NAUGHTY FANTASIES

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Is it wrong to eroticize activities that are themselves wrong? Consider the following scenarios:

(1) Sally is a feminist who enjoys light sadomasochism, including spanking, whipping, and slave-master roleplaying. Sometimes she is the "top" in such activities, and sometimes her boyfriend is, but in all cases the activities are consensual and mutually pleasurable.

(2) Fred is a gay man who finds himself aroused by stories of fraternity hazing, particularly those involving stripping and humiliation. He is against such activity in "real life," and indeed he discourages college-age friends from joining fraternities because of these and other troubling practices. Nevertheless, he occasionally visits websites that contain such stories for the purpose of erotic stimulation.

(3) Ramona, who was raped as a teenager, occasionally fantasizes about rape while masturbating or having sex with partners. Given her serious opposition to rape and to exploitation of women more generally, she feels guilty about such fantasies. Nevertheless, she finds that her sexual experiences are intensified when she recalls her own rape or imagines others.

Some (notably certain feminists) have argued that actively entertaining the sorts of fantasies described above is always wrong, insofar as these fantasies depend on models of domination and exploitation. Others (including other feminists) have defended such practices on grounds of personal freedom and privacy. In this paper I would like to revisit this debate by clarifying and evaluating one of the core arguments within it. Although my conclusions will be somewhat tentative, I hope at least to elucidate some of the ethical and conceptual issues raised by these practices, which are not merely controversial but also rather common.

For lack of a better term, I shall group these practices under the rubric "naughty fantasies." In using the term "naughty" I do not intend to diminish the seriousness of the topic. The alternative "guilty fantasies" is unacceptable because it prejudges the issue. "Sadomasochism" is too narrow, though much of the prior feminist debate on this topic has focused on sadomasochism. "Violent fantasies" is both too narrow and too broad: not all such

fantasies are *violent* in any but the loosest sense (cf. Fred's fraternity stripping scenes), and not all violent fantasies are sexual. By "naughty fantasies" I mean any sexual fantasy, *either imagined or acted out*, involving the eroticization of an activity that is itself morally wrong. (Notice that the three examples above represent a range of such fantasies.) By "eroticization," I mean actively regarding the activity with sexual desire (although as I shall explain below, I think the phenomenon of eroticization is itself in need of better analysis). The argument I wish to clarify and evaluate is as follows:

(1) It is wrong to eroticize activities that are themselves wrong.

(2) Naughty fantasies eroticize activities that are themselves wrong.

Therefore, it is wrong to pursue naughty fantasies.

Let us call this the "naughty-fantasies argument." Note that the first premise is intended *a priori*. One could, of course, make the consequentialist argument that those who pursue naughty fantasies are more likely to engage in *actual* exploitation than those who do not, or that they are more likely to be violent or callous or incapable of intimacy—but this is not the argument under consideration here. Rather, the question is whether it is wrong *in itself* to eroticize wrongful activities.

One way to rebut the argument is to attack the second premise. Patrick Hopkins takes this approach in his defense of sadomasochism.[1] According to Hopkins, sadomasochism does not eroticize a wrongful activity, it eroticizes the *simulation* of a wrongful activity:

> In the case of SM...it should not be assumed that SM participants actually find pleasure in the torture of slaves, nor in the cries of a rape victim, nor in the humiliation of women, nor in the relentless assault of an attacker. In fact, it is a central ethical and political value of those SMists who also profess to be feminists that such events are indeed evil, deplorable, and repugnant. At the same time, however, it is possible to desire the *simulation* of those events, to lust after the context of a negotiated and consensual "submission" or "domination."....[T]he sadomasochist can *desire the simulation itself*, not as an inferior copy of the real thing, not as a copy of anything at all, but as simulation qua simulation.[2]

In one sense, Hopkins is correct when he claims that SM participants do not find pleasure in the torture of slaves and so on: the typical naughty fantasizer is as horrified by *actual* atrocities as anyone else. But during fantasy, the distinction between the fictional and the actual is not so clear. When Fred reads a fraternity-hazing story on the internet, does it matter for erotic purposes whether the story is true or not? Suppose Fred discovers that a favorite story that he had believed to be "fictional" is actually a biographical account. He might feel guilty about continuing to eroticize the story, but will

he find it less erotic? Might he not even find it *more* erotic?

