

The Politics of the “Good” in Good Sexuality Education

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Articulating the aims of sexuality education is a daunting challenge for philosophers of education, at least if the intention is to have some effect on educational practice. In order for a framework of aims in sexuality education to reach the classroom it must not only survive academic scrutiny about the justification of that framework, but also successfully traverse a gauntlet of criticism from politicians, parents, churches, special interest groups, and school boards. It is not surprising, then, that many philosophers of education, suffering from what sex therapists call “performance anxiety,” have shied away from the messy subject of sexuality education. (It’s not, we hope, that we’re prudes, but just a little nervous.) It is thus with considerable relief to us — and perhaps some understandable disappointment to those who flocked to hear this session — that the title of Steutel and Spiecker’s paper is more tease than truth. This paper is *not* about “*Good Sex!*” but about different kinds of questions concerning the “good” that need to be asked in a comprehensive view of the aims of sexuality education. Performative questions, yes, but only in a sanitized, Habermasian sense. Though it might have tempted us to respond to the tease of the title, we will censor ourselves and follow their purer intentions.

Steutel and Spiecker offer us considerable food for thought, though we submit that some of our more religiously conservative friends will most likely see it as forbidden fruit. The structure of their efforts, depending as it does on classic, liberal analytic moves, leads to a picture that is seductive in its clarity: if we just make the right distinctions and recognize their practical differences, the aims of sexuality education are uncovered (even if good sex itself is not). What we need to do, they argue, is first to differentiate a concern for “morally good sex” from a concern for “nonmorally good sex,” and then to utilize the “concept/conception” distinction within each concern. What emerges, according to Steutel and Spiecker, is the recognition that the constraints of the good on educational practice lead to different implications within the two concerns.

On the one hand, they assume the perspective of a “common-sense” or “garden-variety” *concept* of the moral good, as pertaining to “the well-being and dignity of other persons,” and then argue that the elaboration of a *conception* of morality will result in a finite (and internally consistent) set of constitutive substantive *principles* that are either derived from or interpretations of this concept (with little or no room for variation). This general framework leads them to the firm conclusion that, with respect to a concern for the moral good, “all children, without exception, are expected to acquire the *same* conception of morally good sex.” On the other hand, their view of a concern for the nonmoral good within sexuality education is quite different — much more formal and much less prescriptive in terms of content. Here, with the significant qualification that “all of this should remain within the boundaries of what is morally permissible,” they conclude that the aim of (nonmorally

good) sexuality education can be expressed in terms of “facilitating the formation and development of a conception of nonmorally good sex, and in particular of a conception that is the expression of rational preferences.” This kind of aim, rather than being the same for every child, will necessarily “vary from child to child,” and will also have content that is “largely *terra incognita* for the teacher.” The reason for this variation and open-endedness within this area of sexuality education is that Steutel and Spiecker understand the nonmoral good to be coterminous with views of “personal well-being,” and “the best explication of our common-sense notion of personal well-being is offered by the so-called *rational preference* theory.” Accordingly, “individual well-being or human flourishing [including well-being or flourishing within sexual relationships] is a function of rational preference satisfaction: the better we succeed in satisfying our rational preferences, the better our life will be from the nonmoral perspective.”

Now this picture that Steutel and Spiecker have drawn for us is most analytically neat, with foreground-background highlights that utilize a well-known technique for achieving admirable clarity of subject matter. If it were a bed, it would be a well-made bed — sheets tucked in, pillows fluffed, everything taunt, blankets turned down and precisely aligned—but *not* one recently slept in... and *certainly not* one in which there has been any recent sexual activity, in whatever sense of the good you want. Although we do agree that analytic moves of this sort might be useful for clarifying differences in moral point of view in the context of particular disagreements within local discussions of sexuality education (and we might even agree with some of the substantive claims), we worry that they do not serve us well in either recognizing or accommodating the larger, political dimensions of discussions of the aims of sexuality education. There are two distinct points with regard to which this worry becomes salient for us.

First, we have some reservations about a discourse that depends too heavily on being grounded in “our” notion of a “common-sense” or “garden variety” concept of morality. Just who is the “we” that is being assumed here? Given the remarkable cultural diversity of most Western democracies, is it really so easy to identify a concept of morality that is shared by everyone? Or is there some hidden exclusion going on here: some share this concept, and we really don’t have to consider those who don’t? The only place that we can find where Steutel and Spiecker even acknowledge this problem is not in the text, but in a footnote attached to their expressed intention to “start with a brief analysis of our concept [of morality].” The qualifying footnote says:

We do not claim that the notions and distinctions that are clarified are universally shared. On the contrary, it is quite possible that they are only part of common-sense in liberal democratic societies. What we do claim, however, is that these notions and distinctions are useful and appropriate.

