

“Do We Have a Duty to Give Sexual Pleasure to Others?? A Reply to Professor Arthur Wheeler,” Tri-State Philosophy Association, Mercyhurst College, Erie, Pennsylvania, October 20, 1985.

Have We a Duty to Give Sexual Pleasure to Others?

A Reply to Arthur M. Wheeler

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by
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Having been teaching medical ethics for about 12 years, I have become enamored of the method of case study analysis as a useful pedagogic tool for presenting vividly the congeries of issues usually found in a concrete moral situation. Having recently read Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, I have become convinced of the virtues of presenting ethical issues in the context of narratives about individual heroes and anti-heroes for the purpose of analysis. Hence, my pedagogical and analytical predilections prompt me to start with three examples as vehicles for facilitating comment on Arthur Wheeler’s paper, *Sexual Pleasure and Ought*.”

Case 1

Carol Gino, in *The Nurse’s Story*¹, recounts her experiences while serving as a nurse in a burn ward.

. . . [W]e had gotten [a] . . . new admission . . . : Scott Silk, a young man who had fried his arms by hanging onto a hot wire as he fell from a tall tree. Both his arms had to be amputated in the Emergency Room the night of his admission. He was twenty-four years old and the lead guitarist in a band. He had been trying to rescue a trapped kitten

When I sat in the room that night, I sat next to Scott.

“I broke up with my girl today,” he volunteered. His voice was hollow in the night.

“How come?” I asked. I could see only his shadow in the

¹1. Carol Gino, *The Nurse’s Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

bed.

“She finds me repulsive now,” he said, and even though I couldn’t see his face I knew he had been crying.

“Scott,” I said, “you’re a beautiful man. How can anyone say you’re not?” He had white-blond curly hair, a thick mustache and a small, well-card-for beard. His skin was clear, and his features were so fine they were almost girl-like.

“Nobody would say that to me,” he answered softly, “but I can see it in her eyes when she stands at the foot of my bed.” There was a long silence before he added, “You should have seen how she looked when she first saw that my arms were gone. She tried, ut she couldn’t hide what she felt.”

“Give her time, Scotty,” I said, my voice almost inaudible because of the mask, and the tightness in my throat.

“I love her,” Scott said, his voice raised now. “Why would I want to give her time? Why would I want her to have to settle?” He took a deep breath and I knew he was trying to compose himself. “I don’t want her to spend her life taking care of me,” he added more quietly.

“No one is going to have to take care of you, Scott,” I said, trying to reassure him. “There’s enough of your arms left to wear artificial arms. In no time you’ll be able to do things for yourself.”

“Hey, Teri, how would you like someone to touch you with a hook when he was making love?” He laughed a small, sad laugh. “Could you handle it?” Without for me to answer, he offered, “I couldn’t.”

I had nothing to say that could make it better, so as I got up I just reached over in the dark and touched his cheek with my gloved hand

That morning, triumph and I did Amy together, then Bobby, then Scott, and then we took a coffee break. “They goin’ to graft Scott’s stumps this week,” Triumph told me. “It’s time to take the pigskin off again and use his own. She told me that they would take squares of skin from the front of his thighs, with something that looked like a cheese slicer, and place it over his wounds to try to speed the healing

“He ain’t talkin’ as much lately,” she added as she lit a cigarette. When she started to hum, I realized that I had noticed a change in him myself the last few days. He seemed angrier. And now, when I focused on it, it worried me to.

. . . between the anesthesia and the pain, Scott had finally reached the end of his endurance. He fumed at any of us whom he had to be dependent on.

“I hate being fed, I hate being washed. I can’t stand your hands in my mouth brushing *my* teeth I can’t even scratch my ass by myself,” he raged

The next night I sat in the oppressive silence of the nurse’s station, stalling, not wanting to face Scott. Harriet had said he was taking Bobby’s death very badly. He had ranted and raved all day, gotten out of bed and kicked apart the room

I kept doing busy work on the charts until I thought I heard someone cry out from the ward. I sat up straight and strained to hear; I wanted to make sure I wasn’t imagining Bobby’s cries after all those nights. But I clearly heard it again—a soft moaning.

I tiptoed across the hall and into the room, squinting through the darkness to try to see. Amy, filling the whole bed, was sleeping peacefully. Bobby’s bed was glaringly empty.

As I looked at Scott, I wasn’t sure I moved closer very quietly. Then I stood at the foot of the bed and didn’t say anything because I was afraid I would startle him.

