LET'S TALK ABOUT THE BIRDS, NOT THE BEES: SEX EDUCATION FOR A FLOURISHING LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Just as math and history classes aim to prepare students to do math and history well, sex education must prepare students to participate in good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing. I reject David Archard's autonomy-centered view of sex education because it fails to address deeply ingrained social inequalities. I deny Paula McAvoy's mutuality-centered view of sex education because mutuality and consent are not sufficient for good sex. I draw on Quil Kukla's work on sexual negotiation and claim that for sex to be good, we must engage in communicative sex that goes beyond consent. Therefore, sex education should not only instruct students how to avoid bad sex, but also enable students to participate in good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I evaluate two views of aims for sex education.[1] I start by describing David Archard's position that in liberal democratic nations, sex education ought to centrally focus on choice. My main focus is his claim that sex education ought to ensure that students make informed decisions about sex that promotes their autonomy. Then, I elucidate Paula McAvoy's claim that choice is an insufficient aim and instead, we must prioritize educating students about background inequalities in order to promote a gender egalitarian society. While McAvoy considers autonomy an important aim of sex education, she does not think it is the only aim. I argue that neither Archard nor McAvoy develop an adequate theory of sex education.[2] Sex education does aim to give students the tools to make autonomous decisions and to participate in sexual choices that promote equality, but these are not the only aims sex education should advance. Therefore, I argue that, just as math and history classes aim to prepare students to do math and history well, sex education must prepare students to participate in good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing.

II. AUTONOMY-PROMOTING SEX EDUCATION

Let us begin with David Archard's autonomy-based sex education. Archard wrote in response to then recent increases in pregnancy, unwanted sex, and STI rates among teenagers in Britain during the late 1990s.[3] He references former Prime Minister Tony Blair's comment in the "Social Exclusion Unit's Report on Teenage Pregnancy" that those who have sex prior to age sixteen "lack the knowledge or confidence to say no, or not yet."[4] Teenagers are also ignorant about contraception, sexual health, having children, and relationships, and have ambiguous information about sex.[5] Therefore, teenagers need to be educated regarding sexual and reproductive health and relationships. There is evidence that teaching sex education does not cause students to become

1 While my argument applies to liberal democracies, it is important to note that my own experience comes from sex education in public high schools in the United States.

2 While I focus on Archard's liberal sex education and McAvoy's mutuality sex education, note that other variations of sex education could exist. Abstinence-based sex education is another form that aims to enable students to delay sex until they are married. Additionally, within all frameworks of sex education there will be divergence in how it is actually taught in schools and received by students due to region, school size, teacher competence, and media, to name a few.

3 David Archard, *Sex Education* (London: Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2000), 4.

4 Archard, *Sex Education*, 5.

5 Archard, *Sex Education*, 6.

sexually active and, contrary to popular belief, teaching sex education actually can make students wait to have sex until later in life.[6] Schools then ought to provide sex education due to "the resources, the training, and the commitment to a common curriculum, which the home lacks."[7] Schools providing sex education "would do much to meliorate the current bad consequences of precocious sexual activity, precisely by making young persons aware of the sexual choices open to them and of the consequences of these choices."[8]

Archard claims that schools should provide sex education, but what should this sex education look like? Archard positions sex education as just one part of a broader liberal education. Liberal education, according to Archard, "must help to create individuals who can make free, autonomous choices as to how they want to lead their lives. It should maximize the opportunities and capacities of individuals to exercise their own free choices."[9] Due to the potential adverse effects of sex, students ought to be informed about their sexual and reproductive health. Furthermore, since sex has the potential to strengthen or limit autonomy, sexual education is a vital part of liberal education. If the aim of liberal sex education is achieved, then "young persons should be supplied with enough information to make informed, considered choices, taught to make their own choices, and choice should be accorded a central role in the legitimation of sexual conduct."[10] Therefore, choice is the key aim of a good sex education.

