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# PORNOGRAPHY AND THE “SEX WARS”

*Mari Mikkola*

## Introduction

Issues surrounding sexuality and pornography have tended to polarize the feminist movement and differences in views led to the so-called “sex wars” of the 1970s/1980s. The main opposing positions can be denoted with PorNo (short for anti-pornography positions) and PorYes (denoting pro-pornography and “sex-positive” outlooks). PorNo feminist activism has in recent years gained renewed momentum. The “Stop Porn Culture” movement, cofounded by the high-profile anti-pornography campaigner Gail Dines, is calling for an end to society’s “pornification” (i.e., an end to normalizing sexual themes and explicit sexual imagery in mainstream culture). Concurrently, the production of self-proclaimed feminist pornography has become more prominent. In addition, academic work on pornography that is not premised on a PorNo position has gained impetus with the first-ever peer-reviewed academic journal in such a vein, *Porn Studies*, established in 2014 and published by Routledge. Dines, who likened the journal’s editors to climate change deniers relative to pornography, fervently opposed its launch.<sup>1</sup> However, the “Stop Porn Culture” movement has been critiqued for being “unwilling to acknowledge the counterhegemonic possibilities in feminist and queer porn, unable to consider the possibility of improving rather than eradicating pornography, and [for] reject[ing] the possibility of neutral or even positive uses of sexually explicit materials” (Tarrant 2014: 36). PorNo positions are criticized further for assuming that “sex is inherently oppressive to women – that women are debased when they have sex on camera – [which] ignores and represses the sexuality of women” (Taormino et al. 2013: 15). PorYes positions claim that pornography can be and is in many cases empowering. These positions do not have in mind (only) sexually suggestive “softcore” materials, but rather sexually explicit hardcore depictions too. Some PorYes positions are also tied to pornography being essentially transgressive in character and therefore positive: for instance, Laura Kipnis holds that “pornography obeys certain rules, and its primary rule is transgression. Like your boorish cousin, its greatest pleasure is to locate each and every one of society’s taboos, prohibitions, and properties and systematically transgress them, one by one” (1996: 164).

This PorNo–PorYes opposition is fraught with difficulties. First, it is not entirely clear what exactly is under dispute. There is confusion over whether different sides disagree about how to define the concept of *pornography* or merely about which materials fall under the concept. Moreover, it looks like a mistake to accept either position in an unqualified sense. As PorYes advocates point out, an unqualified PorNo stance is blinkered: anti-pornography critiques can miss their target because they treat pornographic materials as all the same, failing to appreciate there are differences in kind. A number of queer theorists have accused anti-pornography feminism of being heteronormative and heterosexist: of treating heterosexuality as the normative standard

against which all sexuality is measured. Such a standard problematically naturalizes heterosexist sexual practices, where sex between cis-men and cis-women is “normal” and so, other practices end up being seen as deviant. Although these claims have *prima facie* plausibility, an unqualified PorYes position is also misguided: such a position ignores that pornography production and consumption are not just harmless private affairs. Working conditions can be and are at times unsafe. Some empirical evidence suggests that heavy consumption of virulently inequalitarian pornography makes consumers more ready to hold callous views about women and to accept rape myths (like that women who wear revealing clothing are “asking” to be sexually attacked). And to think that the *raison d’être* of pornography is simply or primarily to transgress societies’ bourgeois conventions (as Kipnis does) is surely exaggerated and over intellectualized (for more on these claims, see my 2019).

We can see the makings of new sex wars in popular discourse and culture as well as in academic writings about pornography. However, I will argue in this chapter that—contra first appearances—this debate is significantly steered by considerations that are *not* about pornography. The dispute importantly turns on the nature of sex: the nature of *sexual activities*, and of “*having sex*.” The underlying disagreements about sex, then, engender different normative conclusions about pornography. Making headway in the PorNo–PorYes debates requires excavating and making explicit this underlying issue. Hence this paper asks: How do different sides understand “sex,” and how do these conceptions differ? In what ways do these differences subsequently undergird distinct normative positions relative to pornography? I will start by sketching out PorNo positions prominent in philosophy and beyond (§2). Next, I will consider PorYes responses to anti-pornography feminism (§3). Finally, I will spell out the different conceptions of sex at play in these views (§4).

### Antipornography Positions in Philosophy and Activism

The Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously proclaimed that even though he cannot provide a clear definition of *pornography*, he knows it when he sees it. At the time of this comment (in the 1960s), pornography in the USA and UK was legally understood on the model of obscenity. Even today, pornographic materials in the USA must pass the (so-called) Miller test that regulates the distribution and consumption of obscene materials in order to be legally protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution. So somewhat oddly, there are two distinct legal parameters against which pornographic works are measured in the USA. If some pornographic work counts as speech in the relevant sense, it deserves First Amendment protection. If, however, it counts as obscene, the work loses this protection. The Miller test for obscenity is a *conjunction* of three conditions: if an average person applying community standards finds a work as a whole to appeal to prurient (sexually arousing) interests; and the work depicts in a clearly offensive way sexual conduct; and the work as a whole lacks any serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value, then it counts as obscene. *De facto* the test does little to no work in restricting the production and distribution of pornographic materials though. And as the offensive character of the depictions was not clearly defined, this understanding makes pornography a matter of public morality and pits conservative opponents of pornography against “sexual radicals.” According to such conservatives, pornography removes sex from its proper setting of the monogamous, heterosexual marriage relation, which debases humanity and regresses human progress (for an overview of such views, see Berger 1977).

