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The good and bad in sexual relations: A reconsideration of Winch's limiting notions

Camilla Kronqvist

Do we need to be reminded that there is something existentially and ethically troubling in sexual relations? Literature, poetry and not the least songs constantly speak of the pain of unrequited love, the devastation of lives due to unruly desires. Philosophers, at times, also portray love as capable of destroying a life (cf. Gaita 2011, 180-183). In the public space too, as witnessed in the #metoo-movement, there has been a growing awareness of the vicissitudes of sexual desire. Yet, it seems as if the liberal response, indeed the only appropriate response, is to say that whatever it is that might trouble us here, or should trouble us, it is not the fact that there is something sexual conjoining these cases. In the light of political movements working for the acceptance of different sexual and gendered minorities, potential differences in how one expresses one's sexuality are not to be taken to reveal any differences in moral character or vision, but merely differences in taste. The disastrous character of some of these cases are thus to be considered as a consequence of some other sin, such as the failure to react to the other as a freely choosing, independent being. The problem with cases of sexual harassment or abuse, thus, is analyzed as not lying in a person's desires, or actions, but rather in their not properly ensuring the consent of another person.

In this discussion, I propose that we do understand sexual relations as something that may, and sometimes also should, trouble us existentially and ethically. I do this, however, not with the intention of advancing a more strict sexual morality, or a sexual morality on the whole, neither do I wish to suggest that there is some specific way they should trouble us. Rather I propose that the social sanctions and rituals surrounding these relations as studied by social anthropologists, such as the institution of marriage, or the call for consent in our society, can be read as one way of trying to come to grips with these troubling, and in social terms often disruptive, features, and making them socially manageable. I also submit that our thinking about sex is indeed bound to be muddled if we fail to take this aspect of our lives seriously. If sexual relations indeed constitute a truly troubling, as well as central, feature of our life, there are clearly aspects of it that we cannot manage solely by social control. We cannot properly address these features of our life by merely raising political questions about social policy, either in the limited sense of involving legislation about the rights of marginalized sexual minorities, or in the more broad sense, addressed by social scientists or gender theorists, of questioning hierarchies of power, and seeking change on a structural level. We need to consider the ways

in which these relations are expressive of what it is possible for us to conceive as good and bad in a human life.

In order to show this, I first consider Peter Winch's suggestion that sexual relations, together with birth and death, are not to be considered as events or experiences in the world, but rather as having a more fundamental role in shaping how we understand ourselves as sexed or gendered beings and conceive of our possibilities of forming intimate relationships with others. I then go on to consider how such an understanding of sexual relations contributes to our understanding of varying and conflicting conceptions about sexual morality, and to some extent, politics, in our present society, through a discussion of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015). In this work, the author attempts to combine reflections on social criticism of our ongoing sexual and gendered practices, many of which are currently in flux, with questions about the character of language and speech in the recounting of a personal love story. This discussion helps shed light on the ethical and existential character of the differences and disagreements concerning what is at stake in our sexual lives and encounters, and why thinking clearly about these issues may be so difficult.

1. Winch's limiting notions: The case of sexual relations

The article "Understanding a Primitive Society" (1964, 1972) follows up on ideas Winch explored in *The Idea of a Social Science* (1990), as well as in "Nature and Convention" (1972). It considers the relationship between language and reality, and the role of rationality in understanding the life and practices of human beings.¹ Following the path laid out in Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" (1993), Winch questions the tendency to apply Western standards of rationality to the thinking and acting of people in other cultures, deemed to be, as the title makes clear, primitive. He exemplifies this move with a discussion of anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work in relation to Azande witchcraft, to show that Evans-Pritchard still holds on to a picture according to which our scientific language responds to reality, whereas that of the Azande fails to do so. The path staked out by Wittgenstein and Winch in these articles, have been travelled by many since the publication of this article. What is more the notion that our conceptions of rationality may be used to erect barriers between an

¹ Winch responds to questions raised about "Understanding a Primitive Society" in "Language, Belief and Relativism" (1987), and also discusses similar matters in "Human Nature" (1972). These articles are published together with *The Idea of a Social Science* in the Swedish translation of that work.

us and a them, where “they” are deemed irrational, has become a staple in feminist and post-colonialist criticisms of Western thought.

The emphasis of this discussion, however, will be on a group of remarks at the end of the paper that have received less attention. Here Winch attempts to show what possibilities of communication between different cultures are left if one rejects the notion that all languages seek to describe the same objective reality and acknowledges instead how deeply entrenched they are in the practices of people, not all of which aim at describing reality. In allusion to Vico (1968, §§ 332-33, 336-337), he suggests that sexual relations together with birth and death (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, 127), can be thought of as “limiting notions” in human life. They, says Winch, are notions “which have an obvious ethical dimension, and which indeed in a sense determine the ‘ethical space’ within which the possibilities of good and evil in human life can be exercised” (1964, 322).

