

Sex, Lies, and Pornography

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In the last third of the twentieth century pornography became much more widely available, but the moral and political issues surrounding it remain unresolved. In the 1960s the United States, for example, was barely past the era of banning books; courts had begun to grapple with obscenity cases.¹ Visual pornography could be seen in certain public theatres, and some people, mainly men, had private collections. Keep in mind that there were no video stores on the corner renting pornographic tapes for home VCR use, no cable channels showing it, and no internet to provide a panoply of sites for every erotic taste. When I first started thinking about pornography as a young feminist philosopher in the early 1970s, writing in the public arena concerning the topic came primarily from two groups of (mostly male) writers: "conservatives" who seemed to assume that sex was evil and "liberal" aficionados of the "sexual revolution," who had no clue what feminists meant when we demanded not to be treated as "sex objects." Pornography was also an object of political concern and academic study; for example, then President Nixon appointed a Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (and subsequently disregarded its results).

Where did this leave a feminist philosopher in the 1970s? Torn, conflicted, and unhappy with the level of discussion. On the one hand, I had been inclined to think that pornography was innocuous and to dismiss "moral" argu-

ments for censoring it because many such arguments rested on an assumption I did not share – that sex is an evil to be controlled. On the other hand, I believed that it was wrong to exploit or degrade human beings, particularly women and others who are especially susceptible. So if pornography degrades human beings, then even if I would oppose its censorship, I surely could not find it morally innocuous. In order to think about the issues further, I wrote "Pornography and Respect for Women" – offering a moral argument that would ground a feminist objection to pornography, but avoid a negative view of sex.²

The public and academic debates about pornography have subsequently become much richer, and alliances and divisions have shifted in unusual ways. North American feminists became deeply divided over pornography – debating whether pornography should be censored or in some other way controlled, and analyzing pornography's positive or negative value in moral, legal and political terms reflecting a wide variety of women's experiences. Some of the feminists most vehemently opposed to pornography found themselves allied with other foes of pornography – religious political conservatives with whom they had very little else in common. All the while, the mainstream "culture wars" pitted many of these same conservatives against a variety of people, including feminists, who choose "alternative" life styles or

advocate significant social change. The picture I am sketching of the debates should look complex and frequently shifting. Yet this picture is no more complex and variegated than pornography itself has come to be. Although the central argument of this essay focuses on fairly tame and widespread heterosexual pornography, there is pornography available today for any conceivable taste and orientation. Where there's a market, there's pornography for it.

In this paper I first sketch very briefly some feminist positions concerning the law, politics, and morality of pornography. In the next section I offer a moral argument for maintaining that pornography degrades (or exploits or dehumanizes) women in ways or to an extent that it does not degrade men. In the final section, I argue that although much current pornography does degrade women, it is possible to have non-degrading, nonsexist pornography. However, this possibility rests on our making certain fundamental changes in our conceptions of gender roles and of sex. At a number of points throughout the paper I compare my position to those of other feminists.

I

Although some feminists find (some) pornography liberating, many feminists oppose (much) pornography for a variety of reasons.³ Let's look at some who oppose it. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin drafted civil ordinances that categorize pornography as a form of sex-discrimination; they were passed in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, but subsequently overturned in the courts. In the ordinances they use the definition below.

Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words that includes one of more of the following: . . . women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or . . . as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation . . . or . . . who experience sexual pleasure in being raped . . . tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt [the definition continues through five

more long, graphic clauses before noting that men, children or transsexuals can be used in the place of women].⁴

Although in my way of thinking of morality, this definition already incorporates moral objections to pornography within it, MacKinnon has argued that pornography is not a moral issue but a political one. By a political issue, she means that pornography is about the distribution of power, about domination and subordination. Pornography sexualizes the domination and subordination of women. It makes sexually exciting and attractive the state of affairs in which women, both in body and spirit, are under the control of men. In pornography men define what women want and who we are: we want to be taken, used, and humiliated. Pornography is not about harmless fantasy and sexual liberation. I'll return to MacKinnon and Dworkin from time to time in this paper as examples of "anti-pornography" feminists.⁵

Other feminists claim that pornography is a form of hate speech/literature or that it lies about or defames women. Eva Kittay uses the analogy with racist hate literature that justifies the abuse of people on the basis of their racial characteristics to argue that pornography "justifies the abuse of women on the basis of their sexual characteristics."⁶ Helen Longino defines pornography as "material that explicitly represents or describes degrading and abusive sexual behavior so as to endorse and/or recommend the behavior as described."⁷ She argues that pornography defames and libels women by its deep and vicious lies, and supports and reinforces oppression of women by the distorted view of women that it portrays. Susan Brownmiller's classic statement is also worth noting: "Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition . . . Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."⁸

