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# Teaching good sex: The limits of consent and the role of the virtues

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## Abstract

I offer an account of sexual ethics, and thus of an education in sexual morality, that tries to make some sense of how a view of consent as central to those ethics might be combined with an education in certain virtues. I do so by exploring what some see as the shortcomings of a standard of consent, namely, how it can deal with instances of prima facie bad sex. I consider and reject various attempts to show that consensuality is sufficient for morally good sex. I then show how a needed supplement to the standard of consent can appeal to a broader view of why consent matters. This in turn connects to those personal and interpersonal virtues that the 2019 Department of Education guidance on relationships and sex education suggests should be taught. Finally, I provide an account of why more than consensuality is needed in the case of sex. In short, I insist on the critical importance of consent but supplement the standard of consent by an appeal to why consent matters and does so especially in the case of sex.

## KEYWORDS

autonomy, coercion, consent, deception, ends, virtue

## INTRODUCTION

For those philosophers interested in the ethics of sex and what it might mean to teach about morally good sex, the 2019 Department of Education Guidance on relationships and sex education (hereafter 'the Guidance') is a somewhat confusing mixture of recommendations. Let me explain. At one point, it is stated in summary that '[t]he aim of RSE is to

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give young people the information they need to help them develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds, not just intimate relationships. ... It should teach what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relationships' (Department of Education, 2019, para 69).

Clearly, and rightly, young people need information as to what is safe, healthy and sensible behaviour in intimate relationships. However, teaching what is *morally acceptable* in those relationships is distinct from teaching what is prudent. Moreover, doing this is also not simply a matter of transmitting information understood as the command of relevant facts. Crucially, the Guidance acknowledges this and sets itself to ensure that young people acquire and display certain moral qualities of character. The Guidance mentions resilience, courage, confidence, self-esteem and integrity, which are virtuous traits of the individual. The attributes of generosity, sensitivity, honesty, trustworthiness and kindness mentioned characterise good relations to others. These are recognisable personal and interpersonal virtues, and it might thus appear that the appropriate education is one of instilling those virtues.

Yet, what then of consent? For philosophers who write on sex, consent is critical. Indeed, for many of them, consent is the only relevant standard of what is morally acceptable. However, the Guidance seems to think of talk about consent differently. For example, it asserts that by the end of the secondary level, pupils should know about consent, what it is, 'how people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn'. Interestingly, this set of requirements is listed under the tab labelled 'Being safe'. They should also learn what the law says about consent. This seems right inasmuch as the law of sexual offences in England foregrounds a principle of consent. Sexual assault and rape are acts to which the victim of these offences does not consent (Sexual Offences Act, 2003, §§ 1–4). In this view, young people need to know about consent only in order to do what is lawful and to be protected from certain harms. That view is at some distance from the standard philosophical account of sexual morality.

In what follows I want to offer an account of sexual ethics, and thus of an education in sexual morality, that tries to make some sense of how a view of consent as central to those ethics might be combined with an education in certain virtues. I shall do so by exploring what some see as the shortcomings of a standard of consent and suggesting how a broader view of why consent matters connects to the virtues that the Guidance suggests should be taught. In short, I want to insist on the critical importance of consent but supplement the standard of consent by an appeal to why consent matters and does so especially in the case of sex.

## THE LIBERAL ORTHODOXY

The problem that I want initially to identify and discuss is how consent figures in the account of acceptable sexual behaviour. For many moral and legal philosophers who write on the morality of sex, consent is critical in specifying what is morally permissible. Hence, we should teach young people about consent because consensuality is the key to acceptability. A good example is provided by Jan Steutel and Doret de Ruyter (2011). The article considers previous UK government guidance on RSE from 2000 and argues that any guidance should be for compulsory sex education. Pertinently, it also argues that a *liberal* sex education should be compulsory, such an education being based on a liberal sexual ethics. Its two constitutive principles are those of sexual self-determination and valid consent: Each adult should be free to make their own sexual choices, and any sexual choice is permissible so long as the consent of all involved is secured.