In parallel with anthropological studies which study rites of passage concerning these three aspects in different societies (see e.g. Hendry 2016) as a starting point for understanding their language, culture and religion, these remarks have often been taken to suggest that certain natural, biological facts about human beings, what T.S. Eliot talked about as “birth, copulation and death”, can be taken as points of departure for the hermeneutic task of understanding a foreign way of life. Rather than thinking that the world presents us with grounds for language use, we are reminded of the ways in which language is essentially used within human practices, but also that such practices are shaped by (natural, spontaneous, unreflected) reactions, which taken together reveal a certain uniformity in human life. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1967, §§540-541, 537-539, 542; 2009, §244, part two §289). Birth, death and sexual relations are, thus, among other things, taken to constitute existential facts about the human condition to which everyone must form some kind of relation. We are, as it were, beings who grieve our dead, feel wonder at new-born babies, and feel attraction and sometimes also aversion to one another.

Such descriptions of our life ring true to a point, but also risk concealing that there is no easily available set of basic emotions or emotional reactions (such as facial expressions) that we can ascertain as a fact in every human society, to then seek to study the different meanings they have been assigned (cf. Hertzberg 2009 in relation to smiling). Rather, as it was important for Winch to show, the ways in which we go on speaking about and speaking out of these reactions is constitutive for what we can come to take as these primitive, and spontaneous reactions in the first place (cf. Winch 1989, chapter 4). Treating these limiting notions as a starting point for understanding, and for translating between the understandings of different societies, thus suggests a too simplistic understanding of what is involved in understanding

other ways of life. It also reaffirms the notion that the problem of understanding other “cultures” present us with a difficulty of a specific kind (cf. Motturi 2003, chapter 17). Winch himself, in his 1997 article “Can We Understand Ourselves?” (Winch 1997), targets this tendency. There he draws on examples in which I may fail to understand aspects of my own culture, but we may equally well consider cases in which I find as much understanding in aspects of another’s culture as I do in my own. I respond, and it is interesting that this understanding often takes the form of an emotional response, to a child crying, a mother nursing a child, two persons exchanging a loving look, and so on. Thus, Winch reminds us that understanding is not always readily available even in our own cases. There are degrees of understanding, I recognize, say, the sadness in someone’s face but not the reason the person is sad, and at times understanding is hard to gain.

Rather than using these limiting notions as a key to developing a general concept of understanding human life, I therefore want to consider how they, as Winch suggests, contribute to our conception of what is good and bad in our life, and even more to what we can meaningfully grasp both as important in human life and as human life. How can such an understanding of them help us explore the place different attitudes and understandings of sexual relations have in what one may think of as “our” life and language? Here part of the challenge, is recognizing what is involved in accepting a certain understanding of what is at stake in these relationships as ours.

Introducing questions about good and evil into questions of sexual relations, however, may be met with suspicion. In today’s academic and political landscape, it may easily be experienced as an attempt to moralize, to decide what sexual actions or activities are good, or to find some ways of expressing one’s sexuality, or one’s desires, as better than others, in that it adheres to a social norm. To anyone familiar with Winch’s moral philosophy, however, such worries as readily appear inadequate. Most of his work in moral philosophy can be described as an attempt to reconfigure our understanding of what a serious engagement with ethical questions could be, together with other philosophers taking more or less inspiration from Wittgenstein, such as Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe, Cora Diamond, Stanley Cavell and Iris Murdoch (although with her Winch rather shared an interest in Weil than in Wittgenstein). Furthermore, it is characterized by a desire to bring into the open “certain fundamental difficulties facing a philosopher who wishes to give an account of morality” (“Moral Integrity, Winch 1972, 171, compare “Ethical Relativism” 1972, 181).

Thus, we see Winch in “Moral Integrity”, his inaugural lecture at King’s College, in 1968, take issue with the notion that moral philosophy should be a guide to action. The question that

concerns him there is the “relation of a man to his acts” (Winch 1972, 171), an issue which he attempts to clarify by showing the problems with a certain “picture of the agent” (cf. Murdoch 1997, 75) that he thinks “is secretly at work” in many philosophers ways’ of thinking about morality (Winch 1972, 171). This is the idea of the agent as “a spectator of a world which includes his own body” who “is able to, to a limited extent, effect changes in the world” (Winch 1972, 171). By contrast to this idea, according to which moral philosophy should guide the agent to what are desirable effects, Winch contends that much moral significance lies in *how* a person thinks of his action (1972, 183), and furthermore in what we are able to think of as *his* act (1972, 184), or in taking that action as an expression of *him* (cf. Hertzberg 1997). The sense of integrity called forth by Winch is thus between how a person considers himself in relation to his actions. This is the kind of understanding expressed in realizing that I would be a coward if I did not do something, or an idiot if I did, but also in the realization that I may be forced to do something I recognize as wrong, because I consider it the only thing I can do, without any way of talking my way out of it (Winch 1972, “Moral Integrity”).