In order to understand how my view overlaps with, but differs from the feminist positions just described, we need to note some differences in our terminology and in our legal interests. The authors above build the objectionable character

of pornography into their definitions of it. Sometimes those who do this want to reserve 'erotica' for explicit sexual material lacking those characteristics (though MacKinnon and Dworkin evidence little interest in this). Other times a negatively-value-laden definition is part of a legal strategy aimed at controlling pornography. I take a different approach to defining pornography, one that stems from ordinary usage and does not bias from the start any discussion of whether pornography is morally objectionable. I use "pornography" simply to label those explicit sexual materials intended to arouse the reader, listener, or viewer sexually. There is probably no sharp line that divides pornographic from nonpornographic material. I do not see this as a problem because I am not interested here in legal strategies that require a sharp distinction. In addition, I am focusing on obvious cases that would be uncontroversially pornographic – sleazy material that no one would ever dream has serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific merit.

I should say a little more about legal matters to clarify a difference between my interests and those of MacKinnon and Dworkin. They are interested in concrete legal strategies and believe that their proposed civil ordinances do not constitute censorship. My primary concern here is with neither a civil ordinance nor censorship, but with the basis for objecting to pornography on moral grounds. Nevertheless, it is important for me to state my belief that even if moral objections to pornography exist, there is no simple inference from "pornography is immoral" to "pornography should be censored" or to "pornography should be controlled by means of a civil ordinance that allows women to sue for harms based on sex-discrimination." Consider censorship. An argument to censor pornography requires us to balance a number of competing values: self-determination and freedom of expression (of both the users of pornography and those depicted in it or silenced by it), the nature of the moral and political problems with pornography (including its harms or potential harms to individuals and to communities), and so forth. Although there are fascinating issues here, there is no fast move from "immoral" to "illegal."

II

I want to take a step back from the feminist positions sketched above that assume the morally objectionable character of pornography within the definition. I want to evaluate the moral argument that pornography is objectionable because it degrades people. To degrade someone in this context is to lower her or his status in humanity – behavior incompatible with showing respect for a person. Of the many kinds of degradation and exploitation possible in the production of pornography, I focus only on the *content of the pornographic work*.⁹ The argument is that pornography itself exemplifies and recommends behavior that violates the moral principle to respect persons. It treats women as mere sex objects to be exploited and manipulated and degrades the role and status of women.

In order to evaluate this argument, I will first clarify what it would mean for pornography itself to treat someone as a sex object in a degrading manner. I will then deal with three issues central to the discussion of pornography and respect for women: how "losing respect" for a woman is connected with treating her as a sex object; what is wrong with treating someone as a sex object; and why it is worse to treat women rather than men as sex objects. I will argue that the current content of pornography sometimes violates the moral principle to respect persons. Then, in Part III of this paper, I will suggest that pornography need not violate this principle if certain fundamental attitude changes were to occur. Morally objectionable content is thus not necessary to pornography.

First, the simple claim that pornography treats people as sex objects is not likely to be controversial. It is pornography after all. Let's ask instead whether the content of pornography or pornography itself *degrades* people as it treats them as sex objects. It is not difficult to find examples of degrading content in which women are treated as sex objects. All we need to do is look at examples in MacKinnon and Dworkin's definition of pornography. Some pornography conveys the message that women really want to be raped, beaten or mutilated, that their

resisting struggle is not to be believed. By portraying women in this manner, the content of the movie degrades women. Degrading women is morally objectionable. Even if seeing the movie does not cause anyone to imitate the behavior shown, we can call the content degrading to women because of the character of the behavior and attitudes it recommends. The same kind of point can be made about films, books, and TV commercials with other kinds of degrading, thus morally objectionable, content – for example, racist or homophobic messages.

The next step in the argument might be to infer that, because the content or message of pornography is morally objectionable, we can call pornography itself morally objectionable. Support for this step can be found in an analogy. If a person takes every opportunity to recommend that men force sex on women, we would think not only that his recommendation is immoral but that he is immoral too. In the case of pornography, the objection to making an inference from recommended behavior to the person who recommends it is that we ascribe predicates such as "immoral" differently to people than to films or books. A film vehicle for an objectionable message is still an object independent of its message, its director, its producer, those who act in it, and those who respond to it. Hence one cannot make an unsupported inference from "the content of the film is morally objectionable" to "the film is morally objectionable." In fact, I am not clear what support would work well here. Because the central points in this paper do not depend on whether pornography itself (in addition to its content) is morally objectionable, I will not pursue the issue further. Certainly one appropriate way to evaluate pornography is in terms of the moral features of its content. If a pornographic film exemplifies and recommends morally objectionable attitudes or behavior, then its content is morally objectionable.

