

Are There Compelling Moral Reasons to Refrain from Consuming Pornography?

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Introduction

In this essay, I will argue that there are compelling moral reasons for individuals to refrain from consuming certain kinds of erotic material - material which I will call ‘pornography’ for the purposes of this essay. I will discuss the limitations of Rae Langton’s approach to pornography before showing how her insights can be used to explain how an individual’s consumption of pornography might count among the harms of gendered oppression.

Pornography and Morality

Pornography occasions moral concerns because of harms attributable to the *production* of pornography – an often-exploitative industry. However, what I will tackle in this essay is the more controversial question of the harms – specifically to women -- associated with pornography *consumption*. If it can be argued that an individual’s choice to consume pornography causes harm to women, then there is what seems like a compelling moral reason to avoid that harm and object to *not just* the pornographic industry but also the post-production harms involved in the consumption of pornography itself. This is my task in this essay. I will argue that pornography consumption is the kind of thing that *can* harm women and explain how an individual must therefore avoid consumption lest they contribute to that harm.

I will not try to argue that one should refrain from consuming *anything* that could be considered pornographic – perhaps there are kinds of erotic material that are morally neutral or “egalitarian” (Eaton, 2007, 693). I am, however, arguing that there exists *some* pornography that we have moral reason not to habitually expose ourselves to. Specifically “anti-egalitarian” pornography (ibid., 676) eroticises relations and ideals which characterise and reflect aspects of gendered oppression, particularly with representations which encourage the erotic enjoyment of the undermining of a woman’s autonomy or consent¹. -

As we will see, part of the moral equation is that one cannot easily ‘sort out’ egalitarian and anti-egalitarian pornography; the boundaries between the two are likely to be essentially contestable, open to interpretation, and sometimes even unknowable. It is important to note that my definition does not automatically reject as ‘anti-egalitarian’ pornographic representations that are not strictly equal or ‘vanilla’ e.g. depictions which involve imbalanced power-dynamics, or which fall under the umbrella of BDSM. Such kinds of representation may in fact still acknowledge, appreciate, and respect the consent of women engaging in acts even of humiliation or injury. What I am referring to as ‘anti-egalitarian’ is pornography that

1 This essay does not analyse how the consumption of pornography may harm or be ‘anti-egalitarian’ for other groups than women, such as people of colour or people who are members of multiple overlapping groups. However, I believe similar arguments could be made for avoiding consumption of anti-egalitarian pornography on behalf of other groups that are structurally oppressed.

eroticises and thus reinforces the oppression of women, representations within which consent is not considered necessary, let alone 'sexy'. The mechanisms of this eroticisation and reinforcement of gendered oppression will be further explored in this essay.

I begin by introducing anti-porn feminist Rae Langton's explanation of the potential harms of pornography, before exploring the limitations of her approach. Despite my criticism, Langton's insights can provide foundations for my approach.

Learning from Langton's Anti-Porn Feminism

"If pornography is speech, what does it say? If pornography is a kind of act, what does it do?" (Langton, 1993, 293); This is how Rae Langton begins her landmark 1993 article 'Speech Acts and Un-speakable Acts'. She analyses and opposes pornography as a kind of 'speech-act', that is, a kind of speech that performs an action in being uttered, providing the utterance meets certain conditions. Given the right circumstance, if I am the right speaker, and I have a hearer who has recognised my intention, my speech has the power to make changes to the social world. After a successful speech act, you might be newly *appointed* 'captain' or have been *invited* to a party, if the speaker is in an authoritative position to do so (Langton, 1993, 300).

Langton uses this theory to analyse the actions that are performed in pornographic 'utterances'. She argues that pornography (with the required authority) can perform the act of legitimating violence against women (ibid., 307), which is comparable to the way that a teacher's cruel joke can authoritatively *legitimate* – make more 'lawful' or valid – shaming of an 'overweight' pupil. In the terminology of speech-act theory, the *illocutionary force* of the teacher's words lies in the fact that in so speaking, the teacher authoritatively permits and endorses mockery of the student; if effective it has the *perlocutionary effect* of motivating similar behaviour in other students. Langton's central point is that in a society where women are already uniquely targeted for violence, the legitimating speech of pornography authorises endangering and oppressing women, so constituting an act of societal *subordination* (ibid., 308).

It is important for Langton that pornography does not just have the effect of legitimating subordination, fundamentally it constitutes a form of subordination itself. She explains that pornography conforms to written and unwritten conventions, *the game of sex*, in turn further legitimating its often damaging 'rules': "Just as the speech of the umpire is authoritative within a certain domain - the game of tennis - so pornographic speech is authoritative within a certain domain – the game of sex" (ibid., 311). Widespread harmful and subordinating 'rules of sex', sexual conventions, are believed to be legitimate within our society in part because pornography - as an authoritative agent - underwrites their legitimation, permitting others to re-enact its scripts and sympathise with its themes (ibid., 304).