To Winch, then, questions of morality are centrally connected with questions of what is of importance of concern to us. What I take to be of moral concern, as it were, shows in my perspective on what is important, as well as in how I understand my actions, and what I take as alternatives for action (Winch 1972, 178). For that reason, it is to Winch impossible that philosophy should be able to show someone why something is important, if they were not able to recognize something of importance in that perspective themselves (Winch 1972, 190-191). This is why it is problematic to think of morality as a guide to action, since it, as Winch puts it, would be “a strange sort of guide” that “first puts obstacles in our path and then show us the way round them” (Winch 1972, 172-173).

To understand the ways in which the limiting notions Winch mentions can be said to determine the ethical space within which notions of good and evil are exercised, it is therefore central to see this in relation to what is of importance to us in life, and how that becomes evident in a persons’ life. “A man’s sense of the importance of something to him shows itself in all sorts of ways”, among which one can also consider the need “to contemplate it, to gain some sense of his life in relation to it” (Winch 1964, 320). The problem he and Wittgenstein identify in Evans Pritchard’s and Frazer’s thinking, thus, not only presents us with an intellectual or theoretical failure, of applying a certain view to a situation. It cannot even be considered a practical failure, in the case of Evans Pritchard, since he himself testifies to feeling at ease within the Azande practice (Winch 1964, 311). What is at stake is rather a failure to take others and their lives seriously, and at the same time, a failure to take oneself seriously. It is a failure

to find the right objects of comparison in one's one life, in seeing in what way something is important to others, but also important to ourselves (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, 125-133). They, thus, point to a form of understanding that recognizes aspects of language use and human behavior, such as reacting to the loss of a wedding ring as a betrayal of one's marriage (Winch 1964, 323) or kissing a picture of the beloved (Wittgenstein 1993, 123), as meaningful although it demands of us to go beyond a scientific, instrumental, understanding of our life. What may be learnt from others in such ways is thus not mere knowledge, but rather something approaching wisdom (Winch 1964, 322).

The few examples Winch and Wittgenstein offer as an aspect of thinking about our sexual relations, may not appear as very sexual today. They do, however, suggest that we, besides rejecting a too simplistic picture of ethics as concerned with desirable actions, should also want to reject a too simplistic picture of what can be included in our understanding of sexual relations. Thus, although Winch (1964, 323) rejects the common conception that all morality is sexual morality as vulgar, he also suggests that that notion conveys an important truth. What is vulgar about this conception, we now see, has to do with the notion of morality inherent in such a claim, and at the same time the picture of a human being surfacing in that notion. This impression is augmented by the fact that Winch's prime example of sexual relations involves the suggestion that "The life of a man is a man's life and the life of a woman is a woman's life" where "the masculinity or the femininity are not just components in the life, they are its *mode*."; (Winch 1964, 323)

For a reader sensitive to political issues involving the use of gendered language, Winch's choice of words here may awaken worries, just as his ease in speaking about the relation of "man to his actions" in what is supposed to be gender-neutral terms. Does he have to speak of men and women as if these words denoted pre-given categories in the life of human beings? Is he not reinstating a gender binary in speaking about the life of a man and a woman, treating as an existential fact about us something that may also be subject to cultural change? Although, it is clear that Winch too writes during a certain time, which also colors his choice of word and way of writing, Winch again does not prescribe a certain way of speaking about this issue, in the sense one today easily imagines. By speaking about his masculinity not as an "experience in the world", but as a "way of experiencing the world", he rather draws attention to the ways in which our thought about who we are cannot be torn apart from considerations about what role, for instance, procreation can have in our own life. Consider, say, the significance that can be given to the fact that I am born by this woman, or gave birth to that child. Or, think of how much our thinking about sexual relations has changed with the introduction of contraception.

We do not need to agree with Elizabeth Anscombe's judgements about the meaning of such changes, to think that, as Anscombe puts it, it really was a new offer to think that "you can have sex without children" (1981). Just think of how different a life is in which I as a woman, primarily seeking heterosexual relations, constantly may have to fear unwanted pregnancies, from a life in which I can think of giving birth as something to plan, or decide against. And, of course, think about what meaning notions such as giving birth may have if I, for lack of a womb, or a partner with whom to conceive, struggle to see what place could be accorded to my longing for a child, as well as the conceptual work that has gone into thinking about new family constellations for partners where sex is not a key, or not a key in a conventional sense, to conception. To think about these aspects of life is an invitation to think about the role these concepts have in our conception of life, as well as to reflect on the fact that we are such beings that have a conception of life (Winch 1964, 322).

