Two Cheers for Pornography

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The existence of pornography from the earliest times and in virtually every culture attests to a remarkable universality and persistence. Of course, popularity is no proof of legitimacy. How, if at all, can pornography be justified? This question has no easy answer. Indeed, if one may judge from the controversy, consensus is far from being reached on the question of pornography. I shall suggest some things that can be said in favor of pornography, though I am by no means giving my unqualified endorsement -- hence, only two cheers for pornography. Naturally, I expect some readers to disagree with me, so I will also explain why recent objections to pornography either neglect or obscure the issues.

The Value of Pornography

In attempting to justify pornography, let's first consider its value. It will be obvious to anyone who has read Hustler magazine or seen the film Deep Throat that pornography has a limited and narrowly focused appeal. It caters to the desire to read about or view sexual display and activity. Consequently, pornography can be a benefit to those who have such a desire. By a "benefit" I mean something that is itself, or leads to, an experience which anyone who cares about himself or herself may reasonably want. Now, pornography is beneficial in a number of ways: as a means of employment, as a tool in therapy, as an escape from boredom. However, its main claim to beneficilality is as a source of entertainment and recreation -- it gives people pleasure.

What, then, are the pleasures of pornography? There is first the pleasure of viewing persons we find attractive and activity we find entertaining. And there is of course the pleasure of sexual desire itself. Closely tied to this is the pleasure of the recognition of the intention that one be sexually aroused, a pleasure not confined to pornography, but found also in flirtation and other forms of sexual play. In pornography, sexual arousal is produced by means of the reader's or viewer's recognition of the intention to produce this effect. This gives pornography a structure of reflexive recognition and thus helps to explain how pornography as a representation of something might fall under freedom of expression protection. Then there are the pleasures for which pornography is often an impetus, pleasures which have their locus in consensual sexual activity. In addition to these benefits, reading or viewing pornography can be a profoundly normative experience, causing us to consider what it means to be human. The distinctively human activities and practices depicted in pornography have, to say the
least, a certain meretricious buoyancy: they stimulate the imagination and provoke both the moral and aesthetic consciousness. They open us to new erotic possibilities, challenging us to reflect upon our ideas of beauty, normality, and sexuality.

There are, of course, alternative sources of these experiences, as well as alternative experiences. What is more, the experiences to which pornography is instrumental are by no means the sole benefits in life. But that they are benefits seems indisputable, and one could only question them by referring to other values with which they might conflict.

**Pornography and Feminist Ideology**

The suggestion that pornography is beneficial is not new, but it is one that many people are accustomed to dismiss very casually. Discussions of pornography tend to neglect its benefits and concentrate on its alleged harms. Most recently, radical feminists have argued vociferously that pornography is harmful to women, and have proposed legislation in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Cambridge that would give a woman grounds to sue anyone who had anything to do with the manufacture or sale of material she thought degraded her. These proposals have met with some success, and the momentum clearly seems to be with anti-pornography activists. I have little sympathy with their approach -- though I support the aim to eradicate anti­female violence -- for reasons which will be clear shortly. But let me note here that the assumption of a direct causal connection between exposure to pornographic materials and violence against women has not, to date, been justified by reliable empirical studies. While the preponderance of evidence fails to support any such direct causal connection, the controversy continues.

A major problem for those who advocate censoring pornography is defining terms. What does it mean to say that something is pornographic? What makes a magazine or film pornographic? How are we to define pornography? If we cannot answer these questions, how can we possibly give any meaning to the concept of pornography? According to some liberals and free-speech absolutists, this is precisely what we cannot do. But before embracing any hasty conclusions, let’s look at the way the 1970 Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography dealt with the problem. Es­chewing such highly emotive terms as "pornography" and "obscenity," they instead used terms and expressions such as "erotica," "explicit sexual materials," and "sexually oriented materials." Whatever problems this policy may have produced, it is clearly preferable to the most frequently employed alternatives. For example, in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, a collection of feminist essays, Dr. Diana Russell writes that "Pornography is explicit representations of sexual behavior, verbal or pictorial, that have as a distinguishing characteristic the degrading or demeaning portrayal of human beings, especially women." In her contribution to the same volume, Helen E. Longino defines pornography as "verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation." If we were to accept these definitions, it would seem not unreasonable to call for the censorship of pornography. The problem is that these definitions assume the very point that is being disputed by those who would defend pornography. There is a simple way to illustrate this question-begging procedure. Would Russell and Longino be willing to let conservative pro-life advocates define feminist pro-choice literature as "material that describes the violation of the rights of the unborn child in such a way as to endorse the violation"? Surely these substantive moral conclusions -- that the pro-choice position endorses the violation of rights, that the unborn have rights -- are to be established, if they can be established at all, by argument and evidence and not by verbal fiat. Similarly, since the very question at issue in recent debates over pornography is the substantive moral claim that pornography degrades women, this claim needs to be supported by reasons and not by biased definitions.

