Sex! Let's talk about it …

Disclaimer: *Sexual topics can be sensitive or triggering for some individuals. Our goal in proposing philosophy of sex as a topic for the Forum is to explore sex and sexuality in a philosophical framework. The aim is to engage in philosophical discourse without targeting or personalizing the discussion.*

***Brief description of the topic*:**
Sex and sexuality are integral aspects of human life. This is a broad and multidisciplinary field that intersects with many areas of philosophy. In the following sections, we will provide an overview of some key topics that are central to philosophy of sex.

One major topic of discussion is **sexual desire,** which is closely linked to **sexual motivation, arousal, and activity.** A central question is whether sexual desire is primarily a biological drive, a mental state, or a combination of both. Sexual desire can be complicated because it can be directed toward both people and objects, with motivations that may be **sexual or non-sexual**. Desire can arise not only from our own thoughts but also from recognizing and reflecting on the desires others have for us. Another important issue is how to define **sexual activity** itself. Sexual desire often serves as a key criterion for identifying sexual acts. Philosopher Alan Goldman suggests that sexual desire involves wanting to connect with another person's body and experiencing the pleasure that such contact can bring. Sexual activity, then, serves to fulfill this desire. While this definition is widely accepted, it raises additional questions: How relevant is a person's personality to the desire for their body? And if **sexual pleasure** is included in the definition of a sexual act, what kind of phenomenon does it refer to—physical, psychological, or both? ***(Joint theory of action – epistemological, action theory)***

To decide with whom to engage in sexual activities, it is essential to understand our own **sexual orientation.** This topic is closely related to a broader debate in social ontology about nature versus nurture. **Social constructivists** argue that concepts like sex (as distinct from gender) are shaped by specific historical and geographical contexts. In contrast, **essentialists** believe that all sexual orientations have existed throughout different times and cultures. Understanding our orientation also requires a grasp on our **sexual identity**. Philosophically, identity is complex and multifaceted; it can be descriptive, normative, public, or personal. Philosopher Amia Srinivasan, in her recent book, suggests that sex is not just an individual issue but also a **political one**. While **sex-positive** and **sex-liberal movements** focus on individual sexual liberation, they often overlook how our sexual desires and preferences may reflect and perpetuate existing gendered and racial power imbalances in society. Additionally, the **cultural theory of queer sexual identity** plays a crucial role in shaping how we understand and express ourselves in various contexts. ***(Politics of sex, sexual orientation, and sexual identity – ontological, epistemological)***

We can evaluate sex on a normative scale. **Good sex** involves pleasurable experiences where both partners' expectations are respected and no unwanted violations occur. In contrast, **bad sex** refers to unpleasant experiences or acts that one partner did not want. A key tension arises in how **mutual objectification** during desire can coexist with love and respect. When

discussing good or bad sex, we usually assume that **consent** was given to start the encounter. Without consent, the focus shifts to the **permissibility** of the act itself, with the prevailing view being that consent is morally transformative from impermissible to permissible We must also consider what **valid consent** means. Is having the right mental state enough, or can it be implied through certain communications? Additionally, what acts are we consenting to? For instance, does consent to kissing or oral sex imply consent to intercourse? If consent is necessary for permissible sexual activity, why do some feminist philosophers challenge this? They argue that consent becomes relevant only when something goes wrong. Catharine MacKinnon contends that consent is inherently unequal, as it presupposes a **passive and an active role**. She suggests that **rape** should be defined as any force – social or physical – imposed by a perpetrator on a victim. ***(Normativity and permissibility – ethics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind)***

As mentioned earlier, we discussed the **concept of mutual objectification** in the context of sexual desire. On one hand, both partners may objectify each other, which, from a Kantian perspective, is problematic because it reduces a person's humanity to their body, treating them as a mere means to an end. However, objectification can also be viewed from a **social perspective**, as some feminist philosophers argue. For instance, they claims that **pornography** negatively portrays women's sexuality, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Rae Langton expends this line of thought: pornography uses **language** to shape societal views of femininity, perpetuating subordination. In contrast, philosopher Thomas Nagel offers a different view. He points out that natural sexual desire involves a complex, multi-leveled awareness between two people, where both are mutually aware of each other's desire. This mutual awareness distinguishes natural sexual desire from what is considered **perversion**. ***(Objectification as separate area – feminist philosophy, philosophy of languge, ethics)***

In conclusion, the philosophy of sex is a thought-provoking topic for the Forum to explore. Given its relevance to everyday life, the philosophy of sexuality is an ideal subject for engaging members and fostering stimulating discussions within the Forum.