Feminist philosophers and theorists commonly renounce the conservative/obscenity approach, regardless of whether they oppose pornography or not. And even those feminists who do oppose pornography do not typically do so for its sexual content or putative offensiveness and so, vehemently disagree with pornography’s conservative opponents. Rather, they argue, pornography

*harms* women. One early cluster of such arguments has been framed around the idea that pornography, in treating women as mere sex objects, involves the degradation of women (for a discussion, see Garry 1978). On this view, what is morally objectionable about pornography is not its sexual content per se, but rather the way its content de-grades [sic] women by assigning them lower value and lower moral status (Hill 1987). Typically, though, the mere depiction of lower value does not suffice. Rather, pornography is about verbal and pictorial materials that represent and describe “sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in *such a way as to endorse the degradation*” (Longino 1980: 43). For pornography to endorse degradation is for it to communicate its approval and recommendation of sexual behavior that devalues women. More specifically, this means that the degradation is represented as pleasurable for both the male and female performers, and there is “no suggestion that this sort of treatment of others is inappropriate to their status as human beings” (Longino 1980: 43–44). Pornography hence tells deep and vicious lies about women. In a slightly different vein, Rosemary Tong (1982) argues that pornography celebrates and encourages inequality: the sexual exchanges are degrading in that the desires and experiences of one party (usually, female) are not regarded by other participants as having validity or equal importance. Note that this understanding of pornography is probably one that many contemporary readers find puzzling. For one, it seems to ignore gay and queer pornography in being about how *women* are degraded in pornography. Views focusing on women’s degradation, however, leave open the possibility that sexually explicit materials that do not involve such endorsement fail to count as pornography, instead being classified as erotica. The proponents of the degradation view seem to put forward their understanding of pornography’s harms in a descriptive fashion though and they do not seem to be using “pornography” as a technical term. This points to a general difficulty when discussing pornography: different theorists tend to understand the term “pornography” differently, which is something about which to be vigilant.

Although sharing many aspects with the above positions, in championing their well-known anti-pornography stance, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin put forward a subtly different feminist analysis of pornography’s harms: pornography is a practice of sex discrimination (Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1987, 1989, 1993). This view is less about what pornography represents (about its content), and more about what pornography *does*. In short, pornography celebrates, promotes, and legitimizes sexualized violence against women. It subordinates women. It eroticizes male dominance and female submissiveness, and puts this forward as the apparent truth about sex (MacKinnon 1987: 171)—what “proper” sex supposedly is and ought to be. Pornography purports to mirror reality, but it in fact constructs one. This is what pornography does and not merely what it depicts: “It institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy, fusing the erotization of dominance and submission with the social construction of [gender]” (MacKinnon 1987: 172). With this in mind, MacKinnon and Dworkin (in)famously defined *pornography* as

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.

(MacKinnon 1987: 176)

However, subordination is not the only thing that pornography does: it also silences women. In making “proper” sex about relations of dominance and violence, pornography prevents women from receiving uptake when they say otherwise. Pornography “strips and devastates women of

credibility” in their attempts to articulate experiences of sexual assault, which are just seen as part of ordinary sexual realities due to pornography—women are thus “stripped of authority and reduced and devaluated and silenced” (MacKinnon 1987: 193). Note again that this definition is compatible with there being sexually explicit materials premised on equality and hence counting as erotica. Having said that, MacKinnon holds that if men, or trans people are used in the place of and treated as if they were women, the work also counts as pornography. Gay and queer pornography are therefore not counterexamples to her view.

Rae Langton (1993) defends the philosophical cogency of the MacKinnon-Dworkin position in her by-now classic article “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts,” which marks a watershed moment in philosophical discussions about pornography. She draws on J.L. Austin’s (1962) speech act theory to make good the idea that pornography does something—that it is a practice of sex discrimination. Austin argued that our statements can do and do more than simply make true or false claims about the world—sometimes we perform actions other than just speaking with our utterances. Austin thence divides speech acts into locutions, perlocutions, and illocutions: the speaker’s locution (the words uttered) can perform some illocutionary action (*in* uttering something the speaker’s locution can *count as* doing that thing), and the locution can have some perlocutionary effects (*by* uttering something the speaker’s locution can *cause* further extra-linguistic effects). Now, U.S. legislation takes pornography to be a form of speech insofar as free speech legislation protects its manufacture and distribution; subsequently, Langton argues that pornographic speech illocutionarily subordinates and silences women. *In saying* something about women, pornographic speech does something other than make mere utterances. It functions like the speech of a priest who just in declaring “I pronounce you a married couple” performs the action of marrying. Pornographic speech, however, performs harmful actions. It subordinates and silences women in ranking them as inferior, in legitimating discrimination against them, and in depriving women of important free speech rights (Langton 1993: 305–313). Pornographic content, in being a form of speech, can hence perform subordinating actions.

