here. Because without that ability to commit through the sexual act there is no real shelter provided for children of the next generation and society won't survive that for very long. It can't be that difficult to do this. One way one does it is obviously by the example of one's own life, the way in which one loves one's own children, the way in which one encourages them and turns their attention to one thing rather than another, the way in which one provides them with idealized models of the other sex, idealized models of the sexual relation as such.

**Nigel**

Roger Scruton, thank you very much.

**Roger**

Well, thank you for inviting me.

David

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