Let us now turn to the first of our three questions about sex objects and respect: What is the connection between losing respect for a woman and treating her as a sex object? Some people who have lived through the era in which women were taught to worry about men "losing respect" for them if they engaged in sex in

inappropriate circumstances have found it troublesome (or at least amusing) that feminists – supposedly "liberated" women – are outraged at being treated as sex objects, either by pornography or in any other way. The apparent alignment between feminists and traditionally "proper" women need not surprise us when we look at it more closely.

The "respect" that men have traditionally believed they have for women – hence a respect they can lose – is not a general respect for persons as autonomous beings; nor is it respect that is earned because of one's personal merits or achievements. It is respect that is an outgrowth of the traditional "double standard" – a standard that has certainly diminished in North America, but has not fully disappeared (and is especially tenacious in some ethnic and religious communities). Traditionally, women are to be respected because they are more pure, delicate, and fragile than men, have more refined sensibilities, and so on.¹⁰ Because some women clearly do not have these qualities, thus do not deserve respect, women must be divided into two groups – the good ones on the pedestal and the bad ones who have fallen from it. The appropriate behavior by which to express respect for good women would be, for example, not swearing or telling dirty jokes in front of them, giving them seats on buses, and other "chivalrous" acts. This kind of "respect" for good women is the same sort that adolescent boys in the back seats of cars used to "promise" not to lose. Note that men define, display, and lose this kind of respect. If women lose respect for women, it is not typically a loss of respect for (other) women as a class, but a loss of self-respect.

It has now become commonplace to acknowledge that, although a place on the pedestal might have advantages over a place in the gutter beneath it, a place on the pedestal is not at all equal to the place occupied by other people (i.e., men). "Respect" for those on the pedestal was not respect for whole, full-fledged people but for a special class of inferior beings.

If a person makes two traditional assumptions – that (at least some) sex is dirty and that women fall into two classes, good and bad – it is easy to see how that person might think that

pornography could lead people to lose respect for women or that pornography is itself disrespectful to women. Pornography describes or shows women engaging in activities inappropriate for good women to engage in – or at least inappropriate for them to be seen by strangers engaging in. If one sees these women as symbolic representatives of all women, then all women fall from grace with these women. This fall is possible, I believe, because the traditional “respect” that men have had for women is not genuine, wholehearted respect for full-fledged human beings but half-hearted respect for lesser beings, some of whom they feel the need to glorify and purify. It is easy to fall from a pedestal. We cannot imagine half the population of the US answering “yes” to the question, “Do movies showing men engaging in violent acts lead people to lose respect for men?” Yet this has been the response to surveys concerning the analogous question for women in pornography.¹¹

Two interesting asymmetries appear. The first is that losing respect for men as a class (men with power, typically Anglo men) is more difficult than losing respect for women or ethnic minorities as a class. Anglo men whose behavior warrants disrespect are more likely to be seen as exceptional cases than are women or minorities (whose “transgressions” may be far less serious). Think of the following: women are temptresses; Arabs are terrorists; Blacks cheat the welfare system; Italians are gangsters; however, Bill Clinton and the men of the Nixon and Reagan administrations are exceptions – Anglo men as a class did not lose respect because of, respectively, womanizing, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra scandals.

The second asymmetry looks at first to concern the active and passive roles of the sexes. Men are seen in the active role. If men lose respect for women because of something “evil” done by women (such as appearing in pornography), the fear is that men will then do harm to women – not that women will do harm to men. Whereas if women lose respect for some male politicians because of Watergate, Iran-Contra or womanizing, the fear is still that male politicians will do harm, not that women will do harm to male politicians. This asym-

metry might be a result of one way in which our society thinks of sex as bad – as harm that men do to women (or to the person playing a female role, as in homosexual rape). Robert Baker calls attention to this point in “‘Pricks’ and ‘Chicks’: A Plea for ‘Persons’.”¹² Our slang words for sexual intercourse – “fuck,” “screw,” or older words such as “take” or “have” – not only can mean harm but also have traditionally taken a male subject and a female object. The active male screws (harms) the female. A “bad” woman only tempts men to hurt her further. An interesting twist here is that the harmer/harmed distinction in sex does not depend on *actual* active or passive behavior. A woman who is sexually active, even aggressive, can still be seen as the one harmed by sex. And even now that it is more common to say that a woman can fuck a man, the notion of harm remains in the terms (“The bank screwed me with excessive ATM charges”).

