

# A Philosophical Examination of Porn

Some months ago, Intellectual Takeout [blogged](#) thus:

*“From a philosophical standpoint, the following seems to be the case:*

*For those who believe pornography is intrinsically evil, the onus is on them to explain how its use does not accord with the proper telos, or goal, of human sexual activity.*

*For those who believe pornography is a matter of temperance, the onus is on them to explain how its use can correspond to the proper telos of human sexual activity, for (in the tradition of Aristotle) temperance involves a right use of pleasurable activities that are good.*

*And if you think that there is no proper telos to sex, I suppose there’s no point in having the debate at all.”*

For those unfamiliar with Greek and/or philosophy-speak, the word *telos* means ‘end’ as in ‘goal’. If you don’t think sex has a goal or purpose, then debate about its purpose does seem pointless. You will take the view that the means by which one seeks sexual stimulation is nobody’s business, as long as nobody “gets hurt” who doesn’t actually want to get hurt.

But at the very least, there should be a discussion. For the aforesaid view is not merely false; hardly anybody actually believes it.

For one thing, everybody who hasn’t chosen to forget it knows that the biological purpose of sex is reproduction. From that standpoint, the purpose of sexual pleasure is to get us to make babies. Is it adaptive, from an evolutionary point of view, to separate sexual pleasure so completely from

reproduction that the latter becomes altogether superfluous? I know of no serious argument that it is, and I can think of more than one reason why it is not.

But rather than explore those reasons, I pose the following question: Does porn make people more or less likely to relate well to their partners?

In part, of course, the answer depends on what is meant by 'well'. If you think relating well consists in getting your partner(s) to do the kinds of sexual things that many people enjoy viewing as porn, then the answer is that porn use makes it more likely that one will relate well sexually to one's partner(s). But of course, it matters whether the partner freely agrees or not, and it also matters whether, if they do so agree, the relationship is thereby strengthened overall. If the partner does not so agree, then they are being abused. If they so agree but the health and strength of the relationship is not thereby enhanced, then each person is merely using the other.

Now there are people who claim not to mind that. Some of them are doubtless sincere. But again, I know of no serious argument that either individuals or society benefit from the attitude of people who see nothing wrong with using each other (sexually or otherwise) as opposed to treating each other as *persons* who, merely as such, are valuable for their own sake. Just using each other is not love; treating each other as persons valuable for their own sake is the baseline of love, of which we can all agree there needs to be more.

If you find that a bit too morally earnest and unsexy, ask yourself this: Does regular porn use, on average, even promote good sex? A few years ago writer Naomi Wolf, no prude herself, [answered emphatically in the negative](#) in a piece for *New York Magazine*. And she's got plenty of research to back her up. You can find a quick-and-easy summary of that [here](#), but the peer-review literature in the same vein is growing rapidly.

Pornography is sometimes classified in the genre of “erotica.” But if, as some such as Wolf claim, porn is addictive and inhibits sex with real partners, it’s almost as if porn defeats the purpose of *eros*.

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