There are several different points being made in this qualification. One is that they are clearly backing away from the rampant false universalization that is so often cloaked in the purported neutrality of linguistic analysis, and that has been exposed by so much recent feminist analysis. A second point is less clear. They acknowledge that their favorite notions and distinctions may be only “part of common-sense in

liberal democratic societies," but this is too ambiguous. Does it mean that anyone with liberal democratic commitments will have these notions and distinctions within their moral point of view *whatever else they also have* within it, or does it mean that only *some* people within liberal democracies might be fully comfortable with them? If they mean the former, then we would want to press them strongly for an argument (obviously not possible here) that they think will successfully show how the moral notions they point to can be interpreted such that they will *both* have sufficient content *and* not be in tension with some beliefs of some positions. If, on the other hand, they mean the latter, and this disclaimer is really code for "some people," then their "garden variety" begins to look a bit more like a garden-of-Eden-variety, with some already banished outside the walls. Finally, the last sentence in this qualification suggests to us a different stance from that which prompts the qualification: here they are acknowledging a performative stance that, more appropriately in our view, depends upon moral, political, and pedagogical support, rather than more-or-less generalizable analytic assumptions.

Our second general point concerning a missing political dimension pertains less to how they get to this stance, and more to how they think they can use it once they have it. In this context, at least, "if you don't use it, you lose it" is arguably bad advice. Following this advice overlooks the fact that others, with qualitatively different perspectives, also want to use theirs in the same way. The result is, in the political world of educational policy and practice, an ideological battle in which those at whom sexuality education is aimed are more front-line moral shock troops than democratic citizens in the making. The pattern of connection between a preferred moral point of view and recommendations for educational aims found in this paper is common in the politics and practice of sexuality education. This pattern is that one first locates oneself within a particular conception of morality, or, more broadly in Rawls's¹ terms, a "comprehensive doctrine," and then translates this conception into recommendations for, and constraints on, what can count as good sexuality education. The unfortunate result in practice is, too often, a rigid rejection of any point of view within sexuality education that does not conform to the assumed moral point of view. Although we suspect that Steutel and Spiecker would be open to other positions, in the case of what they have offered us here, it is important to see how this pattern can be found on two levels, both of which are contestable.

On the first level, for example, some might go along with the moral/nonmoral "good" distinction much as the authors make it, and even with the substantive suggestion that a core of morality involves the well-being and dignity of other persons, and still object strenuously that conceiving the latter in terms of "observing principles" adequately captures the essentially relational nature of their understanding of the moral good. And they might even go on to say that conceiving the moral part of sexuality education in these terms contributes directly to a failure of communication with those who are on the inside of (perhaps for the first time) the concreteness, immediacy and intensity of a sexual relation, because principle-talk must struggle to get a grip on the phenomenology of this experience. (It's a bit like trying to promote safer sex by suggesting that adolescents should break out of a grope in the back seat of a car with the discursive interruption, "Excuse me, I cannot

enjoy this close intimacy with you because I am worried about a sexual disease and/or unwanted pregnancy.”) In contrast, we might argue that entering the moral realm — and especially sexual morality — through attention to conditions for appropriate trust² would not only be a more viable construction, but would also lead to a more flexible and realistic suggestion that there *is* room for individualization in this aspect of sexuality education.

At another and perhaps more worrisome level, others less aligned with the liberal tradition would object that from the point of view of their comprehensive doctrine, both this disagreement *and* the very distinction between the moral good and the nonmoral good are alien concerns. To suggest that it is somehow neutral simply fails to respect the reality of their moral point of view on what is to count as good sexuality education. Again at this deeper level, still others — and here we would definitely include ourselves — might object to the sanitized moral subject that Steutel and Spiecker’s moral point of view depends on, and that subsequently gets immigrated into claims about good sexuality education. Without a conception of moral subjects as embedded in, and as points of contestation of, on-going group relations of power, sterile notions of “ideal reflection” come to educational front stage and systemic forms of oppression recede from moral view.

This second level represents, for us, the proper entry point into thinking about how we should think about the “good” in sexuality education. Again in Rawls’s terms, we would advocate taking much more seriously the “fact of reasonable pluralism.”³ We are not alone in holding this position; many, though certainly not all, parents and community leaders are uncomfortable with the notion that sexuality education in the schools should attempt to promote a particular conception of morally good sex. Indeed, one of us has recently completed a survey of Canadian parents in which over 75% endorse the statement, “It is important for sexual health education programs to recognize and respect the different moral beliefs about sexuality that may exist in the community.”⁴ These parents seem to recognize that the well-established 60’s adage “different strokes for different folks” applies not only to our sexual tastes, but also to our conceptions of sexuality morality. Or as Jeffrey Weeks⁵ puts it somewhat more eloquently in his recent book: *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, “The contemporary sexual world appears as irrevocably pluralistic, divided into a host of sovereign units, and a multiplicity of sites of authority, none of which can claim a firm foundation.” In our view, this plurality is the central moral/political question that ought to be the entry point to thinking about the “good” in good sexuality education.

1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12-15.

2. Annette Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” *Ethics* 96 (1986): 131-60.

3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 63-64.

4. Alexander McKay, “Rural Parents’ Attitudes toward School-Based Sexual Health Education,” *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 5, no. 1: 15-23.

5. Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 27.