This is a familiar view of sexual morality, one we could name 'the liberal orthodoxy' whose application to various domains of sexual activity is discussed in key surveys (Archard, 1998; Primoratz, 1999). Its appeal lies in the fact that it conforms to liberal principles more generally applied whereby individuals should be free to make their own choices—of lifestyle and of behaviour—so long as they accord a similar freedom to others. It provides a ready answer to questions as to whether various instances of sexual behaviour thought impermissible on conservative grounds are immoral, such as homosexuality, prostitution and non-reproductive intercourse. The answer is 'no' so long as the behaviours are consensual. Its appeal is reinforced by the fact that the orthodoxy does not deny to the individual the freedom to

make sexual choices consonant with a conservative view. It simply maintains that such a view should not constrain the choices of others. Finally, it avoids the necessity of having to explicate and defend contentious understandings of what is 'natural' often required by a conservative account. All that is needed is consent, a seemingly straightforward concept readily applied in a variety of contexts other than sexual choice.

## THE BASIC PROBLEM WITH THE LIBERAL ORTHODOXY

Yet, the liberal orthodoxy is not unproblematic. Some of the problems arise from spelling out what we mean by the giving of valid sexual consent. But it also struggles with instances of sexual behaviour that, although consensual, do not seem to be evidently permissible. To see the problem, it is necessary to spell out the core principle of the liberal orthodoxy. This takes the form of a biconditional: Sexual behaviour is morally permissible if and only if (iff) it is consented to by all parties. Consent is by all affected persons of sufficient maturity, is informed and is voluntary.

The biconditional has two arms. One, 'sexual behaviour is permissible only if it is consented to by all parties', is unproblematic. Clearly, if sex is not consented to by one party, it is impermissible. This is the core tenet of law in liberal jurisdictions defining rape and sexual assault. However, the other arm of the biconditional, 'If sexual behaviour is consented to it is permissible', strikes many writers as not unproblematic in certain kinds of sexual behaviour. Adult incest is a favoured example. This might well be consensual but would nevertheless attract the charge of being wrong, indeed morally repugnant to many. Another example is prostitution when we can allow that the transaction for sexual services is agreed by both parties and yet still seriously worry whether it is morally permissible.

However, there is a different kind of worry, one that arises from a concern not about the kind of sexual behaviour consented to—that it is incestuous or purchased—but rather about the way in which one party behaves and the other is treated. This is the case with instances of sexual behaviour that, as forms of sex, are not thought morally problematic if consensual. Moreover, it is of direct relevance in the present context as it is a worry about the way in which many young people are observed to enter into sexual relations.

One way in which this worry is expressed by some moral philosophers writing about troubling sex concerns the manner in which one party manages to secure the consent of the other. The basic concern is one about inappropriate pressurising. The terms used convey the worry well. Parties 'coax, cajole, wheedle, importune, harangue, berate, brow-beat' the other to get sex (Conly, 2004, p. 115). They use 'wheedling, whining, [and] emotional manipulation' (Anderson, 2005, p. 352). From more popular journalistic pieces, we can add words like 'guilt-trip' and 'badger'.

For now, I want to set to one side the question of whether what one party is pressurised to do is wrong. It might be thought enough to argue that pressurised sex is not consensual and to conclude that as such it is wrong. However, the writers cited above are unhappy to argue that pressurised consent is not consent. Of course, some forms of pressure may suffice to count as coercion that invalidates consent. Yet the standard of coercion is agreed to be something like behaviour that leaves the other with no reasonable choice but to comply. Such is the case with the issuing of coercive threats (Feinberg, 1996). This is not the case with coaxing or cajoling, or any of the other kinds of even insidious and insistent pressurising.

The danger of saying otherwise is that we both improperly extend the scope of what counts as coercion and overstate the inability of individuals to make their own free choices. If the kinds of pressure envisaged are irresistible where that means leaving no possibility of refusing what is demanded, then the scope of free choice is dramatically reduced. We are all regularly subject to these kinds of pressure—not just when we engage in sex with others—and we should be rightly unhappy at the suggestion that in being so subject we are not able to make our own free choices.

Similar comments apply to any representation of those forms of manipulation that Anderson calls 'petty deceptions', including exaggeration, bluffing, finagling and the retailing of half-truths, as amounting to the deception that invalidates consent. For that to be the case—certainly as far as the law is concerned—we need outright lies as to the nature or consequences of the sexual act or as to the identity of the person peddling the lie.

But if what Conly and Anderson describe does not vitiate consent, it is nevertheless *prima facie* bad behaviour. Both are clear that there are forms of sexual behaviour that, whilst not invalidating consent, are morally reprehensible. Conly, for instance, agrees that rape is coerced sex but thinks that there are forms of sexual wrongdoing that cannot be subsumed under the heading of coerced sex, rape, even when and if the category of nonconsensual sex is appropriately expanded (Conly, 2004, pp. 119–121). Moreover, it is bad behaviour that—as we can now properly acknowledge—results in bad sex for those who are subject to it. It is thus important to note that a significant number of young men make use of pornography from which they derive a view of what kinds of sex they want, believe they should have and which they pressure young women to give them (Massey et al., 2021). The result is, for instance, the increasing prevalence amongst young people of anal heterosex, which women are reluctant to permit and which most of them do not enjoy (Marston & Lewis, 2014).