The philosophical positions just outlined did not address the nature of sex all that explicitly. But looking at claims made in more recent anti-pornography activism (that largely are in line with the above philosophical views) illustrates that substantive views about the nature of sex underlie various positions. As noted, the “Stop Porn Culture” movement opposes society’s “pornification” (how sexual themes and explicit sexual imagery have become normalized in mainstream culture). In so doing, Dines writes: “Porn sex is not about making love, as the feelings and emotions we normally associate with such an act—connection, empathy, tenderness, caring, affection—are replaced by those more often connected with hate—fear, disgust, anger, loathing, and contempt” (2011: xxiv). She further holds that what is missing in pornography is “anything that looks or feels remotely like intimacy and connection, the two ingredients that make sex interesting and exciting in the real world” (2011: 68). Although Dines does not seemingly have this in mind, her remarks are reminiscent of Catherine Itzin’s introduction to a hefty 1992-volume on anti-pornography feminism Itzin edited, where she states that the book aims to advance a social environment where

sex might be experienced and presented differently: not in terms of male definition, or of male dominance and female subordination or power and powerlessness, but based on reciprocity, mutuality and equality. [This is being denied] with its false premises about women, its false promises to men, and its power as a form of sex discrimination to ‘pornographize’ women.

(1992: 19)

Dines’ PorNo critique further claims that in “pornland”

an authentic sexuality—one that develops organically out of life experiences, one’s peer group, personality traits, family and community affiliations—is replaced by generic porn sexuality limited in creativity and lacking any sense of love, respect, or connection to another human being.

(2011: xi)

This is close to Martha Nussbaum’s diagnosis of the problem of pornography: it “depicts a thoroughgoing fungibility and commodification of sex partners, and, in the process, severs sex from any deep connection with self-expression or emotion” (1995: 283). In other words, from PorNo perspective certain qualities are missing from sex as depicted in pornography (or “porn sex,” for short). These include emotional connection and intimacy, mutuality and reciprocity, connection to self, and authenticity insofar as pornography tells lies about women’s sexuality.

### **PorYes Response**

The PorNo perspectives introduced above have been immensely influential both in philosophy and activism, but (perhaps unsurprisingly) have not convinced everyone. They have been challenged by activists and theorists alike, and from both feminist and non-feminist perspectives. Some critics hold that anti-pornography feminism seemingly reprimands women who might genuinely enjoy pornography or takes these women to be somehow disingenuous and brainwashed. The view that pornography constructs sex as the eroticization of dominance and submission suggests that all sex under patriarchy is violence. Consensual heterosexual sex becomes impossible and this problematically turns women who engage in heterosexual sex into collaborators in their own oppression (for these critiques, see Valverde 1995; Willis 1995). Others have argued that in failing to theorize and recognize queer, non-heterosexual pornography, anti-pornography feminism actually represses already-repressed sexualities. As already noted above, PorNo positions supposedly fail to acknowledge counterhegemonic possibilities in feminist and queer pornography, which have gained prominence in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Self-proclaimed feminist productions are highly contested by opponents, who claim that self-proclamation is insufficient to make some pornographic materials feminist—producers may declare some pornographic materials to be feminist, but this does not guarantee that the materials embody genuinely feminist values. This is surely right. But consider how the central features of feminist and mainstream pornography are said to come apart. They are said to differ in what is represented and depicted, and how production is organized. On one prominent characterization, feminist pornography is a genre that

uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure at their most confounding and difficult, including pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homonormativity... [It] creates alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and discourses... [and] strive[s] to create fair, safe, ethical, consensual work environment and often create imagery through collaboration with their subjects.

(Taormino et al. 2013: 9–10)

Tristan Taormino (a well-known pornography producer, sex educator, and self-proclaimed feminist) further specifies this last point by stating that feminist pornography involves a fair and ethical production process that creates “a positive working environment for everyone” (2013: 260).

To illustrate further, consider what is typically depicted and represented in self-professed feminist pornography. (Note that I am offering a typical characterization here. This does not mean that every self-professed feminist pornographer fits the characterization and there are live debates about how apparently feminist pornography may fall short in what it depicts.) These types of materials commonly aim to avoid representations of sexist stereotypes and uses of usual pornography tropes like “money shots” (sex culminating in men ejaculating on women’s faces). Anne Eaton outlines seven positive criteria of feminist pornography. First, women are portrayed in active roles: “as *subjects* of desire and pleasure (rather than merely objects of desire).” Second, “narrative and visuals are not organized around men’s orgasms but, rather, centrally feature female pleasure and orgasms.” Third, men are also objectified by the female characters in the film as well as by the spectator’s gaze. Fourth, feminist pornography includes “erotic representations of male bisexuality.” Fifth, men take on submissive roles and women dominant ones. Sixth, “women are represented as powerful and physically strong.” And seventh, “realistic female bodies of all ages that do not promote unhealthily thin stereotypes are not only represented but are also eroticized” (Eaton 2017: 254).