He was lying on his stomach, moving slowly up and down. I heard him moan again. “Scott?” I called softly, and he immediately flipped over onto his back.

I walked over to the side of his bed.

“Go away,” he said, and I knew he was crying. When I reached to straighten his sheet, I saw that his thighs were bleeding profusely. And that he had a huge erection.

“What were you trying to do, ruin your graft sites?” I asked softly, pulling on a clean pair of gloves.

“I can’t do it, Term,” he sobbed, a grimace on his face. I knew he was in pain, but I wasn’t sure from what.

I tried to stop the bleeding on his thighs as hard as I tried to ignore his erection.

“I’m scared, term,” he cried, “and I can’t get it down. I’ve been trying”

I stared at his swollen penis as though it was a foreign object. “Really?” I said, because I didn’t know what to do with him.

He threw himself over onto his stomach again and started moving, but within seconds the pain was so bad that he had to

stop. When he flipped over again, his thighs were a bloody mess.

“Oh, God help me,” he wailed, “I can’t do it myself.”

I stared stupidly at him, then quickly grabbed a pillow and held it over his penis but away from his thighs. “Try that,” I said, biting my bottom lip and putting as much pressure as I could on the pillow. He tried moving frantically up and down for several minutes. Finally, winded, he stopped. When I pulled the pillow away, his penis was as big as before.

I thought about calling the doctor, but Zachary was on and I was sure that he wouldn’t be any help, would probably humiliate both me and Scott with some sarcastic response. I had no medication order for Scott, and he was obviously in pain.

“I think I have an idea,” I said to Scott, and I ran out to the solution closet. When I ran back to his bed I said, “I’m sorry,” and then quickly poured a liter of cold saline over his penis. I tried not to get his graft sites wet. He hollered and then lay shaking in the wet bed, but his erection stood as tall as before.

After I tucked a clean blanket under him I started to dry him off. “Touch me, Term, please,” he asked in a soft cracked voice. “Just this once . . . please help me?”

I drew back as though his body was boiling hot.

“God dammit! Don’t look so horrified,” he cried. “I can’t do it myself. You’ve washed me a thousand times; you’ve stuck your fingers in my mouth and up my ass for medicine. Just once . . . Just touch me once . . . for *me*?”

I quickly threw sterile towels over his thighs, said a prayer that no one would walk into the unit and that Amy was really senile, and grabbed his penis.

“Term,” he whispered, “take the glove off. I haven’t been touched since I’ve been here.” I shook my head.

“Listen,” he pleaded, “I can’t touch myself. Look at me, dammit! *I have no hands!*”

I was crying when I pulled my glove off.

Case 2

Dick Francis, in his novel, *Risk*ⁱⁱ, commences with an amateur jockey awakening

ⁱⁱ2. Dick Francis, *Risk* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977).

in the hold of a ship, imprisoned, having been kidnaped by individuals who are engaged in an insurance scam. He escapes as the boat nears a resort island, swims ashore to a hotel beach while being sought by his captors, and is concealed by a middle-aged headmistress of an English girls' school in her room. Foiled in their search, the kidnappers have left the hotel but remain in the area. This scene opens in her bedroom.

The evening air was chilly. Mis Pinlock shut the glass door against the night sky and expertly opened her bottle of Marques de Riscal.

"Tell me about your journey," she said, handing me a glass.

I told her the beginning and the end, and not much of the middle.

"Extraordinary," she said.

"When I get home I'll have a go at finding out what it was all about . . ."

She looked at me gravely. "It may not be over."

She had an uncomfortable habit of putting my worst fears into speech.

We drank the excellent wine and she told me a little of her busy life.

"I enjoy it," she said positively.

"Yes, I see that."

There was a pause. She looked carefully at the wine in her glass.

She said, "Will you go to bed with me?"

I suppose I sat in an ungentlemanly heap with my mouth open. I closed it, conscious of the insult it conveyed.

When I'd got over the first shock, she looked up. Her face was calm and businesslike as before, but also suddenly there was vulnerability and self-consciousness. A blush started on her neck, and spread painfully upward.

She was between forty-two and forty-six, I guessed. She had dark-brown wavy hair, going gray, cut with shape but not much style. A broad, lined forehead, large nose, mouth turning down naturally at the corners, and small chin. Behind her glasses her eyes were brown and looked small, probably the effect of the lenses. Wrinkles grew where wrinkles grow; and there was no glow to her skin. A face of character, but not sexually attractive, at least not to be.