The answers to these questions depend on Fred's particular situation. But whatever the answers, the question remains whether it is psychologically possible for Fred (or anyone else) to eroticize a *simulation qua simulation*. In order to understand this question, put aside the issue of eroticization and consider first what it means to *attend to* a simulation qua simulation. Take barn facades, for example. One can attend to these qua barns, in which case one might notice their charming architecture, their idyllic settings, their bright red siding. Or one can attend to them qua simulations, in which case one might notice their apparent three-dimensionality, their realistic stature, or their propensity for appearing in Gettier-type counterexamples. Note that the features noticed when attending to the barn facade qua simulation are largely exclusive of those noticed when attending to it qua barn: indeed, when attending to it qua simulation, one is mindful of precisely those features that make the object *not* a real barn.

The case is somewhat different in naughty fantasies. True, SM participants frequently attend to the pleasure of their partners, and to that extent, they are mindful of features that distinguish their activities from actual violence. But they are also mindful of features that occur in the "real" case: the spanking, the quickened heartbeat, the gasps and groans. When they eroticize these features, SM participants (and other naughty fantasizers) seem to be eroticizing not simulations qua simulations, but domination and its manifestations. The simulation is not the object of arousal; rather, it is the vehicle for the object of arousal.

To see this point more clearly, let us suppose that Fred is watching a porn film depicting fraternity-hazing. If Fred were to focus on the film qua simulation, what features would he notice? Presumably, he would attend to things like the convincingness (or lack thereof) of the actors' humiliation, the realistic nature of the dorm-room sets, or the level of detail in the storyline. Such attention would be more appropriate to the film critic than the sexual participant. Indeed, it is not even clear what it would mean to *eroticize* such features (although someone who did would possess a most interesting fetish). What turns people on in naughty fantasies is not depiction, but rather what is being depicted.

This is not to say that the object of a naughty fantasy—that is, the part that "turns on" the fantasizer—is typically clear or well-defined. Fred may not know why he enjoys fraternity-hazing scenes, and he will likely find that over-analysis of this issue serves merely to spoil his fun. Lacking a developed "phenomenology of arousal," we may find that it is harder to

explain what the object of arousal *is* than to explain what it is *not*. In any case, we must reject Hopkins' claim that the object is simulation qua simulation and consider a different approach to the naughty-fantasies argument.

Perhaps it would be more promising to grant the second premise of the naughty-fantasies argument and instead attack the first, which states that it is always wrong to eroticize wrongful activities. Hopkins employs this approach briefly when he writes,

> In fact, SM scenes gut the behaviors they simulate of their violent, patriarchal, defining features. What makes events like rape, kidnapping, slavery and bondage evil in the first place is the fact that they cause harm, limit freedom, terrify, scar, destroy, and coerce. But in SM there is attraction, negotiation, the power to halt the activity, the power to switch roles, and attention to safety. Like a Shakespearean duel on stage, with blunted blades and actors' training, violence is simulated, but is not replicated.[3]

Hopkins is correct that the central wrong-making features of rape are absent from rape fantasies. Moreover, one could argue that rape fantasies not only lack the wrong-making features but also add a good-making one, namely the pleasure of the fantasizer. But this argument misreads the first premise of the naughty-fantasies argument as being consequentialist in nature. Recall that proponents of the argument are not (or at least, not *here*) concerned with whether such fantasies have good or bad consequences. The fact that people take pleasure in such fantasies is precisely the problem, according to this argument: some pleasures are bad because their objects are inappropriate as objects of pleasure.