Now the badness in question—of the behaviour and of the resultant sex—would seem not to be captured by the liberal orthodoxy. Consent may be given to the sex even if not enthusiastically and even if not secured in an entirely appropriate manner. Something, in other words, seems missing from the account of morally proper sex that the orthodoxy provides; there is a gap between the orthodoxy's standard of good sex and what many would be disposed to judge is bad sex. In what follows I am thus interested in whether there is bad sex—along the lines indicated—that is not bad for being nonconsensual. In assessing the liberal orthodoxy, I shall for now presume that the sex in question and as described is bad.

## DEFENDING THE LIBERAL ORTHODOXY

How might the defenders of the orthodoxy respond? A first response insists that the requirement of securing consent specifies an obligation or duty. Good sexual behaviour may nevertheless be beyond duty, supererogatory. This is unsatisfactory. Behaviour that is not bad in the sense indicated is not excellent or superlative; it is what is required of parties to a sexual relation. Someone who pressures another to have sex they do not really want or enjoy does something wrong. They do not simply fail to do what is admirable.

Here is another attempt to understand the gap opened up between the liberal orthodoxy and some instances of bad sex. Igor Primoratz distinguishes between what is demanded by rules and what is a matter of ideals (Primoratz, 1999, pp. 168–172). By the latter, he means those personal precepts that an individual holds as to what makes their life worthwhile. It is akin to John Rawls' notion of a conception of a good or rational plan of life that specifies what is of value to that person in their life (Rawls, 1999, §§ 22, 60, 61 and 63). So, for instance, one person may hold as ideal an existence of ascetic self-denial that involves celibacy and sexual abstinence, whilst another may subscribe to a belief in the overarching importance of personal pleasure, including sexual. In this sense, an ideal is not a standard to which all should be held. Indeed, there will be a diversity of ideals. Yet good sexual behaviour is not a personal ideal as so understood and everybody should reasonably be held to whatever standard we agree does define such behaviour.

Obviously, sex can be bad in a prudential sense. It could be unsafe, risky and unhealthy both physically and mentally. What has been instanced as bad sex may be bad in this sense. Young people who suffer sex they do not really want or enjoy may be damaged by the experience. But the occurrence of those harms they suffer is not what leads us in the first instance to characterise it as morally bad sex.

There may be other non-moral forms of appraisal of sexual conduct. Of interest here is John Stuart Mill's view about 'the art of life' (Eggleston et al., 2010). Mill thought there were three kinds of practical reasons, that is, reasons why individuals ought to live as they choose to do. These were moral, prudential and aesthetic. So, as already conceded, an individual might have prudential reasons, ones of self-interest in avoiding harm, not to engage in sex at all or to avoid sex of a certain character. They could also have aesthetic reasons for avoiding sex, that it was ugly, worthless, aesthetically displeasing or disagreeable. These two kinds of reasons move an individual to make their choices in life. They do not concern others. So, for instance, imagine an individual who chooses to pursue a life of hedonistic sexual pleasure through sex with strangers that is without promise or expectation of love or emotional intimacy. They choose a life that

might be evaluated on prudential grounds as risking harms or on aesthetic grounds as shallow and without merit. If we do judge the sex in this instance as bad, it is for aesthetic or prudential reasons. But it is bad for the individual alone and for Mill morality (like law) governs our relations to others. The bad sex under question, whose badness is arguably not captured by the liberal orthodoxy, is bad because of the way one person treats another with implications for how one party suffers the resultant sex.

A final response on behalf of the liberal orthodoxy that should be considered appeals to the requirement of seeking consent and what that entails. A good example is Tom Dougherty's defence of what he calls a duty of due diligence (Dougherty, 2018). The background general thought is that doing what is morally permissible should involve forming correct beliefs about what is required and, crucially, about how to do what is required. So, if we ought only to have sex with someone who consents, then we ought only to have sex with them if we have taken proper steps to ensure that the other consents and that we can consequently reasonably be assured that they are consenting.