The fact that there is so much disagreement over the meanings of key terms creates problems for opponents of pornography. For example, a number of writers have insisted that there's a difference between pornography and erotica. And yet no one, to my knowledge, has been able to provide criteria for distinguishing between the two that isolates the former without threatening First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and expression with respect to the latter. Erica Jong's contribution to a forum on "The Place of Pornography" published in a recent issue of *Harper's* illustrates the lengths some will go to make the distinction. "Erotica," she writes, "celebrates the erotic nature of the human creature, attempts to probe what is erotic in the human soul and the human mind, and does so artfully, dramatically. Pornography, on the other hand, serves simply as an aid to masturbation, with no artistic pretensions and no artistic value." Note the false opposition, as if the only alternatives are art or masturbation. If pornography has only a masturbatory intent and effect, of course it should not be considered art. But why cannot pornography be artistic? This Jong does not tell us, though by linguistic device she pretends to have proved it cannot. Her view implies that "artistic pornography" is a self-contradictory expression. In consequence, when critic and novelist Susan Sontag writes in
defense of the aesthetic value of the pornographic novel *The Story of O*, she is contradicting herself, however persuasive her arguments may seem.

Such difficulties are endemic to the enterprise of defining pornography, and the reason is not far to seek. The contentions that "pornography degrades women," that "pornography has no artistic value," and that "pornography is antifemale propaganda" (Susan Brownmiller) are morally motivated. Those who propose them do so because of prior moral beliefs about how women should be treated, about the purpose of art, about the nature of sexual exploitation. Because the sharp distinctions between pornography and art are stipulations, they cannot be refuted. But perhaps the extent to which they are question-begging is now clear. Equally clear, in consequence, is that any attempt to toss a ring around pornography is bound to appear arbitrary. First, because the way we think about pornography both partially determines, and is determined by, our view of its normative value. And second, because the term 'pornography' designates a continuum rather than a dichotomy; a range of cases across a wide spectrum. At the very least, pornography involves explicit representations of nudity and/or sexual activity, and contains elements of fantasy and exaggeration. It abstracts somewhat from the normal web of human feelings, attachments, and circumstances. But any attempt to pick out one of these features as the essence of pornography is implausible. And if a whole cluster of different factors is involved, there is no special reason to think that they must all be present, or present to the same degree, in every instance of pornography. To be sure, some pornography deals in bestiality, the use and abuse of children, and violence against both men and women but especially women. Nothing in what I have written is intended as a defense of such stuff, and the presence of these elements is neither necessary nor sufficient for pornography.

If we reflect upon the basic values of pleasure, privacy, and freedom that are placed in jeopardy by censorship, it becomes clear that ideologically-motivated definitions of pornography have implications that pose a considerable risk to those values. For these reasons it is preferable to define pornography in less doctrinaire, more nearly neutral terms. I shall use the term 'pornography' to refer to materials that explicitly depict nudity and/or sexual activity in a manner usually having little or no artistic or literary value, typically for the purpose of arousing and entertaining its audience. This definition too has its drawbacks, but at least it avoids the forms of definitional bias identified above. (I do not know whether it avoids all others.) It does not make bold claims of artistic or literary merit on behalf of pornography, yet it does not rule out the possibility that there is, or can be, genuinely artistic pornography.

**Sex and Ideology**

Any assessment of pornography ultimately must confront our attitudes about sex. A great deal is made by feminists, in particular, about the attitudes towards sex and women embodied in pornography. Since those who attack pornography are, alas, often as doctrinaire about sex as they are about pornography, some clarification is in order. But first we need some background.