With these criteria of putatively feminist pornography in mind, recall a common anti-pornography critique outlined above: what makes pornography problematic is that it *endorses* and *celebrates* (rather than merely depicts) women’s subordination and degradation.<sup>3</sup> In endorsing women’s subordination, the depicted images are morally problematic because endorsing degradation involves communicating an approval and recommendation of sexual behaviors that devalue women, and their sexual self-determination. Celebrating women’s degradation makes mainstream pornography sexist. However, feminist PorYes advocates *agree* with this assessment of much of mainstream, industrial pornography (Rubin 1993). Feminist pornographers typically hold that mainstream pornographic depictions of sexual activities and gender roles are sexist in precisely this manner (Ms. Naughty 2013; Royalle 2000). The view that sex depicted in masculinist pornography (that is, pornography produced from a masculinist perspective that takes being male as the standard for sexuality as such) ignores and devalues desires and experiences of women is a mainstay of feminist pornography. But, the thought goes, we should not, therefore, oppose pornography *per se*; rather, we should oppose exploitative and sexist pornography and aim to undermine its force by depicting sex and sexual agency of women. Producers typically aim to realize feminist aims by avoiding common pornographic tropes and depictions that are formed from a masculinist perspective. Candida Royalle—a performer turned director and the “grand dame” of feminist pornography—recounts how she started directing pornographic films in order to undercut sexist depictions of women in mainstream industrial pornography (Royalle 2000). In her work, Royalle refused to use common mainstream tropes like money shots. At the same time, she (in her own words) refused to present herself as pro-porn or as an “anything goes” director. The point of feminist pornography for her was precisely to say that not everything goes, that some pornography is exploitative and that some pornographic depictions are sexist—they are based on false premises about women and they offer false promises to viewers. From this description of feminist pornography, we can see that a PorYes perspective affords another way to understand porn sex. From this perspective, it supposedly encompasses the following: transgression and expansion of norms, activities, physical possibilities, desires; complexity of desire, identities, and pleasure; and authenticity in portraying “real” sex, rather than the kind of sex portrayed in masculinist pornography that tells lies about women.

### The Nature of Sex

As I see it, the different positions outlined above define the nature of sex in pornography differently. That is, they take porn sex to be (documented) sexual activity that is characterized

by distinct features. The disagreement importantly isn't just about the *value* of sex or of the characteristics that define sex, but about what the characteristics definitive of sex in pornography *are*.

*Porn-Sex (PorNo)*: Sexual activity that lacks emotional connection, intimacy, reciprocity, and deep connection to self; is one-sided and inauthentic (a lie).

*Porn-Sex (PorYes)*: Sexual activity that is transgressive, expansive, complex, and authentic (real).

These distinct conceptions about the nature of sex in pornography give rise to different normative conclusions about pornography. Simply put, thinking that porn sex is somehow inauthentic and problematically one-sided, *prima facie* speaks against pornography. Thinking that it is authentic and expansive, engenders more optimistic normative conclusions. Showing how the different sides hold different views about the nature of sex in pornography helps to excavate an underlying dispute that is doing much of the normative work. In so doing, we can hopefully render the debate more meaningful: we can see more clearly what the source of the disagreement is and where there is common ground. I will discuss next some of these key characteristics in more detail to see where the disagreements and commonalities lie. First, I will consider one-sidedness; second, the idea that sex involves a deep connection to the self, and finally how porn sex is (or fails to be) authentic.

Start with the idea that porn sex is one-sided and lacking in reciprocity. To illustrate how this is supposedly the case and why it might be problematic, consider Elizabeth Anderson's (1990) discussion of different sorts of value. Although Anderson does not discuss pornography specifically, her discussion of sex work illuminates how the nature and value of sex are implicitly understood by anti-pornography feminist perspectives. For Anderson, certain things should not be bought and sold. This includes sexual services, organs, and reproductive labor: their commodification is problematic due to the nature of markets. Markets are institutions in which individuals and collectives exchange (typically) money in return for goods and services. Participation is motivated by self-interest rather than (say) forging social relations. Markets are asymmetrical and alienating since market norms and relations are characterized by the following features: markets are impersonal and anonymous; the market is a sphere in which one is free to pursue one's own ends irrespective of others' ends; goods traded at the market place compete with one another; markets are want—rather than need—regarding, and dissatisfaction is signaled through exit rather than “voice” (we stop buying a product, if dissatisfied). On this view, something is an economic good when its “production, distribution, and enjoyment is properly governed by these five norms, and its value can be fully realized through use” (Anderson 1990: 184).