There is, however, an important sense in which sexual relations, more than the other limiting notions of birth and death, involve us in an encounter with another human being. Although, Winch's reworking of Wittgenstein's notion that death is not a (future) event in his life but a cessation of his world, shows how "one's attitude to one's life is at the same time an attitude to one's death" (Winch 1964, 323), it mainly concerns the perspective of an agent on his world, or his life as a whole. Clearly, other people also appear in how we think of death and birth. Thinking about my children's death is a reason for anxiety in a different way than the thought of my own death, partly because it involves me in contemplations about how I could go on without them. In a similar manner, I experience the birth of my and others' children in ways in which I do not experience my own. The subject of our own death and birth thus invites a certain solipsism. My way of thinking of my own sexuality, however, necessarily go through my relations to others, or is a way of thinking about myself in relation to others, even in the case where my way of relating to them is constituted by a fear or reluctance of entering such relationships. It is for this reason that the consideration of the different roles sexual relations have in our life, involve us in both existential and ethical questions. They are existential in that they confront us all as individual human beings with questions about what we can regard as meaningful, pointing us both to what aspects we can regard as aspects of a concept and to what we regard as important in our life. They are ethical, in that they engage us in encounters with other human being, and in responses to these relationships, out of which our understanding of what is to be considered good can be said to grow.

2. Disagreements about desire

In the following, I address differences and disagreement as to what is good and bad in our sexual relationships, in relation to some passages in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, with the intent of showing both the ethical questions involved in the concepts we use to characterize certain forms of difficulties and distances in our sexual relationships, as well as what is entailed in taking another and ourselves seriously.

The Argonauts has been characterized by some as a work in auto-theory, which groups together personal anecdotes and stories with quotes and reflections from theoretical works. In it, Nelson describes her relationship with Harry, a self-described 'butch on T'² (Nelson 2015, 65), and their different ways of relating to both love and language. She touches on themes such as their relationships with their own and each other's bodies, Nelson's relationship to Harry's son from a previous relationship, and the pregnancy and birth of their child. In itself, then, the book delves into very different questions about what it means for us to be gendered beings and living in families and intimate relationships that fall outside of the still relatively normative understanding of what a family is.³ It describes the existential tensions and ethical possibilities available within these lives, but is also written out of these same tensions.

A set of such tensions take form in Nelson's depiction of scene after a talk at a New York University. It reads,

After the Q&A at this event, a woman came up to me and told me that she just got out of a relationship with a woman who had wanted her to hit her during sex. *She was so fucked up*, she said. *Came from a background of abuse. I had to tell her I couldn't do that to her, I could never be that person.* She seemed to be asking me for a species of advice, so I told her the only thing that occurred to me: I didn't know this other woman, so all that seemed clear to me was that their perversities were not compatible. (Nelson 2015, 115)

Nelson's answer is tentative, and although she returns to the notion of incompatible perversities at diverse points in the book, it remains unclear whether she really thinks her response settles the issue. The question that is inherent in the woman's story as well as in Nelson's response, however, brings to the fore an issue that reoccurs, structures and even haunts Nelson's writing.

² 'T' stands for the testosterone. The book touches on both Nelson's and Harry's shifting responses to the top surgery that takes place and the hormone treatment that is started within the time frame that the book covers.

³ In fact, it can be read as an attempt to find a way of relating to all of Winch's limiting notions. Besides the reflections around sexual relationships, birth and parenthood, their own as well as their relationships to their own parents, biological as well as social, Harry is adopted, the book also deals with questions of death. These come in the form of the recounting of the murder of Nelson's aunt Nelson had discussed in a previous book and the death of Harry's mother.

How does one come to grips with what may appear impossible to grasp in another's vision of what is pleasurable or desirable? How does one encounter another's request for something that appears either as wrong or as unintelligible? And how, from another perspective, does one think of the possibilities of finding union and community in what by some, or according to dominant pictures of what is normal in society, is conceived as unintelligible?

It is, initially, easy to provide a Winchean reading of what the woman from the audience is saying. We can describe her as addressing the relationships between herself and her action, and as speaking about her sense of integrity, in recognizing in her partner's request something that she herself was incapable of doing; *"I could not do that to her"*. Furthermore, this recognition is linked both with the question of who she was, and what she wanted to be; *"I could never be that person."* It is also possible to read Nelson's response, in being called to the moral character of the suggestion that there are certain things one cannot do and still go on respecting oneself, as expressive of a desire not to moralize about human sexuality. The tentative character of her answer, as well as her saying that she did not know the woman's ex-partner, suggest that she did not want to risk excluding on beforehand certain actions and desires from what can be imagined as an aspect of (human) sexuality, and that she did not either want to judge, or did not think of herself as in the position of judging, whether the ex-partner should really be considered as "fucked up" in asking to be hit.

