

Pornography in High Places

Reflections on sex, calumny and human nature

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Sometimes public accusations tell us, implicitly, more about the numerous accusers than the solitary accused. What does *that* mean? Here is one recent example, explored.

Like hatred, sex must be articulated or, like hatred, it will produce a disturbing internal malaise.

- George Jean Nathan (1935), *Passing Judgements*

A lie has no leg, but a scandal has wings.

- Thomas Fuller MD (1732), *Gnomologia*

The UK, December 2017. A politically destabilising crisis. It will be largely forgotten, when it no longer has the frisson of hot news. A senior cabinet minister (CM¹) acknowledges that he had publicly lied, and promptly resigns. What was the lie that warranted this parliamentary *hara-kiri*? He had falsely denied knowledge of the fact that, several years ago, the police – while investigating parliamentary security – had claimed to have found many non-criminal ‘pornographic images’ on his computer.

Separately, CM denied knowledge of, or ever watching, this material: he said that *if* such images had indeed been found then someone else had downloaded them. This remained neither verifiable nor refutable.

Very significantly the police never brought charges, so we may assume that the alleged material nowhere involve coercion, children or violence. Probably, then, it involved nothing darker than explicit sex between consenting adults.

So why did CM lie if there was no illegality? The answers may tell us something about the man: lying expediently in the hope of surviving, *maybe* looking at sexually arousing images – both very common ‘flaws’.^{2,3} But, I think, the story tells us much more about the rest of *us*: our inconsistent and often prurient morality, our appetite

for catching others out, retributive judgement and thus scapegoating, and our denial of our illimitably complex – so confusing – sexuality.

Whether CM did, or did not, view the images is not relevant to the fact that he feared the righteous wrath that would follow any possible association with such material. Why? Some specious and avoidant explanations followed, such as ‘CM’s [alleged] viewings were downloaded on a *parliamentary* computer which should only process parliamentary work. Anything else distracts from this work.’ Maybe. But however CM was spending his time, it did not obstruct his work: he was widely respected for his attentive efficiency and colleagueiality.

This concern is not new. Eighty years ago J Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, when faced with a similar possible conflict between public responsibility and possible sexual distraction, ruefully acknowledged:

I regret to say that we of the FBI are powerless to act in cases of oral-genital intimacy, unless it has in some way obstructed interstate commerce.

In any case, other kinds of possible distraction from public office hardly ever excite this amount of moralistic interest. It is very unlikely we would unleash such a quasi witch-hunt if CM had been accused of watching – say – a TV sports channel, or reading Victorian novels while remaining politically astute and competent.

There are other judgements not being openly expressed.

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It is called in our schools 'beastliness', and that is about the best name for it ... should it become a habit it quickly destroys both health and spirits; he becomes feeble in body and mind, and often ends in a lunatic asylum.

– Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941). *Scouting for Boys*

Baden-Powell is here, with Olympian contempt, instructing boys of a century ago about the evils of masturbation. Few would now talk of this activity with such punitive harshness. Yet masturbation and pornography have many kindred features as well as a functional co-dependence: they often need one another to operate. Both directly pursue sexual arousal and relief, usually in the absence of a partner – so both may be said to become *depersonalised*, though may use personal images. In common parlance they are both *virtual* actions and interactions. Being removed from any natural context they must involve either internally reveried or externally manufactured images or sounds. So if sexual intercourse is not available to (or too fearful for) our bodies, we are likely to relegate activity to our minds. An economist might explain it as akin to 'quantitative easing', a device to help us when demand exceeds supply, a biologist might talk of a kind of adaptive teleology – a route to comfort and survival.

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We usually think of progress in terms of how technologies can better bring us speed, convenience and satisfaction on demand.

'Take the waiting out of wanting!' exulted Access, the first credit card. That was more than four decades ago. Meanwhile we have become ever-better at operating outside of slow and cumbersome considerations of natural or human context, relationships, or natural history. With such 'progress' we can, with comfort and convenience, divest ourselves of almost any understanding of our objects and experiences. We merely command the next pleasure, 'need' or experience with a tap or swipe of the finger or, increasingly, the prompt of our voice.

Aren't all these characteristics of high tech living also basic premises of pornography? Aren't we merely harnessing the tide of our culture and applying this to our sexual appetites?

We are being good consumers! Our cybergenie can service our desires without the demands of any other personal bonds, knowledge or responsibility. What freedom! *And* it helps the economy.

But Woody Allen, with typical profound jest, suspects fear urging us to shelter in our cyberworld:

The difference between sex and love is that sex relieves tension and love causes it.

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Research of sexual matters did not exist until modern times. But clearly both onanism and erotica are evident in our earliest artefacts: the first with mostly fearful

acknowledgement (eg religious texts), the latter, sometimes, with more celebration (eg Indian sculptures, Greek pottery).

Whatever research we can manage usually shows us how indeterminate and inconsistent is our sexuality. It is (we are) much more polymorphic, pleomorphic, plastic and encoded than most of us can understand and thus be comfortable with. So we try to protect and distance ourselves from our own complexity: we medically compartmentalise, religiously preach or governmentally command a less problematic sexuality. Such attempts inhabit all known human history, always managing only specious success: outward conformity is often merely a shallow mask for a much deeper undertow. Sometimes, tragically, attempts to control achieve the reverse – much like the prohibition of alcohol in 1920s USA.