Of course, Archard does not claim that just any sexual choice is morally permissible, and he does place limits on what should be promoted through a liberal sex education. For example, sexual activity that harms others is morally impermissible. Other sex, such as sex that results in unwanted pregnancy, could be morally impermissible, but it is also negative due to the unintended consequences. He claims that "whatever is consented to by those capable of giving their consent and which harms no-one else is morally permissible."[11] He endorses a liberal understanding of sexual morality by including a variety of sexual behaviors that constitute morally legitimate sex. In liberal democracies, people disagree about how to live, and the state should refrain from taking sides among reasonable people who disagree. States ought to give citizens freedom to make whatever choices they please as long as those choices do not harm others. Liberal sex education promotes the same end by solely critiquing harmful sexual behaviors and

6 Archard, *Sex Education*, 7.

7 Archard, *Sex Education*, 7.

8 Archard, *Sex Education*, 42.

9 Archard, *Sex Education*, 37.

10 Archard, *Sex Education*, 2.

11 Archard, *Sex Education*, 41.

remaining neutral on what constitutes good sex. He argues that, "No particular form of sexual activity should be recommended, celebrated, or promoted. It is the liberal ideal of sexual autonomy that should be promoted."[12] Gay sex, for example, must not be denigrated as an improper or immoral sexual choice. Rather, students must learn to have respect for other's liberty and make choices of their own. Furthermore, liberal sex education is centrally focused on giving students the ability to make autonomous sexual choices that do not cause harm.

I reject Archard's view because of its sole focus on autonomy. As we'll see in the following section, Archard's argument fails to address deeply ingrained social inequalities that may create barriers for some to exercise autonomy. Only focusing on autonomy and choice does not properly equip students to have healthy and flourishing sexual lives. One may engage in consensual sex that still goes poorly. We'll return to this point later. Therefore, I contend that while Archard's view is insufficient, I do not fully endorse McAvoy's view either.

III. MUTUALITY/EQUALITY PROMOTING SEX EDUCATION

McAvoy argues that enabling students to make good choices is an insufficient aim for contemporary sex education curriculum. Her argument responds to Archard's view of liberal sex education. She claims, "(1) given the existence of gender inequality, choice making cannot be the legitimating feature of sexual conduct; and (2) teaching young people to be more autonomous in their sexual behavior exacerbates rather than ameliorates gender inequality."[13] Given the background features of the contemporary world, emphasizing choice making is not the only important aim for sex education curriculum. Furthermore, centralizing choice making is not only reductive, but also perpetuates deep gender inequalities that relate to our sexual lives.

McAvoy broadens the purview of what constitutes sexual conduct. She believes that sexual behavior encompasses not only explicitly sexual conduct, but also activities such as sending or receiving nude photos, clothing choices, and any other behavior related to one's sexual expression.[14] Under this view, penetrative penile-vaginal sex, masturbation, kissing, the way one does their makeup, one's eating or exercise habits, engaging in fellatio or cunniligus, watching pornography, and many other actions are sexual. To elucidate the claim

12 Archard, *Sex Education*, 43.

13 Paula McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education: Demoting Autonomy and Promoting Mutuality," *Educational Theory* 63, no. 5 (2013): 487, 10.1111/edth.12036.

14 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 487.

that sexual behavior is broad, McAvoy describes two cases in which no sex occurs, but it seems that the agents are participating in behavior that interests sex educators.

First, she outlines the story of Phoua, a Hmong American teenage girl living in the Midwest.[15] Once she finishes high school, Phoua's parents have arranged for her to marry a local Hmong boy, whose family is financially better off than her own. Zaj, the boy she is set to marry, sees Phoua talking to a different boy at a school and gets so jealous that he tells his parents he wants to marry Phoua immediately. According to Phoua's parents, she needs to get married to Zaj and move in with his family even though she "does not want to get married now and would prefer a 'love match' later in life."[16] Phoua gets married to Zaj because she wants to be a "good Hmong daughter."[17]

Second, McAvoy retells the story originally witnessed by Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*.[18] Levy observed a scene filmed by *Girls Gone Wild* in which young women participated in a "sexy position contest." During the contest, two young women were chanted at to "take it off," then booed when they did not remove their clothes. The spectators of the "sexy position contest" were mostly young men. The crowd was only appeased when one young woman poured beer on the other woman's head and chest.[19]

According to McAvoy, these cases show us that young people participate in a broad range of activities that express their sexual lives. Phoua's case shows two young people entering a lifelong romantic relationship due to parental influence. The *Girls Gone Wild* case shows young women acting "sexy" in front of young male consumers. From Phoua and Zaj to the young women and the young men cheering, we see that all the decisions at play are externally influenced. Interestingly, in both cases it is difficult to identify which particular behaviors are autonomous and which are not. The autonomy status of these example behaviors is contentious, but McAvoy says, "To think that these women are making free and authentic choices requires one to believe that they are choosing subordination."[20] For McAvoy, both cases are examples of women "choosing" to denigrate themselves and have a lesser status than men, which is not a true choice. In Phoua's case, it is because of socioeconomic constraints and cultural norms that place women lower than men. The expectation of being a "good Hmong

15 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 487-88.