This seems right, and it provides support for the idea that consent must be given, and be seen to be given, in ways that meet this requirement of reasonable assurance. For instance, it provides support for the idea of a standard of affirmative consent that insists upon consent being taken as given only if it is affirmed by appropriate words or explicit acts. However, the duty of due diligence is limited in its scope. It does not require that someone attend to what the other person wants. We can, after all, freely and knowingly consent to what we would rather not happen. The distinction between agreeing to something and agreeing *with* that thing is well established and clear. The unhappy spouse might willingly if reluctantly go along with bad sex as a fulfilment of what she thinks is her conjugal duty. Moreover, the duty of due diligence does not prohibit someone from engaging in those forms of sexual behaviour—insistent pressure to have sex, petty deceptions, manipulation and so on—that Conly, Anderson and others worry about as bad but not rising to the level of invalidating consent. Indeed, the skilled seducer might behave badly but be concerned to assure themselves that consent was still forthcoming. Thus, they could behave badly without ignoring what consent required *and* do so with an eye to what remained consensual. They could recognise the boundaries between bad behaviour and nonconsensuality precisely in order to secure what they wanted, namely, the agreement of the other. So long as it is recognised that some forms of pressure are not coercive and some forms of 'petty deceit' are not the lies that invalidate consent, the seducer behaves badly but is not, and can indeed be concerned not to be, a rapist.

## LAW AND MORALITY

There is a final matter. According to the liberal orthodoxy, consent is key to moral evaluations of sexual behaviour *and* to what should be criminalised. Nonconsensual sex is morally impermissible and is (subject to familiar requirements of intent or foreknowledge) the crime of rape. Yet expressed as a biconditional, the orthodoxy is not capable of evaluating some forms of consensual sex as morally bad. Consent suffices for moral permissibility. The burden of this piece has been that this is problematic. What is also problematic for the liberal orthodoxy is the scope of the criminal law. It is unclear how the orthodoxy can justify criminalising acts that by virtue of being consensual are morally permissible. It is, of course, normal to point out that law and morality are not coextensive. Yet this point is usually made to allow that some immoral acts should not be crimes. However, the issue here is how some morally permissible sexual acts might be justifiably subject to legal sanction.

The issue is not whether the orthodoxy can distinguish between egregious and non-egregious nonconsensual acts. Sex managed by the use of extreme violence is worse than sex obtained by a threat of violence or deception. In 'The Wrong of Rape', I thus distinguished between the *core* and *aggravating* wrong of any instance of rape (Archard, 2007, p. 380). Such a distinction could be reflected in the penalties attached to those different offences. Nevertheless, the core wrong of rape lies in, and is to be explained by, the absence of consent. Consent does not come in degrees. Either it is given, or it is not. What comes in degrees is the seriousness of any nonconsensual sexual act.

Equally, we should recognise that there may be non-legal sanctions attached to sexual behaviour which is not rape. Thus, professional codes of practice are used to discipline the doctor or lawyer or teacher who has

sex with their patient, client or student. The interesting question is whether such behaviour is wrong for being nonconsensual or for the improper manner in which consent is obtained, for example, by exploiting the difference in status of the professional and the other (Archard, 1994). The orthodoxy cannot allow the former.

In sum, the difficulty for the orthodoxy in respect of the law is that we have a good reason not to restrict sexual offences to those of rape. This difficulty is illustrated by the problems the criminal law has in respect of sex obtained by fraud, especially once the distinction between fraud in the *factum* and in the inducement is made (Feinberg, 1986). Case law and jurisprudential discussions of fraud in this context seem to view fraudulently obtained sex as somehow very different from sex secured coercively. Yet, either all fraud invalidates consent such that fraudulently procured sex is rape, or some forms of fraudulent sex are properly categorised as sexual offences but not rape.

In sum, insofar as the liberal orthodoxy provides a standard of both moral impermissibility *and* criminality, it faces the problem of how legally to treat behaviours that whilst not amounting to rape should arguably be subject to sanctions in the criminal law or non-legal codes.

## BEYOND THE LIBERAL ORTHODOXY

If the liberal orthodoxy falls short of capturing what counts as morally good sex, then we need to supplement consensuality as a requirement of morally permissible sex with further requirements. We do so without being committed to regarding what is immoral but consensual sex as criminal.