Despite this argument's force, we encounter problems in using it for the intended purposes. Langton's argument straitjackets how we theorise about pornographic representations, stuck within the heavy

machinery of J.L. Austin's speech-act theory. Langton's argument does not provide clear conceptual resources for understanding how an *individual's* consumption of pornography is linked to the general subordination of pornographic speech. Speech-act theory was developed to model how the *spoken* language can perform actions if conditions permit: a speaker's authority, intention, and the hearers' uptake. However, the problem faced in this essay demands an explanation of how an *audiovisual* mass-medium, against the background of social conventions, works through experiences of individual consumption to constitute social reality. With pornography, we are in a situation where there is no clear 'speaker' with transparent intentions, and the experience of consumption may not be captured as completely as we wish by the terms 'hearing' and 'uptake', although to some extent there is *uptake* – adoption by hearer, or pornography consumer – if they are prone to accept oppressive ideals as a result of pornographic media which implicitly endorses those ideals.

For these reasons, I offer an alternative model which retains Langton's idea of pornography as a communicative act which goes into the constitution of social reality but which is better suited to the problem before us by taking into account how pornography can also be an audiovisual mass-medium. This allows us to capture more intuitively capture an individual's experience of pornography consumption, and the potential consequent harms.

Bond's *Romanticisation* / Pornography's *Eroticisation*

Despite my criticism of Langton's argument and its applicability, I am sympathetic to the spirit of Langton's methods and conclusions. I also analyse pornography as a kind of act that *does something* 'anti-egalitarian' - it eroticises relations and ideals that characterise and reflect aspects of gendered oppression. This *eroticisation* plays a significant part in endorsing, normalising, and thus legitimating aspects of gendered oppression, "[A]s any advertiser will tell you, making something sexy is among the most effective means of endorsement" (Eaton, 2007, 682). How does this work in practice? The example of James Bond can illustrate how media can perform oppressive actions.

In *Goldfinger* (1964), there is a scene² where our hero – James Bond – suggestively approaches Pussy Galore. Galore explicitly refuses; Bond responds, grinning, grabbing her as she tries to leave, questioning her decision. The scene continues as Bond fights to wrestle her to the ground - quite literally forcing a kiss onto her. Romantic music swells and Galore's resistance turns into a caress. We, the audience, are supposed to marvel at Bond's 'seductive' masculine power; despite resisting, Galore really did 'want it'. The film, with its cinematography, scoring, and action, has performed an act of *romanticisation* and thus *endorsement* of a paradigm case of sexual assault, exchanging Galore's would-be trauma for pleasure. This scene thus normalises oppressive ideals that could easily be internalised by any gender as acceptable masculine behaviour and obfuscates the reality of women's actual experiences of not consenting. The cultural legitimacy of the film, the film industry, and its resonance with scripts in other media lend further au-

2 This scene can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pUXH1Bye88>

thority to its legitimation of the norms and conventions of gendered oppression.

I would argue that anti-egalitarian pornography performs similar actions, except with a more intense level of *eroticisation* rather than romanticisation. Acts and relations that characterise women's experiences of sexual violence are instead consistently represented and endorsed in pornography as normal and pleasurable aspects of sex for women, even demanded of the ideal 'masculine man'. It is exactly the man's disregard for consent which is framed as 'sexy' and powerful – and as in Bond, women are often framed as 'enjoying it', even whilst distressed – legitimising victim-blaming myths and a masculine sexual culture which ignores the need for communication and affirmative consent.

The example of Bond's imposture conveys how pornography can cause harm to women through its acts of erotic endorsement, normalisation, and legitimation. I will now return to the central question, of the morality of an individual's pornography consumption.

So, Should I Refrain from Consuming Pornography?

One might say that even if pornography influences *some men* – those particularly impressionable or already prone to sexual violence – to harm women, *our own* pornographic use, in itself, can't have any effect on the harmful oppression of women. Most rational people can tell the difference between fantasy and reality, one might say – *for us* there is very little enjoyment in the anti-egalitarian, nothing that could make us act in an anti-egalitarian manner. Perhaps there are compelling moral reasons for *those* people to stop consuming certain kinds of porn – this might be admitted – but *we* would do no such harm.

In response, I want to argue that the average person (of any gender) should refrain from exposing themselves to anti-egalitarian pornography.