These reactions themselves present us with a variety of questions. Is it always, or really, a way of moralizing to call upon the moral aspects of inquiring into what we, as a community and as individuals, find possible and impossible to do? Can one describe the disagreement or dissonance in the relationship between the people in the example without either moralizing, or drawing on some notion of what is or is not moral? This concerns both the disagreement between this woman and her previous partner, and what might turn out to be a difference, or disagreement, in her and Nelson's way of approaching the issue. The woman approaching Nelson was clearly looking for some form of affirmation in her belief that this was the only way to think of the issue, but Nelson did not give her that. The quote, in that way, testifies to a failure to meet, or find community, both in body (in the case of the woman and her ex) and in mind (in the case of Nelson and that woman).

To throw light on what meaning might be found in Nelson's suggestion that we describe these differences as a matter of incompatible perversities, I will bring in more examples from her text. First, however, I want to introduce another example as a way of showing where these kinds of disagreements about what may and may not be part of our sexual relations can be said to sit. This is part of an entry from a homepage, which in translation reads "The truth liberates",

and which collects stories about different forms of sexual harassment and abuse within the Finnish evangelical-lutheran church, told in the wake of the #metoo-movement. A woman, who has now left her husband, a clergyman, writes.

Am I the only believing wife of a church worker who had to experience sexual harassment in her marriage? For me, my husband was practically asking for sex every day, squeezing my breasts, groping my lower parts (because I was so desirable), forcing me to have sex (so that the priest would not have to commit the sin of adultery) and expecting every night service in bed. (my translation) (<http://totuusvapauttaa.fi/pappipuoliso-pakotti-seksiin-ja-haukkui-huoraksi/> accessed 21.8.2019.)

In the story, we are presented with what happened in the marriage as a case of sexual harassment. The story speaks out of the pain of feeling forced to something, and of being the recipient of unwelcome attention. In many ways, it was precisely, this pain that grabbed hold of my attention when reading this, and similar testimonies within the #metoo-movement. Yet, philosophically, it seems as if we need to say more as to why this is to be taken as a case of sexual harassment. Why should we not just think of this as yet another case of “incompatible perversities”, as a form of mal-communication between the parties, which certainly caused them trouble, but did not necessarily point to anything wrong in the particular actions? Certainly, people may feel differently about how often they want to have sex, and also how they want to be touched and when. Yet, there is nothing in the particular acts, such as desiring sex every day, groping someone by the groin or the butt, or squeezing the breasts, that makes these actions morally problematic, if considered in isolation from the fact that we in one case conceive of them as a form of harassment and in another case do not.

To substantiate the claim that this was a form of sexual harassment, we may of course draw on such descriptions, and the sense in which the man’s attention was both constant and unwelcome. The sexually explicit language used in the descriptions, in this case also serve to emphasize the claim that this was a case of sexual harassment, whereas speaking of caressing or touching the lower parts of the body might not have been as suggestive of unwanted forms of attention. Yet, reading Nelson, we are also asked to envision relationships in which similar forms of attention and action, as well as language, are welcomed, and even desired. She suggests, for instance, that sexually explicit language is at times part of the attraction of certain sexual acts.

Sometimes words are a part of it. I can remember, early on, standing beside you in a friend’s cavernous fourth-floor painting studio in Williamsburg at night (she was out of town), completely naked, more construction workers outside, this time building some kind of luxury high-rise across the street, their light towers flooding the studio with orange shaft and shadow, as you asked me to say aloud what I wanted you to do to me. My whole body struggled to summon any utterable phrase. I knew you were a good animal, but felt myself to be standing before an enormous mountain, a lifetime of unwillingness to claim what I wanted, to ask for it. Now here you were, your face close

to mine, waiting. The words I eventually found may have been Argo, but now I know: there's no substitute for saying them with one's own mouth. (Nelson 2015, 87)

The reference to Argo alludes both to the title of the of the book, referring to Roland Barthes' reflections on the ship Argo,⁴ and to what one as a reader is invited to think of as Nelson's own perversity, in other words, being "fucked in the ass". This is mentioned at several places of the work, as early as the first paragraph,⁵ linking it to the author's first declaration of love (Nelson 2015, 3). Now, although, as Nelson makes clear, bringing oneself to admit both what one wants and how one wants it (that is, under what description) may be painstaking (Nelson 2015, 87), it is clear that her experiences and desires do not translate into the more clinically sounding "preference for anal sex" (although I too can admit to thinking that it would be less painstaking to use such words in an academic text). As she says, "I am not interested in a hermeneutics or erotics or metaphorics of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking." (Nelson 2015, 107). This appears at once as a protest against the distancing effect a certain theorizing language may have on us in relating to our concrete lived sexual experiences, but also as a reminder that what these experiences are, is partly an aspect of the language we use to speak of them. For one person, such as Nelson, the following description, "Then as now, you spread my legs with your legs and push your cock into me, fill my mouth with your fingers. You pretend to use me, make a theater of heeding only your pleasure while making sure I find mine" (Nelson 2015, 87), is expressive of her relishing the notion that "No matter what we do, it always feels dirty without feeling lousy." (Nelson 2015, 87). For her, there may even be a certain excitement in regarding what they do as a perversion. For another person, such as the clergyman's wife, however, we