One such account of doing this is provided by Lamb et al. (2021), an article that is discussed elsewhere in this issue. They defend the idea of 'mutuality', which they define as treating the other with 'loving care and attention'. They see this as a determinant of what is morally right in a sexual encounter and as extending beyond the requirement of consensuality. In other words, consent is necessary but not sufficient for the moral permissibility of a sexual encounter; mutuality is also necessary. Consent *and* mutuality are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for permissibility. But, crucially, mutuality is not implied by consensuality. If it was, then consent would be enough, as it would bring mutuality in its wake. That consent does not imply mutuality seems to be the view of the authors. However, I note that one of them, de Ruyter, co-authored the earlier cited article that defended the liberal orthodoxy as a biconditional principle, whereby consent is sufficient for permissibility.

What are we make of this and indeed of any account of moral permissibility that supplements the principle of consent? I do think a supplemental account is needed. Morally permissible sex needs more than just consent, understood in its simple and most basic form of agreeing or not to have sex. However, I want to defend the view that what else is needed stands in an understandable relation to consent. I am very sympathetic to the approach of Lamb and others that insists that consent is not enough. But I also think that there is a way to appreciate what else is needed that makes use of a richer understanding of consent and its preconditions, one that does not appeal to ideas that are, as it were, tangential to and not evidently related to the ideal of consensuality.

To see this, let me start with a key claim of Onora O'Neill. She defends a Kantian account of what it means to respect the other as a source of ends by insisting upon the minimally defined duty not to deceive or coerce the other. This is obviously consonant with the conditions of securing consent, even if O'Neill's account understands the Kantian requirement of respect in terms of possible rather than actual consent.

However, what is striking about her application of the requirement to respect the other in the context of sexual intimacy is her insistence that not coercing and not deceiving the other is not enough. She writes:

Avoiding deceit and coercion are only the core of treating others as persons in sexual relationships. In avoiding these we avoid clear and obvious ways of using as (mere) means. But to treat another as a person in an intimate, and especially an intimate sexual, relationship requires far more. (O'Neill, 1985, pp. 269–270)

The claim is defended by an appeal to what is special about intimate relationships, of which more anon. But what exactly the demand of 'far more' is remains unclear. The 'core' suggests a periphery, the 'more' suggests something additional. But what is it beyond not deceiving and not coercing that is demanded if one is not to treat the other as mere means? It is not love since her understanding of Kant clearly distinguishes between respect and love. Nor is it less clear and obvious ways of deceiving and coercing. Nor is it greater care in avoiding deception and coercion since avoiding these is explicitly stated as not enough.

The clue to understanding what is intended is to remember that what respect for the other requires of us is seeing the other as a person, as someone with ends, ends that are *theirs*. To deceive or coerce the other is to fail to do this by subordinating their actions to *our* ends. Put in more straightforward and common-sense terms when I deceive or coerce another person, I get them to do what serves my purposes and aims by ignoring, overriding or being indifferent to theirs.

Now if the point of not deceiving or coercing another is to avoid treating the other with disrespect by not recognising them as having their ends, we do not do enough if despite not deceiving or coercing the other, we fail to recognise those purposes. For what respect for the other requires is precisely an attention to these. We need to do more than simply not deceive or coerce if we are to recognise the other as someone with aims, purposes and ends.

This can be shown as related to consent in the following way. The normative power of consent is often described as 'magical' (Hurd, 1996). By its exercise—in perhaps no more than the utterance of a single word or a nod—the individual morally transforms the world, granting permission for what would otherwise breach a duty and be sanctionable. The power is one whose foundation and ultimate justification is the autonomy of the individual, that capacity and entitlement to make one's own choices of actions and of life. Its exercise demands of an individual that they have desires, beliefs and ends that can be formed, revised and acted upon. The power to give and withhold consent derives from that autonomy and protects the ends that are an individual's own.

In simple terms, it is for us to allow, to grant permission for what another does to us. But what the other does may not accord with our ends. That is precisely what happens in bad sex when we consent to what we do not really want to happen to us. For we can agree to what we do not find agreeable or agree *with*. It is a common misunderstanding, already noted, to think that consent licenses what we wish for or welcome. In fact, we can give consent to what is unwelcome and unwanted. The consent is given so long as we will what the other does and do so freely and informed of what is proposed.

The other who gains our consent to bad sex does not do what we really want. They are inattentive to or careless about or indifferent to our wants. The sex is bad for not being what we really want, and the behaviour is bad for not caring about what we really want. There is a failure to respect the other in bad sex which is not avoided merely by not coercing or deceiving the other.