Goods that do not satisfy this definition should not be considered commodities. This includes goods of personal relations and relationships that are embodied in other norms. Centrally, these include norms of intimacy and commitment. Goods of personal relationships like love and sex are *shared* goods: they are constituted by reciprocity and mutuality. Hence, their realization presupposes a close committed relationship between social agents. As Anderson puts it, the nature of sex is based on reciprocal sexual attraction and “affirming an intimate relationship in [agents'] mutual offering of themselves to each other” (1990: 187). The proper nature of sex is realized *together* and in *cooperation* since it hinges on reciprocity. This realization is missing in sex work and, seemingly, in porn sex according to the PorNo position because they are one-sided and lack intimacy, thus being alienating. And so, Anderson writes: “The fundamental contrast between the sphere of personal relations and that of the market is that the former is properly governed by the spirit of the gift rather than the spirit of commercial exchange” (1990: 186). To sum up the view of sex as a shared good, Anderson holds:



One and the same good is realized by both partners in their action, and part of its goodness lies in the mutual understanding that it is shared. The couple rejoices in their *union*, and not simply in his or her own distinct physical gratification. As a shared good, it cannot be realized except through each partner reciprocating the other's gift *in kind*, offering his or her own sexuality in the same spirit in which the other's sexuality is received – as a genuine offering of the self.

(1990: 187)

Sex work and sex in pornography contradict this conception of sex. They do not treat sex as a “gift” and they divorce sex from the self. For instance, as Anderson puts it, the seller of sexual services is not interested in the buyer as a person, but merely as someone who is willing to pay for the services—the seller is not attracted to the buyer, but their wealth. Then again, the buyer merely seeks sexual gratification, and not (as Anderson puts it) a physical union with the seller; hence, the relationship is not reciprocal. And insofar as sex is supposedly integrally tied to selfhood, in sex work one ends up offering a piece of oneself for money and this contradicts the proper realization of sex as a shared good that is to be understood as a gift.

Having this view about the nature of sex is illuminating for understanding the PorNo–PorYes debates. Many PorNo positions implicitly understand the nature of sex in line with Anderson's view, and having a particular substantive view about the nature of porn sex engenders normative conclusions: if one thinks that in porn sex mutuality is missing and one thinks that this lack goes against the proper nature of sex, porn sex ends up perverting the nature of sex. If consumers, moreover, think that such a perverted conception tells us something not just about porn sex but about sex in general, this is likely to lead to morally problematic sex outside of pornography too. PorYes positions seemingly reject the idea of sex as a gift; and so, porn sex that lacks such gift-like characteristics isn't warped and the lack of mutuality does not signal a moral problem. Mutuality in the sense of gift-giving simply is not a necessary part of the nature of sex, and its absence in porn sex is not hence a cause for concern. Without aiming to argue for the PorYes conception of sex, let me raise some concerns about understanding sex on the model of gift giving. For a start, there are fairly obvious cases of sex that ill fit this model: just think of masturbation. Insofar as there is no union with another, masturbation, so long as it is acknowledged to be a form of sex at all, looks to be a *prima facie* problematic kind of sex. But this (I expect) would not be an attractive conclusion for reasons that I take not to be in need of elucidating. Of course, we might say that there is a giver and a receiver—they just happen to be the same person. However, arguments going in this direction start to look rather *ad hoc* and unnecessarily convoluted. Masturbation aside, I am not convinced that sex involving other people does or ought to function like a gift either. In fact, I am not convinced that gifts quite work in the way Anderson discusses. She writes: “As a shared good, [sex] cannot be realized except through each partner reciprocating the other's gift *in kind*” (1990: 187). It is far from clear though what “in kind” here denotes relative to gift giving or sex. For a start, it does not seem necessary for gift giving to expect reciprocation and certainly not reciprocation in kind. If I expect you to “match” my gift in (say) monetary value, it looks like I have missed something crucial about gift giving. In other words, imagine that I give my loved one a gift worth 100 Euros for their birthday. If my loved one fails to reciprocate in that I receive a gift worth only 50 Euros on my birthday, being resentful or hurt about the lack of reciprocation would not strike me as appropriate reactions. Displaying such attitudes would rather signal me harboring undesirable character traits. Expecting reciprocation in kind in this manner looks instead more like a commercial exchange.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, to reciprocate sex in kind portrays a picture of sex that looks deeply clinical and mechanistic: if you touch your partner a certain way, they should then reciprocate and touch you that way too; if you give pleasure to your partner in some particular

manner, you can expect to receive pleasure in that same manner too—otherwise, something about the sexual encounter goes astray. This looks like an unappealing portrayal of sex though in draining it from spontaneity and playfulness, which can plausibly be important parts in our sex lives without engendering moral concerns. I agree that if sex wholly lacks collaborative participation and mutuality, whereby one pays no heed to the desires and experiences of one’s partner, something problematic is going on. But morally and experientially good sex does not seemingly require reciprocation in kind in the manner assumed by the gift-giving model.