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Of course a stable, faithful, lifelong, heterosexual monogamy with a symmetrically appetited partner would make for a much more stable, comprehensible, predictable, neat and peaceful world. It makes for more rational, biological sense. It is easier for us all to manage – individuals, families, communities ... even governments and administrators.

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James Boswell wrote on March 26 1763 in his *London Journal*:

If venereal delight and the power of propagating the species were permitted only to the virtuous, it would make the world very good.

This quaintly worded two hundred and fifty-year-old diary entry probably represents more contemporary orthodoxy than we readily suppose. Boswell was, I think, making two assertions. The first is that if only virtuous people propagate the species, then the likely offspring would create a better society – a plausible but dangerous project. The second is that the nature of venereal delight among the virtuous is more socially beneficent and socially consonant than the delights of the unvirtuous.

We have learned, especially from twentieth century history, just how destructive is this first notion. But we may be rather more in thrall to Boswell's second notion: that there is an equation between general virtue and adherence to current mainstream sexual orthodoxy: 'virtuous' sex. Has this ever been true? Yet we seem often morbidly fascinated when public figures fail to enact this pious equation: we continue to believe it *should* be true.

Our herd behaviour may be closer to 1763 than we like to think.

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Yet some much earlier thinkers seem to have understood the chimeric complexity of our sexuality far more than many of us do now – in our informed and liberal times.

Here is the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan in *The Critic* in 1779:

Certainly nothing is unnatural that is not physically impossible.

Even more wisely searching, and certainly much earlier, is this from the poet-philosopher Lucretius, in his long poem *On the Nature of Things*, written in the 1st century BC:

The body searches to heal with love that which has injured the mind.

Such substantial and sensitive truths will almost certainly help us integrate our sexuality far more than Baden-Powell's lofty denunciations, or the forensic hunting of CM. Such better insights can further our intelligent kindness, but many problems remain. For example, our best understanding cannot dissolve problems of sexual demand-and-supply, or asymmetry of appetite. The first is well exemplified by an unpaired person troubled by their sexual hunger: the second by a paired person now unmatched in their sexual urges or appetites – this is a common, usually secreted, problem in long-term relationships, long after the sex-fairy has flown.

Such problems are frequently unnegotiable and deeply individual: they may represent little of other compatibilities and common interests in a long-term relationship. So what to do? Confrontation tends to embarrassed or ugly impasses. Open infidelity risks the very existence of a bedrock relationship, sustaining family and social networks, and – eventually – one's legacy: if not legally, then morally or reputationally.

With such dilemmas it is hardly surprising that many choose a furtive route of displacement: onanism, prostitution and erotica/pornography. And, given the sometimes ruinous or erosive consequences of more 'moral' or 'honest' approaches,

are these displacement activities often not the most beneficent compromise?

Paradoxically, may they not – sometimes – serve a greater good?

Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.

– George Herbert (1640), *Jacula Prudentum*

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And what of our distinctions between erotica and pornography? The novelist Isobel Allende has this to say:

Erotica is using a feather, pornography is using the whole chicken.

So Allende perceives a quantitative difference becoming fundamentally qualitative. This illustrates another principle of perennial truth, now increasing, in our era of exponential mass production: ‘more of something good isn’t always better’. Indeed we are accumulating hard lessons in how industrialising what seems to be cleverly expedient will often make other matters much worse. Human beings are unique amongst nature’s species in not knowing when to stop. Our gathering environmental debacle is an obvious example. Is our increasing consumption of pornography a parallel, ‘softer’ equivalent? When is our problem one more of aesthetics than ethics? If it is aesthetic we can, perhaps, be well-guided by this liberal pragmatism:

My dear, I don’t care what they do as long as they don’t do it in the street and frighten the horses.

– Beatrice Stella Tanner, 1865-1940

Except, of course, it is not horses that fear such errant complexity, but humans.

CM knows the hidden power of this: if it were not for such tangled fear, his long public service would probably have continued.

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Notes

1. The senior cabinet minister was frequently named while in the public spotlight for the few weeks around his resignation. He is here coded as 'CM' as this analysis is not primarily concerned with him, but with how others reacted to matters that were both merely alleged and, in any case, not illegal. CM is thus here dealt with as a catalyst and a magnifying glass in relation to larger social phenomena.
2. Many and repeated experiments show that many more people will lie expediently than will admit to doing so in either questionnaires or 'candid' anonymised interviews. The liar-deniers comprise most of the population (eg us).
3. Pornography consumption accounts for an enormous fraction of internet traffic and generated revenue: this can be electronically measured. Less direct or accurate quantitative investigation is possible with the more vernacular masturbation, prostitution and other forms of pornography. Such studies always portray much greater frequency and prevalence than can be deduced from all but the most intimate (so unrecorded) conversations.

The common truth here? Our public personas are often very different from our private hinterlands.

And a consequence? Those who have such discrepancies publicly exposed are liable to be attacked, ridiculed or excluded.

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