There are at least two non-consequentialist ways to understand the first premise of the naughty-fantasies argument. One might adopt a virtue-ethics approach and argue that naughty fantasies are incompatible with good character, particularly if they are pursued habitually. The idea here is not that regular pursuit of such fantasies might cause one to be more violent, or callous, or indifferent to human suffering: that argument would be consequentialist. Rather, the idea is that naughty fantasies are incompatible with some virtue or set of virtues that has some *non-instrumental* value in a well-lived life.[4] Someone lacking such virtues would be missing something, even if neither she nor anyone else is less happy as a result. Alternatively, one might argue that actively entertaining naughty fantasies is wrong in itself, apart from any connection with virtue. I will focus on this latter claim, though much of what I say will apply to the virtue-ethics version as well.[5]

The intuition that drives this claim is that any seriously wrongful activity merits an attitude of disapproval, and eroticization of such an activity is

inconsistent with this attitude. I suggest that the best way to defend this intuition is dialectically, through the use of further examples.

Consider Raymond, who collects and studies newspaper accounts of *actual* rapes in order to enhance his erotic life. Suppose that he, like Ramona, is deeply against rape and would never commit it. Now one might have trouble accepting this supposition, mainly because it seems incompatible with Raymond's enjoyment of real-life rape stories. In other words, there seems to be some incoherence involved in being against rape while deriving sexual pleasure from reading about real rapes. Yet notice that on consequentialist grounds, Raymond is in the clear. (We are assuming that Raymond is sincere in his opposition and that he is no more inclined to be violent or callous because of his predilections.) His pleasure in reading such accounts results in a net gain in utility.

Or consider Charlie, married with grown children, who sometimes fantasies about having sex with underage girls. He is deeply opposed to child abuse and would never engage in such activity himself. On a few occasions he has purchased magazines with erotic images of females who are in fact over eighteen but who appear to be as young as twelve, and he has privately begun writing (and via the internet, sharing) fictional stories about forcible sex with these girls. His relationships with his wife and others appear unaffected by this activity, which occupies very little of his time and which he would abandon entirely were it not for the sexual charge it brings him. Or if Charlie's case does not trouble you, consider Chester, who is like Charlie in every respect except that the stories he shares are *actual accounts* of adult-child rape. Consequentialist concerns aside, there is a strong intuition that in Chester's case (if not in Charlie's as well) the eroticization of child abuse represents a failure to exhibit the appropriate attitude toward a deeply wrongful activity.

One might object in the cases of Raymond and Chester, who seek real-life accounts rather than fictional ones, on the grounds that their predilections are *causally dependent* on the existence of actual atrocities. The problem is that the same seems true in the case of Ramona, Fred, and Charlie. Presumably, naughty fantasies give them a sexual charge in large part because of the intense emotions associated with *actual* domination and humiliation. Thus, if causal dependence on real atrocities tarnishes Raymond's and Chester's fantasies, it tarnishes all naughty fantasies. (Indeed, a major thrust of feminist ethics is that human actions cannot be evaluated apart from the social context that imbues them with meaning.)

The point about inappropriate attitudes can be illustrated with non-

sexual examples as well. Some years ago I attended a large Southern university where one of the local fraternities annually held an "Old South Ball." The fraternity, which was notorious for its white-only membership, would hire black students to pose as "slaves" at the ball for the sake of verisimilitude. Needless to say, this event regularly provoked a serious outcry within the campus community. While some defended the fraternity on the grounds that the black actors were willfully (though, to many minds, inexplicably) participating, most thought that the event involved a serious failure on the part of all participants to adopt an appropriate attitude toward slavery. The fact that these actors were paid well was beside the point.

This is not to say that any and all depictions of wrongful practices are bad. Compare the Old South Ball to the mini-series *Roots* and the difference is immediately apparent: those who watch *Roots* should (and typically do) sympathize with the slaves; those fraternity members who participated in the ball simply enjoyed themselves at the "slaves'" expense. On the other hand, if someone were to watch *Roots* and smile or cheer during a lynching scene, others might reasonably balk. Similar points can be made about war movies. A person who watches a World War II film, for example, and fails to sympathize with the Jews is missing something—a point that was made humorously during a Seinfeld episode, when Jerry was chided mercilessly by his parents after being caught making out with his girlfriend during *Schindler's List.*

Video games may provide an even better analogy because of their more clearly participatory nature. Suppose Victor enjoys games in which he assumes the role of a fighter pilot bombing various military targets. Such games are quite common and are widely regarded as harmless (the familiar objections to violent toys notwithstanding). Now suppose the game is based on an *actual* war—say, the civil war in Bosnia—and Victor assumes the role of a Serb targeting Muslim civilians. Further, suppose that although Victor is opposed to the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, he really enjoys his video game and cheers loudly every time a Slavic Muslim in the game is killed. Even if we were convinced that Victor would never behave this way toward ethnic minorities in "real life," would we not find his behavior during the games problematic?