## AUTONOMY AND THE VIRTUES

It is interesting in this context to see how the virtues listed at the outset from the Guidance relate to autonomy. Eamonn Callan asserts that in most philosophical writing on autonomy and how children are reared to have and to value it, there is a limited focus on the development of capacities for revision of conceptions of the good. This is because the primary concern of such writing is whether and how individuals have and can exercise autonomy, understood as a capacity of reason sufficient to review and revise one's desires and beliefs. For Callan, it is also worth attending to the value of developing those personal capacities that allow and sustain a rational adherence to a conception of the good (Callan, 2002). Individuals must be able not only to form a conception of what gives their life worth, revising it in the light of a rational appraisal of their beliefs and desires. They must also be able to confront those beliefs robustly, stick to them when they are endorsed, but be unafraid to change or relinquish them when this is demanded by what they come to know about themselves and the world. They must value not only their conception of the good but their



own capacity to form one and to change it when they see this is needed. All of this is surely precisely what the virtuous traits listed of resilience, courage, confidence, self-esteem and integrity summarise.

At the same time, an openness to—a capacity to see and acknowledge—the other's ends in life is what is meant by recognising the other as also an autonomous person. It requires understanding and behaving towards the other as someone with *their* desires, beliefs, purposes, aims and conception of the good. It means not acting on the presumption that one's own ends are the only ones or the only ones of value. It means—particularly in intimate relations—being prepared to care about what the other wants and to act accordingly in ways that do not serve only one's own wants and desires. All of this is—again—surely precisely what the virtuous traits listed that characterise our relations to others summarise: generosity, sensitivity, honesty, trustworthiness and kindness.

## SEX IS SPECIAL

Why does this matter? Why does teaching respect for oneself and the other—at the heart of the Guidance—have the significance it does for educating young people about sex? Onora O'Neill devotes a section to consent to sexual intimacy in an article that is about respect and consent more generally. She does so because she thinks, as already noted, that respect for the other demands more in sexually intimate relations than in other contexts. This is, she suggests briefly, because sex is special and in two relevant ways: first, in intimate relations we make ourselves, our desires and ends known or at least knowable to the other; second, what we desire in a sexual relationship is bound up with what the other desires (O'Neill, 1985, p. 285).

We should add a third way: sex just is a big thing in our lives. Sex matters greatly to each of us. Indeed, sex is central to our sense of who we are; it is at the core of our personhood. We are sexed beings. We are so even if we do not have sex or pursue sexual pleasure. It is not that sex is an interest of each of us, one that is more fundamental than or crucial to the satisfaction of other interests. Sex is a critical element of our identity. For this reason, unconsented sex, rape, is an assault that strikes at the very heart of ourselves. That helps explain its seriousness (Archard, 2007, pp. 387–393).

Because sex is special, failures to respect the other are especially damaging. If we want to teach young people to respect themselves and respect others, nowhere does this matter more than in the intimate relationships we can enter into.

## CONCLUSION

In teaching sex learning about consent is not enough. This was a failing of my own earlier contribution (Archard, 2000). It is certainly not enough simply to teach the facts of consent as a guard against risking being harmed or doing what the law forbids. Consensuality is key to moral permissibility. If we do what the other does not consent to, we behave wrongly. Yet, consent is not enough. Young people need to learn about bad sexual behaviour and bad sex, whose badness is not captured by consent alone. What is needed is a proper regard for one's own self and for the other. Such a regard is realised through the acquisition and display of virtues of personal character and behaviour towards the other. These virtues matter more in our sexual relations than in other areas of our life. This is because of the centrality of sex to who we are and the consequent damage that can be done to oneself and to others by bad sex.

It is important to emphasise that finding a place for the acquisition of personal virtues does not imply or require subscription to virtue ethics as a moral theory. Indeed, one can believe in the importance of such virtues whilst endorsing any moral theory. The view of the self as autonomous and as having ends or purposes that matter and demand respect also does not presuppose any moral theory, even if, on O'Neill's account, it is tied to her deontological commitments. However, there is much more than can be said here about why such virtues matter in a full account of what it might mean for anybody to live a morally good and flourishing life, and in particular an autonomous one.

What this article has argued is that consensuality is not enough for an evaluation of sexual behaviour, but that what else is needed is to be explained, and justified, by what gives that consent its meaning and value, namely, that we each have our desires, beliefs, purposes and aims. That we have such ends allows us to make choices and to give permission to others to behave in certain ways towards us. When in sex we fail to make those choices that fully accord with our ends or behave towards others without fully respecting their ends, we behave badly, in prudential and moral terms, respectively. Understanding what that means and why sex in this sense is bad should be at the heart of any education on sex and relationships.

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