References

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Nagel, Thomas (1969). "Sexual Perversion". Journal of Philosophy: 5-17

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Potential keynote speakers:

Name, University	**Areas of interest**
Rae Langton (Cambridge University)	feminist philosophy, speech act theory, metaphysics
Amia Srinivasan (Oxford University)	Political philosophy, epistemology, feminist philosophy
Raja F. Halwani (School of Art Institute of Chicago)	philosophy of sex, moral philosophy, political philosophy
Jessica Keiser (University of Leeds)	philosophy of language, logic, metaphysics
Jonathan Ichikawa (University of British Columbia)	epistemology/social epistemology, ethics, feminist philosophy, philosophy of language
Karamvir Chadha (Durham University)	consent, ethics and legal studies
Tom Dougherty (University of North Carolina)	ethics of consent and rational (in)significance of action regarding the temporal perspective
(Catharine A. MacKinnon (Harvard Law School): could be fun, however she's not directly a philosopher – working in law)	*lawyer, writer, professor and activist on sex equality issues*

Relevant texts we could read:

Introduction

- Alan Soble and Raja Halwani: "Introduction: The Analytic Categories of the Philosophy of Sex", 2017

Historical

- Bertrand Russell: *Marriage and Morals,* 1929 (Chapter 20: "The position of sexuality among human values)"
- Barbara Hermann: "Could It Be Worth Thinking about Kant on Sex and Marriage?", 1993

Sexual desire/sexual pleasure

- Rockney Jacobsen: "Arousal and the Ends of Desire", 1993
- Alan H. Goldman: "Pleasure", 2016
- Raja Halwani: "The Sexual Pleasure View of Sexual Desire", 2020

Sexual acts

- Alan H. Goldman: "Plain sex", 1977
- Kenneth Mah and Binik Ytzchak: "Do All Orgasms Feel Alike? Evaluating a Two-Dimensional Model of the Orgasm Experience Across Gender and Sexual Contexts", 2002
- Natasha McKeever: "Sex: What's Love Got to Do With It?", 2016
- John Gardner: "The Opposite of Rape", 2018
- Karamvir Chadha: "Sexual Consent and Having Sex Together", 2020
- Alan Soble: "Masturbation and the Continuum of Sexual Activities", 2022
- Melissa Rees; Jonathan Ichikawa: "Sexual Agency and sexual Wrongs: A dilemma for consent theory", 2024

Consent

- Robin West: “The Harms of Consensual Sex”, 1995
- Igor Primoratz: “Sexual Morality: Is Consent Enough?”, 2001
- Catherine MacKinnon: “Rape redefined”, 2016
- Rebecca Kukla: “That’s What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation”, 2018
- Jessica Keiser: “The case for consent pluralism”, 2022
- Tom Dougherty: “Social constrains on sexual consent”, 2022

Sexual orientation/sexual identity

- Raja Halwani: “Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics of Sexual Identity: Recasting the Essentialism and Social Constructionism Debate”, 2006
- Robin Dembroff: “What is sexual orientation?”, 2016
- Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever: “Asexuality”, 2021
- Matthew Andler: “Queer and Straight”, 2022

Objectification

- Rae Langton: “Projection and Objectification”, 2009
- Rae Langton: “Speaker’s Freedom and Maker’s Knowledge”, 2009
- Shira Tarrant: “Truth Claims about Porn: When Dogma and Data Collide”, 2014
- Emily A. Parker: “Sexual Assault and Derivatization”, 2017
- Lina Papadaki: “Sexual Objectification”, 2017

(Perversion)

- Thomas Nagel: “Sexual Perversion”, 1969
- Sara Rudick: “Better Sex”, 1984
- Igor Primoratz: “Sexual Perversion”, 1997