Iris Young writes that *oppression*, understood structurally, "refers to the deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of the often-unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes..." (Young, 1990, 41). Oppression is structurally widespread and reinforced in media such as and including pornography; we are often more vulnerable to unconsciously absorbing and repeating oppressive patterns of thought and action than we believe. Even if we are not the ones committing sexual violence, we might still enable its proliferation. We might harmfully carry oppressive biases and assumptions unconsciously in our everyday life – we may be less alert to a partner's sexual discomfort, or as a juror we may be more likely to disbelieve a woman's testimony of distress or violation, having seen it presented so often as erotic and acceptable.

According to my model, the cinematography, scoring, dialogue and action, the overall framing of pornography as an audiovisual medium – using cinematic language that borrows from and resonates with similar ubiquitous media – *eroticises* relations and ideals which characterise and reflect gendered oppression, thus constituting its *endorsement, normalisation, and legitimation*. Even as well-meaning people, this *legitimated eroticisation* has the power to reinforce and strengthen our own acceptance of the norm, the

‘often unconscious assumptions and reactions’ which constitute structural oppression.

But can't we consume media such as pornography critically? With other media that endorses harmful stereotypes or dynamics, one might recommend developing skills of critical reflection which could enable one to consume it with some pleasure but disrupt the harmful romanticisation that previously allured us. Maybe this immunity is possible for films such as Bond's *Goldfinger* but unlike other popular media, the habitual and visceral erotic grip of pornography might more easily bypass critical-reflective faculties. The consumption of pornography *as pornography* is not likely to yield to grounded critical inquiry. This is not to say that a critical-reflective approach to pornography is pointless – it may in fact be instrumental – even essential – to an ethic of *responsible* erotic consumption.

It is possible to watch pornography in a manner that is not harmful but that is critical; indeed, some individuals do not react to anti-egalitarian pornography at all in erotic fascination but instead with hurt or distress. What I am concerned with, however, is the consumption of pornography *as pornography*, a state in which it is hard to resist pornography's anti-egalitarian eroticisation.

Ought we then err on the side of caution regarding our porn use and refrain from consumption, knowing that it risks harm and the encouragement of structural injustice? Before we reach this conclusion, however, more must be said to qualify the risks of pornography consumption disposing us to behave in ways which reinforce gendered oppression and thus harm.

The Risks of Pornography Consumption

I have thus far endeavoured to argue that the consumption of pornography can dispose even the most well-meaning people to cause harm and reinforce gendered oppression; the experience of its consumption *as pornography* gives it power to eroticise anti-egalitarian relations, rendering us less sensitive to the reality of those relations within and around us, more susceptible to repeat its harms. The reader at this point, though, may still be wondering: pornography consumption *may* cause harm, it *may* reinforce our unconscious prejudices, the acceptance of sexual scripts which disregard consent, and *may* make us less sensitive to women's experience of those scripts – but can we assess this ‘may’?

Anne Eaton suggests that we should conceive of exposure to anti-egalitarian pornography as one factor amongst many in a complex causal mechanism that can contribute to the development and maintenance of ranging harmful sexist attitudes and dispositions (2007, 713). There is an array of questions here asking for research:

1. How *probable* are the harms risked in pornography consumption?
2. How *substantial* are the potential and actual harms?
3. Could there be benefits to pornography consumption (relief, relaxation or suchlike) which could outweigh its potential harms?
4. What are *my* risks?

Eaton's *A Sensible Antiporn Feminism* provides detailed discussion of how the harms of pornography could be empirically investigated. She presents an epidemiological framework for studying individual and macro-level risk factors which, combined with habits of exposure to anti-egalitarian pornography, might come together to increase the probability and degree of harm (ibid., 685-6). Interestingly she posits a 'feedback loop' by which pornography use leads to harmful attitudes, which lead to further use and so on, suggesting that possible benefits of pornography use might be overwhelmed as time progresses (ibid., p.713). She also provides a set of seven criteria by which the causality between consumption and harm could be empirically tested (ibid., p.709-10). Her work is a good start.

Following up these questions requires further empirical inquiry. The *moral* question, however, regarding the consumption of pornography³ is if we are in a situation where we do not know if we are watching 'anti-egalitarian porn' or whether we are particularly susceptible to it – and given that we are unaware of our unconscious biases or of how substantial the damage is we are subjecting ourselves and others to – we should pursue a minimax strategy and err on the side of caution: avoiding anti-egalitarian pornography and working from the assumption that in an oppressive society, pornography – at least depicting women – is likely to be anti-egalitarian until plausibly shown not to be.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is moral reason to avoid consuming pornography that could risk harm to others, and I have explained how that harm can come about. Along the way, I have shown some limitations of Langton's theoretical approach to pornography and have constructed an alternative feminist approach, albeit grounded in the spirit of her inquiry.

References

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3 Specifically, the harms concerning pornography consumption itself, and not the also important moral questions responding to the harms involved in pornography production.