It is easy to understand why one’s traditionally proper grandmother would not want men to see pornography or lose respect for women. But feminists reject these “proper” assumptions: good and bad classes of women do not exist; and sex is not dirty (though some people believe it is). Why then are feminists angry at the treatment of women as sex objects, and why are some feminists opposed to pornography?

The answer is that feminists as well as proper grandparents are concerned with respect. However, there are differences. A feminist’s distinction between treating a woman as a full-fledged person and treating her as merely a sex object does not correspond to the good–bad woman distinction. In the latter distinction, “good” and “bad” are properties applicable to groups of women. In the feminist view, all women are full-fledged people; however, some are treated as sex objects and perhaps think of themselves as sex objects. A further difference is that, although “bad” women correspond to those thought to deserve treatment as sex objects, good women have not corresponded to full-fledged people; only men have been full-fledged people. Given the feminist’s distinction, she has no difficulty whatever in saying that pornography treats women as sex objects, not as full-fledged people. She can morally object to

pornography or anything else that treats women as sex objects.

One might wonder whether any objection to treatment as a sex object implies that the person objecting still believes, deep down, that sex is dirty. I don’t think so. Several other possibilities emerge. First, even if I believe intellectually and emotionally that sex is healthy, I might object to being treated *only* as a sex object. In the same spirit, I would object to being treated only as a maker of chocolate chip cookies or *only* as a tennis partner, because only one of my talents is being valued. Second, perhaps I feel that sex is healthy, but since it is apparent to me that you think sex is dirty, I don’t want you to treat me as a sex object. Third, being treated as any kind of object, not just as a sex object, is unappealing. I would rather be a partner (sexual or otherwise) than an object. Fourth, and more plausible than the first three possibilities, is Robert Baker’s view mentioned above. Both (i) our traditional double standard of sexual behavior for men and women and (ii) the linguistic evidence that we connect the concept of sex with the concept of harm point to what is wrong with treating women as sex objects. As I said earlier, the traditional uses of “fuck” and “screw” have taken a male subject, a female object, and have had at least two meanings: harm and have sexual intercourse with. (In addition, a prick is a man who harms people ruthlessly; and a motherfucker is so low that he would do something very harmful to his own dear mother.)¹³

Because in our culture we have connected sex with harm that men do to women, and because we have thought of the female role in sex as that of harmed object, we can see that to treat a woman as a sex object is automatically to treat her as less than fully human. To say this does not imply that healthy sexual relationships are impossible; nor does it say anything about individual men’s conscious intentions to degrade women by desiring them sexually (though no doubt some men have these intentions). It is merely to make a point about the concepts embodied in our language.¹⁴

Psychoanalytic support for the connection between sex and harm comes from Robert J. Stoller. He thinks that sexual excitement is

linked with a wish to harm someone (and with at least a whisper of hostility). The key process of sexual excitement can be seen as dehumanization (fetishization) in fantasy of the desired person. He speculates that this is true in some degree of everyone, both men and women, with “normal” or “perverted” activities and fantasies.¹⁵

Thinking of sex objects as harmed objects enables us to explain some of the reasons why one wouldn’t want to be treated as a sex object: (1) I may object to being treated only as a tennis partner, but being a tennis partner is not connected in our culture with being a harmed object; and (2) I may not think that sex is dirty and that I would be a harmed object; I may not know what your view is; but what bothers me is that this is the view embodied in our language and culture.

Awareness of the connection between sex and harm helps explain other interesting points. Women are angry about being treated as sex objects in situations or roles in which they do not intend to be regarded in that manner – for example, while serving on a committee or participating in a discussion. It is not merely that a sexual role is inappropriate for the circumstances; it is thought to be a less fully human role than the one in which they intended to function.