⁴ Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name." Just as the Argo's parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo, whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new." (Nelson 2015, 6)

⁵ It is mentioned before heading into a discussion of whether words are good enough, leaning both on a Wittgensteinian therapy of being made aware of what words do in context (Nelson) rather than a more poststructuralist disappointment with language for what it leaves undone (Harry) (Nelson 2015, 4-5). It thus links up with the more general theme approached in the book of marriage as a form of conversation, where part of the conversation turns around the possibilities of conversation and communication in the first place, the reach of words, the attitudes to it. It is, I would submit, central to this conversation that the sexual relation of the parties involved in it, and what one is able to say and not say about them, is not external to the conversation, but internal to it.

can imagine that such descriptions would only make her feel dirty, and that she thereby may also experience them as demeaning. Similarly, if someone were to suggest that her conviction that something that feels dirty must also be demeaning, was itself expressive of a perversion, she may experience that claim as perverse.

Be that as it may, someone may retort, the difference between these sexual acts may in the end be boiled down to whether they are desired or not. It is here that calls for consent become more vocal, for although one's verbal consent does not exclude the possibility of engaging in sexual activities one does not desire, at least the explicit communication of one's intent may lessen the risk of the other misunderstanding what sexual advances are desired. This suggestion carries some weight. With the sexual liberation movement, there has been growing agreement that in our sexual lives we should be attentive to each other's needs and desires, and even more that a lack of desire is a reason not to force one's advances on another. For many the notion of consent seems to speak to such concerns. In matters of legislation, also, the introduction of the term in definitions of rape may help shift the focus from victim to perpetrator in judging whether an act is to be counted as rape. Philosophically, however, I submit that the mere focus on consent, or the relation between consent and desire, is dissatisfying if one wishes to explicate what is at stake in sexual relations on an interpersonal level. The notion does not provide either the conceptual or ethical resources needed to think through the differences in description in the previous cases, and the difficulties of understanding diverging perceptions of what our sexual lives may entail. It rather reinstates the picture of a person's relation to his or her actions, that Winch showed to be problematic, and often introduces an equally problematic picture of our relation to our desires, as well as the relation of our desires to our actions.

It does not, as it were, speak to Winch's notion that "there is no general kind of behaviour [or in this context, also desire] of which we have to say that it is good without qualification" (Winch 1972, 181). It also does not speak to Nelson's reference to feminist theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, following directly on the story about the woman at the Q&A, that, "Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people." (Sedgwick 1990, 25) These remarks serve as reminders that any action, utterance or behaviour, cannot be considered in isolation from the descriptions under which one comes to understand them, and that the pertinence of such descriptions will depend on context, and speaker, as well as the relationship one has to the speaker.

"One must", as Nelson writes in her own version of a Wittgensteinian context-sensitivity, "become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, You're just a hole, letting me fill you up. Like when I

say husband.” (Nelson 2015, 9.) Taken as they stand the whisper, “You’re just a hole” is reminiscent of the way in which the female sexual organ has often been depicted as a lack (cf. Irigaray 1985, 23-24), and almost gestures at the pornographic, whereas “husband” seems to speak to our more normal or normative understanding of love. Nelson, however, allows us to see how the first words may come to life as an expression of love, whereas the second, in relation to marriage, may appear as much more ambivalent. Here, both “husband” and “marriage” allude to the difficulty of specifying the gender of this particular husband, “The man she is married to”. They raise issues about Harry both passing, and not passing as a man, mentioned throughout the book, but also confronts the norms and expectations going into those words. Depending on whether one sees marriage as an institution worthy of treasuring, or as upholding and reinforcing problematic norms, the concept shows up quite differently. As Nelson puts it in relation to their spontaneously tying the knot, when there was a legal sanction for it. “Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable).” (Nelson 2015, 28).

Furthermore, discussions on consent often present an individual’s desire as cut off from what is desired. They suggest that any act can be desired, if there is a desire for it. To the extent they provide a moral, they suggest that whatever someone wants to do, or wants to be done, is in order as long as another person consents to it. This gives us some means of describing the clergyman’s wife as offering a testimony of sexual harassment and not just of incompatible desires; “She did not consent to his advances”. It does not, however, capture the sense in which what seems to be of concern to her is not that she was not asked to consent to this treatment, but rather that he thought of this treatment as something *he* could ask of *her*, although more indirectly, or that he thought that marrying her would entitle him to this behavior.