"Why?" I said, which was a pretty stupid question.

She blushed a little deeper and shook her head.

“Look,” I said, “ it isn’t as simple as that I can’t . . . I mean, one can’t just . . . sort of switch that sort of thing on and off, like a tap.

We sat in awkward silence. She put down her glass, and said, “I’m sorry. It was a ridiculous thing to say. Please try and forget it.”

“You said it because it was in your mind. So . . . well . . . you must have meant it.”

She half smiled, ruefully. “It’s been in my mind, now and again, for a long time. You will find it extraordinary, but I have never . . . so to speak, slept with a man.”

“ In this permissive age?” I said.

“There you are, you see, you find it hard to believe. But I’ve never been pretty, even as a child. And also I’ve always been . . . well . . . able to do things. Learn. Teach. Organize. Adminstrate. All the unfeminine things. All my life people have relied on me, because I was capable. I’ve always had health and energy, and I’ve enjoyed getting on, being given senior posts, and five years ago, being offered a headship. In most ways my life has been absorbing and gratifyingly successful.

“But?” I suggested.

She nodded. “But. I was never interested in boys when I was in my teens, and then I thought them callow, and at university I worked all hours to get a First, and after that I’ve always taught in girls’ schools because frankly it is usually a man who’s given the headship in a mixed school, and I’ve never fancied the role of male-ego-massager in second place. Nothing I’ve ever been or done has been geared to romance.”

“So why *now*?”

“I hope you won’t be angry . . . but it is mostly curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge.”

I wasn’t angry. Just astounded.

Her blush had subsided as fast as it had risen. She was back on surer ground.

“For some time I’ve thought I ought to have had the experience. Of sexual intercourse, that is. It didn’t come my way when I was young, but I didn’t expect it, you see. I think now that I should have tried to find a man, but then, when I was at college, I was half scared of it, and I didn’t have any great urge, and I was engrossed in my work. Afterwards for years, it didn’t bother me, until I was thirty or so, and of course by that time all the men one meets are married, and in

any case, teaching among women, one rarely meets any men, except officials, and so on. I go to many official functions, of course, but people tend not to ask unmarried women to private social occasions.”

“What changed your mind?” I asked, fascinated.

“Oh, having to cope with highly sexed young girls. The modern lot are so clued-up. So brash and outspoken. I like them. But I have to arrange their sex-education lessons, and in my time I’ve even taught them, from textbooks. I feel it would be a great deal better if I knew . . . what the sex act felt like. I feel at a disadvantage with many of the older girls, particularly as this last term I had to advise a pregnant fourteen-year-old. Fourteen! She knows more than I do. How can I advise her?”

“Catholic priests don’t have this problem,” I commented.

“Catholic priests may be respected for virginity, but school-mistresses are not.” She paused, hesitating, and went on. “To be honest, I also find myself at a disadvantage with the married members of my staff. Some of them have a tendency to patronize me, even unconsciously. I don’t like it. I would be able to cope with it perfectly, though, if I actually knew what they know.”

“Am I,” I said slowly, “the first man you have asked?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled slightly and drank some wine.

“There are practically no men one *can* ask. Especially if one is a headmistress, and widely known. I certainly wouldn’t jeopardize my job.”

“I can see that it would be difficult,” I said, thinking about it.

“So of course holidays are the only possibility,” she said.

“I’ve been on archaeological cruises to Greece, and all that sort of thing, and I’ve seen other couples join up, but it never happened to me. And then I’ve heard that some lonely women throw themselves at ski instructors and waiters and men who perform for money, but somehow that isn’t what I want. I mean, I don’t want to despise myself. I want knowledge without the guilt or shame.”

“The dream of Eden,” I said.

“What? Oh, yes.” . . .

We drank some more wine.

“I’ve been here since last Saturday,” she said. “I always take a complete break straight after the end of term, and then go back refreshed for the new work.”

“A perfect system,” I said absently. “Why didn’t you . . . er . . . throw me back, when the men in the dinghy came after me?”

“If you mean, did I immediately see you as a . . . *possible* then, no, of course not. I was fascinated, in a way. I’d never seen anyone in such terror before. I watched you from quite a long way out. Swimming, and looking back. It wasn’t until you reached the concrete step, though, and I saw your face clearly, that I realized that you were being *hunted*. It would have taken a certain mentality to point the hounds at an exhausted quarry gone to ground, and I don’t have it.”

“And thank God for that,” I said.