16 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 488.

17 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 488.

18 Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

19 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 488.

20 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 490.

daughter" induces Phoua's decision to marry Zaj, despite her desire to marry for love.

The *Girls Gone Wild* case shows women are influenced by commodified patriarchy in which "adolescents are bombarded by all forms of media with the messages that sex ought to be used as a commodity, that young girls are objects of desire (and they should feel flattered), that 'real men' only care about sexual conquest, and that casual sex is a sign of a more gender-egalitarian world."[21] Without the pressure of commodified patriarchy, the young women may not have participated in the "sexy position contest" nor felt the need to appease the crowd. Furthermore, the men would not have viewed the young women as sexual objects who should be demanded to "take it off." The two cases show that many behaviors are sexual and that autonomy is not always present in sexual choices.

Therefore, McAvoy argues that autonomy should not be the sole focus of sex education. She argues that prioritizing choice-making and consent does little to change background gender inequalities. Instead, she claims that

> sex educators ought to teach young people, first, to recognize themselves as sexual beings within the larger social context, in which many of the heterosexual values that are promoted position men and women unequally. Second, they need to recognize that all sexual experiences, no matter how brief, are moments of interdependence and thus require those involved to understand their moral obligations to others, including above all concern for the other's well-being.[22]

Through sex education, students must become aware of the underlying inequalities that create coercive pressures in their lives. Furthermore, they ought to be equipped to make decisions that contribute to equality. For this reason, sex education must be "part biology, part gender and cultural studies, and part philosophy with an emphasis on the value of mutual care and our moral obligations to others."[23] Additionally, McAvoy makes it clear that while autonomy is an important aim of education, it should not be the singular aim of sex education.[24] First and foremost, sex education should teach students how to participate in sexual behavior that contributes to overall well-being and equality. Given the non-ideal conditions of the social and sexual world, students must be taught to navigate the non-ideal world in order to bring about the ideal world: a society without gender-based inequality.

21 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 489.
22 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 492.
23 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 494.
24 McAvoy, "The Aims of Sex Education," 495.

As stated above, I favor McAvoy's view over Archard's because she attempts to integrate more than just autonomy into sex education. I commend the intention of creating a sex education curriculum that is more socially conscious and does not position autonomy as the only aim. However, McAvoy's view also fails, because, like Archard, she focuses mainly on avoiding bad sex and utilizing consent. Her view gets us closer towards a model under which students could have good sex, but it mainly is concerned with consent and mutual respect. As we'll see, consent and mutual respect are not enough for good sex.

IV. SEX EDUCATION FOR A FLOURISHING LIFE

Now, I offer my argument that sex education should not only instruct students on how to avoid bad sex, but also enable students to participate in good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing.

Brighouse, Ladd, Loeb, and Swift describe six capacities that support student flourishing: economic productivity, personal autonomy, democratic competence, healthy personal relationships, treating others as equals, and personal fulfillment.[25] Here, I focus on sex and its connection to healthy personal relationships. Relationships with friends and family and intimate relationships with romantic partners contribute largely to flourishing. Furthermore, according to the authors, "Successful personal relationships require certain attributes—emotional openness, kindness, a willingness to take risks with one's feelings, trust—that do not develop automatically but are in large part responsive to one's environment."[26] For many, sex is an essential part of their intimate relationships and largely influences their sense of trust with others. If a student's capacity to flourish is dependent on their ability to have healthy personal relationships, then we ought to educate them in all aspects of healthy relationships, including sex.

Now, let us examine what constitutes good sex. I argue that good sex is sex in which all participants use open communication in order to seek the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of those involved.[27] In this view, an orgasm is not required for the sex to be good, but pleasure ought to emphasized. Pleasure, in some cases, may translate into orgasm. Furthermore, there are deep pleasure inequalities that should inform how we have sex. In *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, Lisa Wade cites the *Online College Social Life Survey* which

25 Harry Brighouse, et al., *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 22.
26 Brighouse, *Educational Goods*, 25.
27 Shorten it to "For more on what constitutes sex, see Greta Christina, "Are We Having Sex Now or What?," in *The Philosophy of Sex*, ed. Nicholas Power, Raja Halwani, and Alan Soble (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 26.

shows that "in hookups men are more than twice as likely as women to have an orgasm."[28] However, in heterosexual couples, when sex involves a combination of oral sex, self-stimulation, and intercourse, women orgasm 92 percent of the time.[29] So, while orgasm shouldn't be the only goal of good sex, it is important to consider the socially constructed inequalities surrounding pleasure. Good sex may not involve an orgasm for any participant, but full consideration of the participants' pleasure ought to be prioritized.