Having discussed one-sidedness, let’s consider another recurrent anti-pornography claim: that sex divorced from selfhood somehow renders it morally problematic and inauthentic. Rebecca Whisnant’s (2016) critique of Tristan Taormino’s work displays this type of thinking. For Whisnant, Taormino’s much-celebrated brand of putatively feminist pornography does not qualify as genuinely feminist. Some of Whisnant’s points are compelling. She critiques Taormino’s reluctance to avoid money shots and some other standard pornography tropes. But Whisnant further questions simplistic ascriptions of authentic desires to performers given the constraints that pornography production and distribution involve. Whisnant takes Taormino to hold that a choice or desire to perform is authentic when this is “something the person sincerely wants to do or from which she or he derives real (rather than faked) pleasure” (2016: 3). But given the constraints of pornography production, this sort of authenticity is supposedly not available to performers. For instance, one might not sincerely want to have sex at all during the time of filming, but refusing to have sex is (on Whisnant’s view) not a viable option on a typical pornography filming set. Therefore, Whisnant argues that following Taormino’s conception of authenticity, a performer who does not particularly feel like doing the shoot or is not personally invested in the shoot, but still goes along with it, will not sincerely desire to perform in the shoot. Thus, the performer partakes in the production inauthentically.

I am not convinced, though, that if performers engage in sexual acts half-heartedly or absentmindedly, this suffices to render sex inauthentic in a morally problematic sense. I suspect that practically every professional philosopher has felt like not giving a lecture or a talk at some point, and so has simply gone through the motions. But there is a substantive difference between doing  $x$  without a great desire to  $x$  (and perhaps because there is a financial incentive or contractual obligation to  $x$ ), and doing  $x$  against one’s will. If the former renders one’s desire and choice inauthentic, much of what we do is inauthentic and this sets the bar of authenticity unduly high. Moreover, I suspect that absentmindedly giving a philosophy talk does not morally concern many; so, why worry about absentminded sex? Presumably, absentminded sex is not on a par with absentminded philosophizing because sex is somehow constitutively intertwined with the self. But how and why this is and should be so, is not carefully justified or elucidated in anti-pornography feminism. That is, it is not obvious to me that if performers engage in sexual acts half-heartedly or absentmindedly, this thereby renders sex divorced from the “deep self” in a manner that is morally worrisome. Sexual integrity and self-determination surely are importantly tied to selfhood, which makes violations of sexual integrity and autonomy seriously wrongful. But sexual self-determination is not the same as actively having sex, much less doing so in a particular way; just think of people who exercise the former by explicitly foregoing the latter (e.g., a priest who chooses a life of celibacy). Although many people might phenomenologically experience sexual activities as having a deep connection to the self, it is not obvious that there is any metaphysical or necessary connection between the two. And so, having sex half-heartedly or absentmindedly isn’t necessarily morally worrisome.

These reflections about half-hearted/absentminded sex suggest that there is a further hidden distinction in the debate doing normative work. One might think that such sex in pornography is not problematic, but perhaps with a loved one, it is. We might plausibly think that just going through the motions with one’s loved ones isn’t exemplary of “good” sex—either experientially,

or in a moral sense. This alludes to a distinction between *engaging in sexual activities* and *having sex*, in the sense that there is a difference between *engaging in childrearing activities* and *bringing up a child*. It seems that we can do the former without deep emotional engagement and intimacy, and without investing ourselves in the activities. Furthermore, there isn't anything obviously morally problematic about this. Many people who are non-parents engage in childrearing activities without investing themselves in those activities. This includes nannies, kindergarten teachers, neighbors, friends of the family, distant relatives, perhaps even close relatives like aunts and uncles. Absentmindedly playing games with a child one is looking after does not seemingly signal a grave moral flaw or a problem. Hence, I contend, there is yet another difference undergirding different conceptions about sex that helps to explain the putative connection to self. Porn sex is about engaging in sexual activities, rather than about having sex. The latter, but not necessarily the former, is something one does with deep emotional engagement and intimacy, and so should not be done absentmindedly and without investing ourselves—without (so to speak) giving a piece of ourselves to another.

This is why reciprocity is seemingly such an important characteristic of sex and why its absence in porn sex looks problematic. Consider a parallel to Jennifer Hornsby's (2014) view of language. The central function and point of language is *communication*. This is not equivalent to producing some (even meaningful) noises; rather, communication involves (as Hornsby puts it) a meeting of minds, where the hearer recognizes what the speaker is intending to say and to do with their words. Thinking about reciprocity, it seems that sex in the sense of engaging in sexual activities does *not* require reciprocity and can be one-sided. Sex in the sense of having sex is reciprocal and presupposes mutuality. For instance, imagine realizing that there is no meeting of minds with one's sexual partners when one expected there to be reciprocity. Just as in cases where interlocutors are simply talking past one another, the lack of reciprocity is worrisome and hurtful if one falsely thought there were a meeting of minds. Again, if one thinks that all sex should be about "having sex" that is integrally tied to reciprocity, we can easily see how this generates anti-pornography normative conclusions: porn sex that lacks reciprocity, mutuality, and intimacy looks worrisome and non-ideal because it fails to satisfy the supposed conditions of sex "proper"—that is, sex in the sense of having sex. If one thinks about sex in the sense of engaging in sexual activities, the lack of reciprocity and mutuality is neither pressing nor clearly grounding any anti-pornography normative conclusions provided of course that the activities are engaged in consensually. My point, in short, is that different sides to the debate have deeply normatively-laden views about what sex should involve and what it is about, where this lends itself to normative conclusions about pornography. Nonetheless, these views about sex are not made explicit or tackled head on, which tends to frustrate efforts to have a meaningful debate.