Finally, the sex–harm connection allows us to acknowledge that pornography treats both women and men as sex objects and at the same time understand why it is worse to treat women as sex objects than to treat men as sex objects, and why some men have had difficulty understanding women’s anger about the matter. It is more difficult for heterosexual men than for women to assume the role of “harmed object” in sex, for men have the self-concept of sexual agents, not of objects. This is also related to my earlier point concerning the difference in the solidity of respect for men and for women; respect for women is more fragile. Men and women have grown up with different patterns of self-respect and expectations regarding the extent to which they deserve and will receive respect or degradation. The man who doesn’t understand why women do not want to be treated as sex objects (because he’d sure like to

be) is not likely to think of himself as being harmed by that treatment; a woman might. (In fact, if one were to try to degrade a man sexually a promising strategy would be to make him feel like a non-man – a person who is either incapable of having sex at all or functioning only in the place of a woman.)¹⁶

Having seen that the connection between sex and harm helps explain both what is wrong with treating someone as a sex object and why it is worse to treat a woman in this way, let's keep in mind the views of anti-pornography feminists as we think about the range of pornography that exists today. Although an anti-pornography feminist need not claim that a pornographer has a *conscious intent* to degrade, to subordinate, or to lie about women's sexuality, some have said precisely this – remember Susan Brownmiller's claim cited in section I that pornography is designed to dehumanize women. The feminist who is not willing to attribute a "design" in pornography (beyond an intent to arouse and to earn a profit) can still find it deplorable that it is an empirical fact that degrading or subordinating women arouses quite a few men. After all, it is a pretty sorry state of affairs that this material sells well.

Suppose now we were to rate the content of all pornography from most morally objectionable to least morally objectionable. Among the most objectionable would be the most degrading – for example, "snuff" films and movies that recommend that men rape and mutilate women, molest children and animals, and treat nonmasochists very sadistically. The clauses in MacKinnon and Dworkin's definition of "pornography" again come to mind; one clause not yet cited is, "Women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual."¹⁷

Moving along the spectrum, we would find a large amount of material (perhaps most pornography) not quite so blatantly objectionable. With this material it is relevant to use the analysis of sex objects given above. As long as sex is connected with harm done to women, it will be very difficult not to see pornography as degrading to women. We can agree that pornography treats men as sex objects, too, but maintain that this is only pseu-

doequality: such treatment is still more degrading to women.

In addition, pornography often overtly exemplifies either the active/passive or the harmer/harmed object roles. Because much pornography today is male-oriented and is supposed to make a profit, the content is designed to appeal to male fantasies. Judging from the content of much pornography, male fantasies often still run along the lines of stereotypical gender roles – and, if Stoller is right, include elements of hostility. In much pornography the women's purpose is to cater to male desires, to service the man or men, and to be dependent on a man for her pleasure (except in the lesbian scenes in heterosexual pornography – which, too, are there for male excitement). Even if women are idealized rather than specifically degraded, women's complex humanity is taken away: the idealized women and the idealized sexual acts are in the service of the male viewer. Real women are not nearly so pliable for male fantasies. In addition, women are clearly made into passive objects in still photographs showing only close-ups of their genitals. Although many kinds of specialty magazines, films and videos are gauged for different sexual tastes, much material exemplifies the range of traditional sex roles of male heterosexual fantasies. There is no widespread attempt to replace the harmer/harmed distinction with anything more positive and healthy.¹⁸

The cases in this part of the spectrum would be included in the anti-pornography feminists' scope, too. MacKinnon and Dworkin's point that pornography makes domination and subordination sexually exciting is relevant here as well as in the more extreme cases. In fact, other clauses in their definition cover much "regular" pornography: "women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; . . . women's body parts, including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks – are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts."¹⁹ Whether or not "regular," corner-video-store pornography is consciously designed to degrade or subordinate women, the fact that it does both degrade women and produce sexual excitement in men is sufficient to make MacKinnon and Dworkin's point.

What would cases toward the least objectionable end of the spectrum be like? They would be increasingly less degrading and sexist. The genuinely nonobjectionable cases would be nonsexist and nondegrading. The question is: Does or could any pornography have nonsexist, nondegrading content?

III

To consider the possibility of nonsexist, morally acceptable pornography, imagine the following situation. Two fairly conventional heterosexuals who love each other try to have an egalitarian relationship. In addition, they enjoy playing tennis, beach volleyball and bridge together, cooking good food together, and having sex together. In these activities they are partners – free from hang-ups, guilt, and tendencies to dominate or objectify each other. These two people like to watch tennis and beach volleyball matches, cooking shows, and old romantic movies on TV, like to read the bridge column and food sections in the newspaper, and like to watch pornographic videos. Imagine further that this couple is not at all uncommon in society and that nonsexist pornography is as common as this kind of nonsexist sexual relationship. This situation sounds morally and psychologically acceptable to me. I see no reason to think that an interest in pornography would disappear in these circumstances.²⁰ People seem to enjoy watching others experience or do (especially do well) what they enjoy experiencing, doing, or wish they could do themselves. We do not morally object to the content of TV programs showing cooking, tennis or beach volleyball or to people watching them. I have no reason to object to our hypothetical people watching nonsexist pornography.