Radical feminists are prone to see such disparate activities and practices as fashion, science, prostitution, marriage, and pornography as expressions of male hostility and contempt and thus as manifestations of male oppression. Bound up with this tendency is another which, while not essential to feminism, is often found in tandem with it. Some feminists tend to argue *a priori*, ignoring empirical evidence and insisting that whatever the facts concerning, for example, exposure to pornography and violence, pornography is intrinsically bad. Now, when *a priori* arguments are put forward as if they were empirical, as sometimes happens under the pressure of ideological consistency, the result can be arguments designed to confirm what the arguer already "knows" to be necessarily correct. Let's consider an example from the work of Ann Garry, a philosopher who regards pornography as morally objectionable on the grounds that it degrades women. In her article on "Pornography and Respect for Women," Garry considers whether it is possible to have pornography with nonsexist, morally acceptable content. She believes there is nothing in the concept or definition of pornography to rule out such a possibility. "Nonsexist pornography," she writes, "could show men and women in roles equally valued by society. Characters would customarily treat each other with respect and consideration. There would be no attempt to treat men or women brutally or thoughtlessly." Nevertheless, Garry thinks such nonsexist pornography would still degrade women. Why? When we can imagine a film in which the main character is a high ranking female Army officer treated with respect by both men and women, whose various sexual encounters are explicitly depicted. Or consider a film in which the protagonist is a female urologist who diagnoses illnesses brilliantly, treats patients with great sympathy, and also has sex with them (these examples are Garry's). "But is the content of such a film," Garry asks, "morally acceptable if it is shown to a typical porno audience today?" Her answer is that "an audience of today is likely to see the 'respected' urologist and Army officer as playthings or unusual prostitutes — even if our intention in showing the film is to counteract this view." You see, Garry knows in advance of any empirical evidence
what a "typical" porno audience is like and what their reaction will be. This question is not settled by precise observation and testing; rather, her theory dictates *a priori* the answer she must give. Thus, Garry does not consider the possibility that the "typical" audience for pornographic films today consists of heterosexual couples who rent "adult" (X-rated) videocassettes for viewing together at home.

I could cite other examples of this retreat to the *a priori*, but instead let me quote Susan Brownmiller, who reduces this kind of thinking to absurdity. "But does one need scientific methodology in order to conclude that the antifemale propaganda that permeates our nation's cultural output promotes a climate in which acts of sexual hostility directed against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged?" The disturbing feature of responses like these (as, in fairness, Garry herself points out) is that they raise the suspicion that it would be beside the point to look for empirical evidence against them, for their authors give every appearance of intending to provide, *whatever the facts may be*, accounts that will *obviously* eliminate from consideration any attempt to defend pornography.

With this background, it is perhaps easier to understand how the theme of male oppression actually functions in much radical feminist polemic. It is meant both to explain various institutions, activities, and practices, and to condemn them. In her examination of radical feminist social and political philosophy, Alison M. Jaggar makes this quite clear: "Contemporary radical feminists...now perceive most social interaction between women and men as some form of "prostitution." Thus, they believe that almost every man/woman encounter has sexual overtones and typically is designed to reinforce the sexual domination of men." Brownmiller, Jaggar, Garry, and others thus speak as though "prostitution is the archetypal relationship of women to men"; that "pornography by its very nature requires that women be subordinate to men and mere instruments for the fulfillment of male fantasies"; and that "to treat a woman as a sex object is automatically to treat her as less than fully human."

Rather than try to survey all the considerations that have been put forward for these claims, let's consider the main point of one recent and influential attempt to support the feminist anti-pornography position. The work of Ann Garry, already referred to, is representative. "As long as sex is connected with harm done to women," she writes, "it will be very difficult not to see pornography as degrading women." Garry supports this astonishing view with a complicated argument which focuses on language. She claims that the words we use in our thinking and speaking about sex are "harm-linked" words. Now, since words like 'fuck' and 'screw' can be used to indicate harm, it would appear that our conception of sex is one in which, in Garry's words, "the active male screws, harms, the passive female." Garry is quite correct to observe that some of the vocabulary of sex can be used to indicate harm: someone may express hostility by yelling "fuck you," or convey the idea that he or she was taken advantage of by speaking of "getting screwed." But such words are hardly the only ones we have for speaking about sex. It seems unlikely that a sensitive and literate speaker of English would choose "fuck" or "screw" as his preferred ways of referring to sexual intercourse. But even if he did, we would need to know a great deal about his intentions, background beliefs, and circumstances before we would be entitled to conclude that he thought about sexual intercourse in terms of harming women. The feminist argument is seriously flawed in its overemphasis on the context of harm in which sexual language is sometimes used and its neglect of other contexts. Their account founders on the reductive impulse to see everything as a manifestation of a single, universal phenomenon, male oppression.

**Conclusion**

To return to the theme which gives the title to this essay. In recent years, pornography has been a topic of discussion in connection with questions of censorship; or as an expression of male hostility and contempt for women; or as an example of the commercialization of sex; or as a consequence of the weakening of the family unit or the decline of intimacy in technological society. But the question of the benefits of pornography has interest in its own right, and needs to be more widely discussed. The idea expressed here, that pornography is instrumental to experiences which any person may reasonably want, suggests that the dismissive attitude many people take toward pornography may well be mistaken. Indeed, when we contemplate those things that are placed at risk by censorship, we may find ourselves driven to the conclusion that our cavalier treatment of pornography is indefensible.

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