Anti-pornography feminism is seemingly wedded to a view of sex where having sex importantly involves giving something of oneself to another, which renders one-sided porn sex a corrupted conception of sex in general. This in turn lends itself to the view that non-reciprocal sex is somehow inauthentic. In fact, both PorNo and PorYes camps stress the role of authenticity in sex. But (as I see it) neither appeal is unproblematic; let me clarify next why.

Recall Dines' claim that in "pornland" "an authentic sexuality—one that develops organically out of life experiences, one's peer group, personality traits, family and community affiliations—is replaced by generic porn sexuality" (2011: xi). In this sense, authenticity is about how sex would "really" be were it not for the influence of pernicious pornography. Think back to what I said above: PorNo perspectives commonly hold that pornography constructs a version of women and sexuality that is deceitful—pornography tells lies about women. So, Dines' thought goes, without pernicious pornography, sexuality would be authentic in being presumably unconstructed. PorYes positions also appeal to authenticity, but in a different sense. Tibbals offers a sociological study of recent trends in the U.S. pornography industry and concludes:

although it comes in many different forms, politically charged considerations regarding authenticity and ethics seem ubiquitous to adult content production and consumption today. Ethics generally refers to the fair treatment of adult performers in their respective workplaces, as well as ethical representations of sex in content. Authenticity refers to the 'realness' of content, and various debates regarding what constitutes 'real' sex and sex-related representations are ongoing.

(2014: 133)

On this view, authenticity is about how sex in fact *is* outside of pornographic contexts; pornography is authentic insofar as it mirrors, rather than constructs, sexuality. The PorYes view, too, is implicitly wedded to the idea that there is something real in the world to be mirrored in pornography.

I, however, see no reason to think that a truly authentic in the sense of unconstructed sexuality exists. For a start, *contra* Dines, families, communities, and even the law exercise coercive mechanisms to make people conform to heteronormative sexual expectations (such as families ostracizing queer members, forcing people to undergo "conversion therapy," or queer sexual practices being made illegal). Therefore, I see little reason to believe that authentic sexuality would "organically" develop in the course of sexual maturation without pornography, or that in its absence our sexual lives will magically become gender just. This point is easily backed up by historical facts: even before the era of mass-produced and -consumed Internet pornography, our sexual lives were not just. An elucidation of authentic or somehow unconstructed "true" sexuality of any kind strikes me as impossible, given the extent and influence of socialization, cultural traditions, and even indoctrination.

Putatively feminist pornography typically aims to depict sexuality in alternative ways to exploitative industrial pornography. It may therefore have a claim to be depicting more authentic sexuality in avoiding warped depictions (like depictions that condone and endorse ignoring consent in sexual situations, and that undermine the prescribed view of women enjoying facial ejaculations). Still, even though such alternative depictions may accurately mirror the sexual lives of some women, they certainly do not depict anything metaphysically necessary about sex or something shared by all women qua woman. There is hence no necessary connection between being sex positive and being pro-pornography. To illustrate, consider Wendy McElroy's (1995) prominent pro-pornography position, which holds that gaining sexual freedom is an integral part of a feminist battle for women's liberation more generally. For her, pornography production and consumption are part of sexual self-determination in being (what McElroy calls) sexual free speech. And so, one's liberty to partake in and/or consume pornography are feminist issues. Furthermore, McElroy holds that pornography benefits women in contributing to their good sexual health, which is essential for good health generally. These benefits (according to her) include: women gaining sexual information from pornography, pornography serving as sexual therapy, and breaking down cultural and political stereotypes about sex (McElroy 1995: chapter 6; see also Palac 1995). In short, pornography offers women new sexual fantasies and ways to explore their sexualities, which traditional gender socialization into "good" and "bad" girls hampers. In pornography acting as a sort of sex therapist, there is seemingly something authentic about it in a different sense: there is something "real" about porn sex that gender socialization masks, like the ideas that women can and should seek pleasure for their own sakes and that sexuality is not confined to heterosexual marriage relations.