A short note on bad sex: I distinguish bad sex from morally impermissible sex. Morally impermissible sex involves numerous behaviors which in common language we would not call sex—rape, sexual assault, and other various types of sexual coercion. Bad sex, on the other hand, is morally permissible, but does not achieve the ends discussed above. To illustrate, consider the following example. Ari and Fred meet through mutual friends at a bar. At the end of the night, Ari asks Fred if he wants to come back to her apartment. Fred says "yes," and they leave the bar. Once at Ari's apartment, they start having sex. Both Ari and Fred consent to having vaginal sex; that is, they both say "yes" to having vaginal sex. Ari and Fred are both considerate towards each other throughout their sexual encounter. Ari, however, knows that she is not going to have an orgasm, and so when Fred orgasms, she pretends she does too. Ari and Fred engaged in consensual sex where mutual respect is present, yet it still seems like something went wrong. Namely, Ari was unable to actively communicate her sexual desires to Fred; her sexual pleasure was neglected because of a failure for each partner to communicate honestly.

According to Quill R. Kukla, writing as Rebecca Kukla, "Consent, including completely autonomous, unmanipulated consent, is never going to be sufficient to make sex go well—we can consent to all sorts of lousy sex, including demeaning, boring, alienated, and unpleasantly painful or otherwise harmful sex."[30] Importantly, I argue that the lousy sex may be perfectly morally permissible, but not good. Therefore, good sex and morally permissible sex come apart. Focusing only or mostly on consent and mutual respect within a sex education curriculum does not give students the tools to have good sex. Kukla reiterates my claim that consent and mutual respect are insufficient for good sex. They also say

> Sexual health requires the effective ability to avoid and refuse sex...But it also requires the ability to explore and pursue our desires and control our sexual narrative, which in turn enables us to take pleasures in our bodies and to pursue activities and relationships that enhance our flourishing... We try to teach teenagers and college students about the dangers of sex and the wrongs of rape, but we don't systematically train them to use language to enable pleasure, agency, and sexual possibilities.[31]

28 Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 158-159.

29 Wade, *American Hookup*, 160.

30 Quill Kukla, "That's What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation," *Ethics* 128, (2018): 72, 10.1086/698733.

In Kukla's view, equipping people with the ability to negotiate with their partners regarding their desires and pleasure enables them to have good sex. Their argument dives deeply into distinctions within philosophy of language which I do not have the ability to cover here. What is important for our purposes is their claim that sexual communication is nuanced and often requires more than just a "yes" or a "no." For sex to be good, we must engage in communicative sex that goes beyond consent. Therefore, Kukla and I both contend that we ought to promote good sex rather than simply avoid bad sex (though avoiding bad sex is important, too).

Educating students to have flourishing sexual lives includes giving them tools to make autonomous decisions and teaching them about unequal social conditions. It also must give them an understanding of mutual respect, reproductive anatomy, STIs, pregnancy, and contraception. But it must also do more; specifically, sex educators must instruct their students that consensual sex is not the absolute. The current rhetoric surrounding informed consent positions it as the gatekeeper to sex. This is to say, once consent is established, the participants have accomplished what is necessary for morally permissible sex. The overwhelming focus on informed consent fails to address the many other factors that contribute to good sex. Thus, utilizing Kukla's model of sexual negotiation will add a much needed nuance to students' understanding of sex and consent. Furthermore, it will enable students to have good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing.

V. CONCLUSION

The central aim for sex education should be enabling students to have good sex that contributes to their overall flourishing. In short, students must be taught about all the possible benefits of sex —pleasure, emotional connection, stress relief, and stronger relationships. Sex educators can integrate my theoretical perspective into their curriculum by forgoing the emphasis on consent, and instead moving towards Kukla's sexual negotiation view.[32] Therefore, my position flips the current narrative by focusing on what constitutes good sex and how to achieve it, rather than continuing to focus on the negative aspects

31 Kukla, "That's What She Said," 72.

32 See Kukla, "That's What She Said," 97 for Kukla's discussion of sex education.

of sex in sex education curricula. I turn away from the common notion of consent-based curricula, towards one that gives communication, negotiation, and pleasure priority.

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