It also does not show why the woman at the Q&A thought there was a problem in doing something that the other desired, as well as the sense in which she seems to suggest that certain desires are wrong in themselves. The disagreements between the woman and her ex, as well as the clergyman and his wife, as it were, go deeper than a mere matter of having different desires, and rather touches upon what it is possible for them to regard as desirable in the first place. They offer us cases where there is not just one person wanting something that the other person does not want, but one where the other cannot conceive that anyone would want what the first person wants in the first place. For what, the women at the Q&A could ask, is it to desire a form of abuse as a sexual act? What she expresses is then an inability or difficulty to see in her partner’s utterance of the words “I want you to...” a real desire (that is, an expression of *her*). What she sees in those words is rather an on-going internalization of a form of abuse, a failure

to love both another person and herself. This we could say with Wittgenstein is a failure not only to agree in opinion or judgement (both in the sense of “We both desire this” or “We both regard this as somethings desirable”) but also “in form of life” (Wittgenstein 2009, §241-242).

Against this background, it appears central that Nelson speaks of incompatible perversities, and not, say, different desires or preferences. But there is still a question of why she latches on to the word perversities. Now, Nelson does not provide any clear reasons for her choice of words, and as I said her use of the expression after the Q&A seems tentative. She does, however, repeatedly turn to this chain of words in aid of her thinking. In relation to a queer activist group seeking for comrades that want to “come together and attack” (straight society, the Capital, exploitation), she writes,

I was glad for their intervention: there is some evil shit in this world that needs fucking up, and the time for blithely asserting that sleeping with whomever you want however you want is going to jam its machinery is long past. But I’ve never been able to answer to comrade, nor share in this fantasy of attack. In fact I have come to understand revolutionary language as a sort of fetish—in which case, one response to the above might be, *Our diagnosis is similar, but our perversities are not compatible.* (Nelson 2015, 30).

A perversity, for Nelson, then is more encompassing than a mere preference (on a narrow understanding of preference). It involves not just an individual desire, popping up out of nowhere, but what appears as a more complex, or complicated mindset, a way of orienting oneself in the world, involving both what choices of words one answers to, and what kind of fantasies one shares. In this orientation to the world, the language one speaks, and the way one speaks it, is clearly important.

Up to this point, I agree with Nelson. After this, however, her reasons for speaking about incompatible perversities become less clear. For it is quite possible to speak of such an orientation, without bringing in any notion of the perverse, that is, of something diverging from the sexually normal. In this respect, her choice of word rather appears to comment on a problematic normality, and even more express a desire to show how our normality, or what we perceive as normal, is itself perverted, in the sense that all (hetero)sexuality is formed around pictures and narratives of dominance.

If you’re looking for sexual tidbits as a female child, and the only ones that present themselves depict child rape or other violations . . . , then your sexuality will form around that fact. There is no control group. I don’t even want to talk about “female sexuality” until there is a control group. And there never will be. (Nelson 2015, 82-83)

Although I sympathize with Nelson's desire to subject certain pictures of normality to critical scrutiny, I am less certain whether the distinction between the normal and perverse will serve to bring out what may be problematic in them here. In this quest, Nelson's elaboration of Sedgwick's "Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people" seems to express a deeper understanding of the moral and existential core of this issue, than the notion that certain perversities are incompatible. Directly after quoting Sedgwick's remark, she remarks, "This a crucial point to remember, and also a difficult one. It reminds us that there is difference right where we may be looking for, and expecting, communion." (Nelson 2015, 116)

This response draws attention to the vulnerability of our desires, the sense in which, to put it bluntly, one does not want to hear that one is fucked up, if what one wants is to be fucked. To consider the form of distance there may be in these cases of disagreement, we therefore need to acknowledge both one's longing for another, and the fear of rejection that goes with that longing. This is also rendered beautifully in the first paragraphs of *The Argonauts*, where the reflections on Barthes are offered by Nelson to Harry as a continuation of her first pronouncement of love. "I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both." (Nelson 2015, 6). This suggests that the kind of agreement in language, in posture, in how one thinks about language, "Are words good enough?", which is constantly at stake in the work (cf. e.g. Nelson 2015, 8), is not something that we can establish as a fundamental fact, but something to yearn for, and cherish when we experience it. Furthermore the kind of communion gestured at in the description of incompatible perversities, "Why did it take me so long to find someone with whom my perversities were not only compatible, but perfectly matched?" (Nelson 2015, 87),⁶ is not to be thought of in isolation from the sense of gratitude experienced in the realization that there could be this form of conversation, and Nelson's acknowledgement, in the final sentence of the acknowledgement section, of learning, through the relationship with Harry, "what a nuptial may be" (Nelson 2015, 180).⁷