What kinds of changes are needed to move from the situation today to the situation just imagined? One key factor in moving to nonsexist pornography would be to break the connection between sex and harm. If Stoller is right, this task may be impossible without changing the scenarios of our sexual lives – scenarios that we have been writing since early childhood, but

that we can revise. But whatever the individual complexities of changing our sexual scenarios, the sex-harm connection is deeply entrenched and has widespread implications. What is needed is a thorough change in people's deep-seated attitudes and feelings about gender roles in general, as well as about sex and roles in sex. Feminists have been advocating just such changes for a few decades now. Does it make sense to try to change pornography in order to help to bring about the kinds of changes that feminists advocate? Or would we have to wait until after these changes have taken place to consider the possibility of nonsexist pornography? First, it is necessary to acknowledge how difficult and complex a process it is to change deeply held attitudes, beliefs and feelings about gender and sex (and how complex our feelings about gender and sex are). However, if we were looking for avenues to promote these changes, it would probably be more fruitful to look to television, children's educational material, nonpornographic movies, magazines and novels than to focus on pornography. On the other hand, we might not want to take the chance that pornography is working against changes in feelings and attitudes. So we might try to change pornography along with all the other, more important media.

Before sketching some ideas along these lines, let's return briefly to MacKinnon and Dworkin – feminists who would be very skeptical of any such plan. Their view of human sexuality is that it is "a social construct, gendered to the ground."²¹ There is no essential sexual being or sexual substratum that has been corrupted by male dominance. Sexuality as we know it simply is male defined. Pornography, therefore, does not distort sexuality; pornography constitutes sexual reality. Even if MacKinnon and Dworkin were to grant me my more inclusive definition of pornography, they would find it bizarre to entertain the possibility of making pornography neutral, not to mention using it as an "ally" for social change.

However, bear with me. If sexual reality is socially constructed, it can be constructed differently. If sexuality is male defined, it can be defined differently – by women who can obtain enough power to overcome our silence and by

men who are our allies. Dworkin herself advocates changing our concept of sexuality. It probably makes more sense to speak of constructing sexualities in any case – to acknowledge the variety of sexualities human beings are likely to construct.

So let's suppose that we want to make changes to pornography that would help us with the deep social changes needed to break the sex-harm connection and to make gender roles more equitable in sexual and nonsexual contexts. When I thought about this subject in the 1970s, I sketched out a few plot lines, partly in jest, involving women in positions of respect – urologists, high-ranking female Army officers, long-distance truck drivers – as well as a few ideas for egalitarian sex scenes.²² However, in the intervening decades while I was standing around teaching philosophy, the pornography industry far surpassed my wildest plot dreams. There is pornography now made by feminists and (thanks to the women who pick up videos at the corner video store as they do more than their fair share of the errands), some pornography that is more appealing to women – feminist or not.²³

One might still wonder whether any current pornography is different “enough” to be non-sexist and to start to change attitudes and feelings. This is a difficult call to make, but I think we should err on the side of keeping an open mind. For, after all, if we are to attempt to use pornography as a tool to change the attitudes of male pornography viewers (along with their willing and not-so-willing female partners), any changes would have to be fairly subtle at first; the fantasies in nonsexist pornography must become familiar enough to sell and be watched. New symbols and fantasies need to be introduced with care, perhaps incrementally. Of course, realistically, we would need to realize that any positive “educational value” that non-sexist pornography might have may well be as short-lived as most of the other effects of pornography. But given these limitations, feminist pornographers could still try (and do try).

There are additional problems, however. Our world is not the world imagined at the beginning of section III for the couple watching tennis, beach volleyball and pornography; in

their world nonsexist pornography can be appreciated in the proper spirit. Under these conditions the content of our new pornography could be nonsexist and morally acceptable. But could the content of the same pornography be morally acceptable if shown to men with sexist attitudes today? It might seem strange for us to change our moral evaluation of the content on the basis of a different audience, but I have trouble avoiding this conclusion. There is nothing to prevent men who really do enjoy degrading women from undermining the most well-intentioned plot about, say, a respected, powerful woman filmmaker – even a plot filled with sex scenes with egalitarian detail, “respectful” camera angles and lighting, and so on. Men whose restricted vision of women makes it impossible to absorb the film as intended could still see the powerful filmmaker as a demeaned plaything or kinky prostitute, even if a feminist's intention in making and showing the film is to undermine this view. The effect is that, although the content of the film seems morally acceptable and our intention in showing it is morally flawless, women are still degraded. The importance of the audience's attitude makes one wary of giving wholehearted approval to much pornography seen today.