I stood up, and opened the glass door, and went out onto the balcony. The cool night was clear, with bright stars over the ageless Mediterranean. Waves rippled softly round the edges of the bay, and the gentle moonlight shone on the wide empty expanse where the boat had been anchored. It was the weirdest of debts. She had saved me from recapture. I certainly owed her my wholeness of mind, if not life itself. If the only payment she wanted was something I didn't much want to give, then that was simply too bad. One extreme favor, I thought sardonically, deserved another. I went in, and sat down. Drank some wine with a dry mouth.

"We'll try, if you like," I said

It was the strangest love-making, but it did work. I looked back afterward to the moment when she first took pleasure in the sensation of my stroking her skin; the ripple of surprise when she felt with her hands the size of an erect man; the passion with which she finally responded; and the stunning release into gasping incredulity.

"Is that," she said, out of breath, "is that what every woman feels?"

I knew she had reached a most satisfactory climax. "I guess so," I said. "On good days."

"O, my goodness," she said in a sort of exultation. "So now I *know*."

Case 3

In the March 1985 issue of the *American Spectator*, Yale and Rita Kramer present a scurrilous review of the movie, *The Big Chill*ⁱⁱⁱ, in their "Narcissist Generation Hits the Screen: from beads to neo-Babbitry, the 1960s crowd ages." The movie is a study of a group of friends, separated since the end of their college days, who meet for the funeral of the leader of their old campus group, a one-time radical activist who has killed himself.

Of perhaps greater importance in the parable are Harold and Sarah. Mr. and Mrs. Good Parent. Harold is a saint; an affable, easygoing, handsome, modest saint. He is a patient man, accepting of his wife's demands (about which more later) and forgiving of the imperfections of those around him. He bathes the kids in the evenings and is not only an equal partner in housekeeping chores, but a business tycoon as well, the owner of a chain of stores that sell funning gear Harold doesn't seem to think about his business much. What he does think about are his friends, to whom he is not above giving illegal insider stock tips so they can make a little extra bread.

Sarah too is only nearly perfect. A mother of two, beautiful, intelligent, handsomely dressed (L. L. Bean and Bloomingdale's), generous (offers her whole house for the weekend to several friends—and that's not all), infinitely understanding, tolerant, and a doctor to boot

ⁱⁱⁱ3. *The Big Chill*, written by Barbara Benedick and Lawrence Kasdan, directed by Lawrence Kasdan, starring Glen Close, Jeff Goldblume, Kevin Kline, William Hurt, Mary Kay Place, the very flexible Meg Thilly, and Kevin Costner's wrists.

One more thing about Sarah and Harold. Somewhere along the line Sarah has had an affair with the dead man, Alex, about which she is neither remorseful nor ashamed but only rueful. Good old Harold seems to have accepted Sarah, her little peccadillo with Alex and all, another example of his greatness of heart. But of course Harold's finest hour is still to come—and we use the verb advisedly . . .

But perhaps the least opaque character is the lawyer, Meg, who know when and why she sold out (she gave up being a public defender when she discovered the criminals she was defending were—well, sleazy types) what has disappointed her most (men), and what she wants most (a child). She has made a Basic Life Decision. She has decided to get one of her old school chums to impregnate her as a favor—no strings attached. We are invited to see her, warmhearted, generous, laughing through the tears, as she is seen by her friend the doctor, den mother to them all.

And seeing this, we should understand what follows, a perversion of an universal fantasy presented as though it were charming humorous sitcom material. Doctor-mother-wife asks her husband (the idealist turned businessman) to make it possible for Meg to have that baby she's been wanting so badly. Now there's hospitality for you . . .

Okay. Why not? Women have a right to realize their life ambitions, right? And Sarah, perfect mother that she is, cannot let one of her symbolic children remain unhappy of an unsatisfied wish, and so, as though having a real baby were the equivalent of buying a Cabbage Patch Kid, she approaches Harold and in the first show of unambivalent affection we have seen from her, with real pleasure and excitement, she asks if he loves her, and will he do something for her.

Now this dippy idea is never articulated on screen, but we thought the dialogue might have gone something like this:

Harold: What?

Sarah: I said I'd like you to sleep with Meg tonight.

Harold: You mean and . . . do it?

Sarah: Of course do it—that's the point. She wants to get pregnant.

Harold: Pregnant! But then *I'd* be the father. Wouldn't you mind?

Sarah: Of course not. She's a beautiful person—so warm and loving. She needs something to love and take care of.