The analogy is, needless to say, imperfect. For one thing, eroticizing something is not the same as cheering for it (more on this below). But the example does capture the concern that anti-SM feminists and others have about naughty fantasies: rape, humiliation, and exploitation are real and all-too-common evils. To seek out their depictions for the purpose of pleasuring oneself is to fail to acknowledge that evil properly.

Having done my best to defend this intuition, let me conclude by noting a few points that militate against it. (I acknowledged at the outset that my conclusions in this paper are tentative.) The naughty-fantasies argument (in particular, the first premise) depends upon the assumption that eroticization involves a kind of pro-attitude which, as such, is incompatible with condemnation of the depicted activity. Yet the truth of that assumption is by no means clear, for several reasons. First, as noted above, the object of eroticization is often non-specific. Just as one can enjoy a movie (say, Schindler's list) without endorsing particular characters, perhaps one can eroticize a wrongful behavior while remaining fully cognizant of its wrongfulness. This again points to the need for a more developed phenomenology of eroticization.

Second, eroticization may not be fully voluntary. If Ramona recalls her own rape experience while daydreaming, and she subsequently becomes aroused, has she really adopted an attitude? Isn't it more accurate to say that she has experienced a *reaction* to a stimulus (and an uninvited stimulus at that)? Insofar as the reaction is involuntary, Ramona cannot be held morally accountable for it. Of course, the matter is somewhat different when she is not merely daydreaming but instead perusing her local adult bookstore. There seem to be various possible degrees of participation in erotic arousal, ranging from the involuntary to the deliberate. It is toward the latter end of the spectrum that one begins to suspect a pro-attitude.

Yet even if Ramona's arousal is deliberate, there is still another defense she can marshal—especially given her status as a survivor of rape. Is it not possible that in eroticizing wrongful activities, those who pursue naughty fantasies thus rob these activities of their wrongfulness? I have in mind the kind of transformation intended when (for example) gays use the word "queer" or Jews make jokes about the Holocaust—Mel Brooks's musical comedy *The Producers* being a brilliant example of the latter. Of course, these sorts of reclamations raise troubling questions of their own. But they also raise the helpful suggestion that the solution to the naughty-fantasies dilemma lies in areas having very little to do with sex.

One final point: although I have tried to focus on a non-consequentialist argument here, one might wonder whether consequentialism is lurking behind the intuitions driving that argument. For it is possible that people believe that it is wrong to eroticize wrongful activities because they cannot shake the suspicion that those who do so are more likely to engage in wrongful behavior, stipulations to the contrary notwithstanding.[6] Such is one of the pitfalls of philosophical thought experiments. Moreover, it

should be noted that there *are* important consequentialist arguments surrounding this issue, *on both sides.* (One could, for example, point to the negative effects of suggesting to people that it would be morally wrong for them to dwell on fantasies that are otherwise largely involuntary.) A fuller treatment of naughty fantasies would need to address these concerns. In this paper I have attempted to lay some groundwork for further philosophical investigation.[7]

Notes

[1] Patrick Hopkins, "Rethinking Sadomasochism: Feminism, Interpretation, and Simulation," *Hypatia* 9:1 (1994), pp. 116-41.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 198

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 197

[4] For a defense of a non-instrumentalist understanding of the virtues see Walter Schaller, "Are Virtues No More Than Dispositions to Obey Moral Rules?" *Philosopha* 20 (July 1990).

[5] Notice that if one adopts the virtue-ethics understanding of the first premise it is no longer true *a priori*, since the virtues are learned through experience.

[6] I am indebted to Alastair Norcross for raising this point.

[7] I am indebted to Robert Card, Alessandro Giovannelli, Herbert Granger, Mark Huston, Bruce Russell, Robert Titiev, Susan Vineberg, and various participants in the Sixty-third Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society for helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.