The fact that good intentions and content are insufficient does not imply that feminists' efforts toward change would be entirely in vain. Of course, I could not deny that anyone who tries to change an institution from within faces serious difficulties. This is particularly evident when one is trying to change both pornography and a whole set of related attitudes, feelings, and institutions concerning gender roles and sex. But in conjunction with other attempts to change this set of attitudes, it seems preferable to try to change pornography instead of closing one's eyes in the hope that it will go away. For it seems realistic to expect that pornography is here to stay.²⁴

Notes

I would like to thank Talia Bettcher and David Ashen-Garry for very helpful comments and references.

- 1 Some of the key first amendment/obscenity cases are: *Roth v. US* 354 U.S. 476 (1957), *Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton* 413 U.S. 49 (1973), *Miller v. State of California* 413 U.S. 15 (1973); a recent internet case is *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union* 117 S. Ct. 2329 (1997). It is easy to find cases at www.FindLaw.com or other legal internet sites.
- 2 Ann Garry, “Pornography and Respect for Women,” *Social Theory and Practice* 4 (1978): 395–421, and published at approximately the same time in *Philosophy and Women*, ed. Sharon Bishop and Marjorie Weinzig (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1979). Sections II–III of the present paper use some of the central arguments from Parts III–IV of the earlier paper.
- 3 Examples of feminists works that are pro-pornography or anthologies of pro- and anti-pornography writings include Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography* (New York: Scribner, 1995), Diana E. H. Russell, ed., *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993), Lynn Segal and Mary McIntosh, eds., *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, eds., *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (London: BFI Press, 1993), Susan Dwyer, ed., *The Problem of Pornography* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995). Several other anti-pornography references are in subsequent footnotes.
- 4 Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 146, n.1. The Indianapolis case is *American Bookseller Association v. Hudnut* 771 F. 2d 323 (1985). A more recent work of MacKinnon's is *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 5 First, readers should not confuse the position of Andrea Dworkin with that of Ronald Dworkin (see ch. 36, pp. 356–63, this volume).
Second, concerning whether pornography is a moral or political issue: MacKinnon and Dworkin associate “moral arguments” against pornography with the liberal ideology they reject in their political and legal strategies. MacKinnon rejects arguments such as mine, among other reasons, because they use concepts associated with the liberal intellectual tradition – respect, degrade, dehumanize, etc. She claims that pornography dehumanizes women in “culturally specific and empirically descriptive – not liberal moral – sense” (*Feminism Unmodified*, p. 159). My take on it is

different. I find MacKinnon's political argument to be a moral argument as well – it is morally wrong to subordinate women.

Third, Rae Langton discusses the MacKinnon/Dworkin claims that pornography subordinates and silences women in the context of philosophy of language: “Speech Acts and Un-speakable Acts,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 293–330, revised as “Pornography, Speech Acts, and Silence,” in *Ethics in Practice*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

- 6 Eva Feder Kittay, “Pornography and the Erotics of Domination,” in *Beyond Domination*, ed. Carol Gould (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), pp. 156–7. Of course, sometimes pornography is both sexist and racist – it utilizes many negative racial/ethnic stereotypes in its fantasy-women (and men) and degrades in culturally specific ways. See Tracey Gardner, “Racism in Pornography and the Women's Movement,” in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Bantam, 1982). Gloria Cowan and Robin R. Campbell, “Racism and Sexism in Interracial Pornography: A Content Analysis,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): 323–38.
- 7 Helen Longino, “Pornography, Oppression and Freedom: A Closer Look,” in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 31.
- 8 Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1975), p. 394.
- 9 By focusing on the content of pornography I exclude many important kinds of degradation and exploitation: (i) the ways in which pornographic film makers might exploit people in making a film, distributing it, and charging too much to see it or buy it; (ii) the likelihood that actors, actresses, or technicians will be exploited, underpaid, or made to lose self-respect or self-esteem; and (iii) the exploitation and degradation involved in prostitution and crime that often accompany urban centers of pornography.
It is obvious that I am also excluding many other moral grounds for objecting to pornography: The US Supreme Court has held that pornography invades our privacy, hurts the moral tone of the community, and so on. There are also important and complex empirical questions whether pornography in fact increases violence against women or leads men to treat women in degrading ways (and leads women to be more likely to accept this treatment). I dealt with some early social science literature on the last topic in