Harold: What about an Old English Sheepdog or a parrot maybe. Then she won't have to worry about . . .

Sarah: Don't be silly. She wants a baby—she has a right to have a baby!

Harold: Oh, in that case.

Sarah: She has so much love.

Harold: But it takes more than love . . . it takes a lot of thought and time, and bathing—a lot more bathing than you think. Besides, she's a lawyer. Is she going to quit being a lawyer?

Sarah: Quit law! Why? She has a right to find fulfillment as a lawyer, doesn't she?

Harold: I was only . . . you're the doctor—you know best. Only, who'll take care of the kid—*my* kid?

Sarah: Oh, it wouldn't really be your child. It would be *hers*. And as far as taking care of it goes, she can find a good housekeeper or put it in a daycare center. A lot of young professionals are doing that.

Harold: Then what's the point, if she doesn't take care of it?

Sarah: It's not the quantity of time, silly, it's the quality.

Harold: Well, what about the kid? Is it good for the kid, I mean, to be raised that way without a father? Didn't I read that it's bad for 'em? Boys start playing with pocketbooks and wearing garter belts and girls end up daydreaming and wondering why their dads deserted them. Gee—I don't want my kid to grow up like that.

Sarah: Anti-feminist propaganda put out by the psychoanalytic establishment. Don't believe it.

Harold: Oh, I see. Well, you're the doctor, but—I feel funny about it. After all, it'll be my kid. It'll have my genes, be my flesh and blood, look like me. I think I'd . . . kind of . . . feel attached to it . . . know what I mean? I'd think about it all the time.

Sarah: Nonsense! You're a man. Men don't have feelings. Only women's feelings are important. And she has so much love to give . . . be a good tycoon and do it for me.

Harold: Well . . . okay . . . but I feel . . . well, like an object.

While the conversation does not occur in the film, the moment of insemination does, and its depiction on screen is clearly the symbolic climax of the film. Assuming an unregenerate missionary-tycoon position over his lawyerdonee, Harold performs his manly duty. Poor Kevin Kline earns his money in this one; that sappy smile as he looks down on her will live forever in film annals. The point of this scene is to show that even though this is a sexual act it is not an erotic or passionate one, i.e., it is not an immoral act, but, on the contrary, a moral one: a good deed: like changing someone else's flat tire.

This is the end of the three case study presentations.

It is tempting to make it the end of my presentation as well, for my aim was to introduce into the discussion of Professor Wheeler's paper an expansion of his theme. For surely, if we have a duty to give mere sexual pleasure to others when doing so costs us little and offers them great (albeit brief) gain, we have a far greater duty to give the far greater or more long-lasting gains of sexual release from suffering, and carnal knowledge, and satisfaction of lifelong curiosity, and babies, if doing so costs us little.

But perhaps an additional question or two is in order.

An argument from analogy works only when the analogs are relevantly

similar. Is missing sexual pleasure relevantly similar to dying of “a highly contagious or potentially fatal disease,” or suffering “freezing cold, disease or starvation” — two of the cases Wheeler believes we have a strong prima facie duty to alleviate when it costs us little and offers others great gain?

Judith Jarvis Thomson suggests we draw the line between duty and supererogation even farther to the right, so that Henry Fonda, bless his departed soul, would not have had a duty to lay his cool hand upon her fevered brow — although it would have been frightfully good of his to do so. Perhaps what is needed in Wheeler’s paper, as in my examples and in what I hope will be a vigorous discussion to follow, is a distinction?

Finally, it is reasonably clear that each of our protagonists — Nurse Gino, the jockey, and Harold — proceeds to provide something sexual reluctantly, under the impetus of some felt sense of duty. In the first case, there is a felt duty to relieve a certain kind of suffering that translates into a duty to give a manually-induced climax when other alternatives fail. (Would the duty be as strongly felt if the nurse were male? If not, is it then only a duty for certain females?) In the second case, there is a felt duty to repay a debt in the currency requested (I don’t think it arises from some general felt duty to relieve ignorance or satisfy curiosity — the jockey isn’t an academic!). (Would the case be altered if the jockey were female, and the other were a virginal headmaster?) In the third case, the felt duty seems perhaps less clearly to be to grant a wife’s request as to sometimes fulfill the role of an object of another’s desires.

What isn’t clear at all in these cases is that there is a felt duty to give pleasure to others. I would venture to suggest that we never feel such a desire as a duty outside of stable, long-term commitments.