Now, some personal stories attest to the liberating potential of pornography for some women, but other claims made by pro-pornography advocates are surely exaggerated. Just think of McElroy's claim that pornography is essential for good health—a satisfying sex life may be essential for good health, but it is surely possible to have one without pornography consumption. Furthermore,

McElroy curiously defines pornography in a “value-neutral manner” as being “*the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings*” (1995: 51; italics original). And by “artistic depiction” McElroy has in mind that “pornography is the genre of art or literature which focuses on the sexual nature of human beings” (1995: 51). How this definition is value-neutral eludes me: McElroy seems to think that any definition, which is not against pornography, is value-neutral. This is clearly false and taking pornography to be by definition an artistic genre is highly value-laden. After all, moral values are not the only sorts of values that can figure in our theorizing, and even if some definition of *x* is free from obvious moral evaluation, this does not render the definition thereby value-neutral.

Be that as it may, both PorNo and PorYes positions oppose inauthentic pornographic depictions of women and their sexuality found in mainstream inequalitarian pornography. And so, depending on how we understand the claim about authenticity, we get different normative conclusions and can see that a source of the disagreement isn’t entirely about what pornography is and what it does, but about how different perspectives on pornography understand the nature (and subsequent value) of sex.

Let me consider a final point about authenticity. One might think that the distinction between engaging in sexual activities and having sex leaves out an obvious phenomenon relative to pornography: that it involves a *performance* of sexual activities or of having sex. In this case, both PorNo and PorYes views would have a flawed understanding of porn sex, and porn sex is always in a sense not real insofar as it is a performance. Whether this makes porn sex inauthentic though is not obvious. Much depends on how we understand performance. If we are talking about classical stage acting that aims to emulate certain actions in skillful and polished ways, there is something non-authentic about the performance insofar as the actor isn’t giving a piece of themselves in the process. Then again, if porn sex involves a performance in the sense of method acting, we get different results. Method acting is about embodying a character more deeply; bringing the character to life by dredging up real and powerful emotions in the actors themselves. This type of acting (whether in pornographic or non-pornographic contexts) has a claim to being more authentic in that the actor is making use of their own emotions in the performance. This type of performance does putatively involve some co-opting of the self—but is there something morally worrisome here? It looks like in the case of non-pornographic acting there isn’t, even though the actors might be co-opting deeply personal emotions and experiences. If there is something worrisome in the pornographic case though, this has to be because *sexual activities* are involved. PorNo views seemingly presuppose something like this: that there is something about sex that makes co-opting *it* morally worrisome. Why we should view this as self-evident though isn’t clear to me. One would have to hold that there is something about sexual activities as such that makes rendering them one-sided more prone to abuse perhaps. Hence, the argument goes, method acting that involves sex is more abusive than method acting involving emotions. But I see no obvious reason to think so. For instance, the Finnish National Theatre School was run in the 1980s by a controversial figure Jouko Turkka who practiced and taught extreme method acting to train students. Many of his former pupils later described the training as emotional abuse. Even though it is clear that our sexual lives can be exploited and abused when our sexual integrity is violated, so can our emotional lives when our emotional integrity is attacked. Anti-pornography feminism, then, has to make a case for exceptionalism about sex to ground their view.

### Closing Remarks

In this chapter, I have considered a meta-debate about sex that seemingly undergirds feminist debates about pornography. Specifically, I have looked at the ideas of mutuality, connection to self, and authenticity that play key roles in defining the proper characteristics of sex and its nature.

With these characteristics in mind, I have raised some worries about conceptions of sex that philosophical and activist discussions presuppose. One might be left with the impression that I find the PorNo conception more problematic than the PorYes conception. This isn't entirely right: I think neither conception is to be preferred in an unqualified sense and both contain controversial aspects. Let me say something more to this briefly before closing. As noted, being sex positive isn't equivalent to being pro-pornography. Moreover, we should not forget that the pornography industry is far from being wholly governed by ethical work practices. As Royalle (2000) put it, like with any big industry, the pornography industry too has good people to work with and some “real creeps” that one learns to avoid. So just because one might find the PorNo conception of sex questionable, it does not follow that one should endorse an unqualified PorYes view. After all, we might (and do) have reasons to be concerned about many industry practices. Nevertheless, here we can see common ground between different positions. And the point of this chapter has been to excavate hidden normatively laden views that are doing important work but not always in a manner that leads to a meaningful debate. Bringing these hidden disputes and points of agreement to light will hopefully further improve feminist engagements with pornography and help to ward off the resurgence of prior “sex wars.”<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/jun/16/internet-violent-porn-crime-studies>.
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/mar/22/porn-women>.
- 3 It is worth noting that not all anti-pornography feminists agree on what the problem with pornography is. So this is one common critique found in the literature, but this does not mean that all anti-pornography feminists agree it is the primary problem with pornography.
- 4 Peculiarly, Anderson seems to agree with my view when she discusses friendship on the gift-giving model. But in her discussion of sex, there supposedly needs to be reciprocation in kind.
- 5 I have presented earlier versions of this paper at workshops in Barcelona (May 2018) and Essen (July 2018). I am deeply grateful to those present for their insightful comments and challenging queries. In addition, I owe much to the editors of this collection for their invaluable help when writing the final version of this paper.

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