"Pornography and Respect for Women," but the length limitations of the present paper do not permit an update. Once you leave the empirical correlation between the use of pornography and masturbation, very little is simple to prove. Summaries of and references to social science work can be found in Edward Donnerstein, et al., *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications* (New York: Free Press, 1987), Neil Malamuth and Daniel Ling, *Pornography* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), Marcia Palley, *Sex and Sensibility: Reflections on Hidden Mirrors and the Will to Censor* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994), and Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, eds., *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1984).

- 10 The question of what is required to be a "good" woman varies greatly by ethnicity, class, age, religion, politics, and so on. For example, many secular North Americans would no longer require virginity (after a certain age), but might well expect some degree of restraint or judgment with respect to sexual activity.
- 12 In Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston, eds., *Philosophy and Sex* (2nd edn.) (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), p. 264.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 A fuller treatment of sex objectification would need to be set in a more general context of objectification. Martha Nussbaum writes about both. See her "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 249–91.
- 15 Robert J. Stoller, "Sexual Excitement," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 33 (1976): 899–909, especially p. 903. Reprinted in Stoller, *Sexual Excitement: Dynamics of Erotic Life* (Washington: American Psychiatric Press, 1979). The extent to which Stoller sees men and women in different positions with respect to harm and hostility is not clear. He often treats men and women alike, but in *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), pp. 89–91, he calls attention to differences between men and women especially regarding their responses to pornography and lack of understanding by men of women's sexuality. These themes are elaborated in his later books, *Porn: Myths for the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and Stoller and I. S. Levine, *Coming Attractions: The Making of an X-Rated Video* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 16 Three points: First, generalizations are always risky. It is important to remember that people's

expectations of respect and their ability to be degraded can differ significantly by their race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and individual psychological makeup. So although men's and women's expectations of respect or degradation are constructed differently within any given group, e.g., an ethnic group, the specifics of their expectations may well vary.

Second, heterosexual men have developed more sensitivity to being treated as sex objects (even if not as "harmed" objects) as women have become more sexually aggressive. In addition, heterosexual male worries about sex objectification surface readily in discussions of openly gay men serving in the military; there is far less worry about openly lesbian military personnel.

Third, although objectification of men working in the pornography industry is beyond the scope of this paper, Susan Faludi writes interestingly about it in "The Money Shot," *The New Yorker*, October 30, 1995, pp. 64–87. Stoller's interviews in *Porn* and *Coming Attractions* are also relevant, see n. 15.

- 17 MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 146, n.1.
- 18 There is a whole array of sadomasochistic pornography (including women treating men sadistically) that I have not addressed in this discussion. There have been intense, multilayered controversies among feminists (both heterosexual and lesbian) about consenting sadomasochistic practices and pornography. See Samois, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), Robin Linden, et al., eds., *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1982), and Patrick D. Hopkins, "Rethinking Sadomasochism: Feminism, Interpretation, and Simulation," *Hypatia* 9 (1994), pp. 116–51, reprinted in Alan Soble, ed., *The Philosophy of Sex* (3rd edn.) (Lanham, MD: 1997).
- 19 MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 146, n.1.
- 20 First, one might wonder whether Stoller's connection between hostility and sex negates the possibility or likelihood of "healthy" pornography. I think not, for although Stoller maintains that hostility is an element of sexual excitement generally, he thinks it important to distinguish degrees of hostility both in sex and in pornography. In his 1990s work specifically on pornography he makes this clear; see, e.g., references above in n.15, especially *Porn*, pp. 223–6. He also realizes that pornographers must know quite a bit about human sexual excitement in order to stay in business; so if sexual excitement requires increasingly less hos-

changes in control over the circumstances of and positions in sex (women's preferences and desires would be shown to count equally with men's), no pseudo-enjoyed pain or violence, no great inequality between men and women in states of dress or undress or types and angles of bodily exposure, a decrease in the amount of "penis worship," a positive attempt to set a woman's sexual being within a more fully human context, and so on.

- 23 Among the best known feminists in the pornography industry are Candida Royalle, Nina Hartley, and (now performance artist) Annie Sprinkle.
- 21 MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 149. See also Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981, with introduction written in 1989).
 - 22 Garry, pp. 413–16. Examples of the kinds of egalitarian features I had in mind are: an absence of suggestions of dominance or conquest,