These remarks bring us back to the necessity of considering, not only the orientation of our desires, and our relationships to different acts, or how we orient ourselves in life as such, but our relationships with each other, to see what possible meaning we can attach to sexual

⁶ But also, "Really, though, it's more than a perfect match, as that implies a kind of stasis. Whereas we're always moving, shape-shifting." (Nelson 2015, 87)

⁷ The reference to nuptial goes back to a quote by Gilles Deleuze/Claire Parnet. "*Nuptials are the opposite of a couples. There are no longer binary machines; question-answer, masculine-feminine, ma-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is—simply the outline of a becoming.*" (Nelson 2015, 8)

relations. In particular it becomes important to consider the distinction between a desire for an act, and the desire for another person, and how these at times may intersect. The desire for another may in one case be a source of discovering what one's own desires are, and what one could come to desire, even if one had not been able to imagine it before. The desire for contact with the other, however, may also make one more inclined to comply with desires that are not one's own, or that one comes to discover one cannot make one's own, out of fear of jeopardizing the relationship. The relationship may thus be a site for exploration, liberation, and for mutual learning, but also for self-deception and concealment. You do something that you think I want, because you believe that is what we should do, or what it means to act out of love. I say that I want something from you, with the hope that it would make you think of me as more desirable.

Against the slightly moralistic picture of us freely choosing our sexuality, or freely expressing our desires, that many discussions on consent seem to assert, where the moralism in large part appears in the desire that we be more free-spoken than many of us often are, we may thus conjure up a picture of human life and desire, where expressing our desires is a much more vulnerable business, since our desires do not lie open to us in open view, and where discovering what our desires are, may demand more of us, than uttering the words. To again quote Nelson, "I didn't send the fragment [of a poem blessing the previous lovers that had travelled the beloved's body] because I had in any way achieved its serenity. I sent it with the aspiration that one day I might—that one day my jealousy might recede" (Nelson 2015, 7). The question of what we desire here, does not only serve to establish our consent, but draws attention to our vulnerability in voicing our desires given what the other may think of us, as well as asks what our desires will make of our relationship.

It is to draw attention to such aspects of desire, and especially the vulnerability of our desires to fear, compliance and other possible self-deceptions, that we do well to heed Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön's advice, quoted by Nelson, that "*You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows.*" (Nelson 2015, 33-34) This alerts us to our own personal responsibility in answering such questions as to what we want as well as facing up to our own possible self-deceptions. It is, as the book from which the quote stems, a reminder of our tendency to withdraw from what is experienced as painful, and an urging to rather move towards it (Chödrön 2005). This, Chödrön suggests, may be an important exercise in opening one's heart. But, we should also heed the caution that Nelson offers in response to it. "And the thing is, even you don't always know." (Nelson 2015, 34)

Attaining knowledge about what our desires are, as it were, is not only difficult. In important respects, it is not even to be had. Certainly, there are situations in which it is utterly clear to us what we ourselves and others desire, and when we either to assert ourselves or to offer reassurance, may say that we know what we want. The kind of doubt and uncertainty that may surround other situations, however, suggests that the question facing us here is not, unequivocally, one of knowledge, either in the sense that it is open to just anyone, or in the sense that it is open to us as individuals in the private realms of our mind. It is rather one of understanding.

This understanding, as in the examples above by Winch, confronts us with questions about what we are able to take seriously, both in our own lives and in those of others. It asks us to recognize the differences there may be in the reactions of others and our own, and the differences, dissonances and distances, even in our own ways of relating to things, over time or at a given moment. What I once appreciated as a form of self-aware outspokenness, I may now, say, see as a problematic form of self-assertiveness. Acknowledging these differences, may many times be the beginning of a bridging of distances, a ground for learning, and sometimes also a source of joyful discovery. Yet, speaking of both dissonance and disagreement, reminds us that the task of understanding, does not only have to limit itself to the acceptance of others as different. We should not jump to the conclusion that all disagreement or distances in how we relate to our sexual lives, are necessary bad, but there is still a need to raise questions as to what conceptions of them we are able to see as good. Taking someone seriously is not a matter of blindly tolerating and accepting what they want or who they are, but of appreciating the difficulty and the challenge of thinking through what it means to regard their difference as a genuinely human possibility. Furthermore, it raises a question about how we can reject what another person desires as undesirable, without at the same time rejecting that other person, whether it is possible to pierce their self-deception without leaving them alone in it, or making them feel ashamed. This requires a form of lucidity, both about what they desire, and what experiences makes them desire it, to enable us to react to each other in ways that acknowledges our vulnerability to each other.

Conclusion

Through a consideration of Winch's limiting notions, I have raised questions about what we will see both as pertinent descriptions of ethics and as good descriptions of sexual relations. These questions I have showed are not only of philosophical interest but address differences and disagreement as to what is good and bad in our sexual relationships in ordinary life. They

alert us to the need to consider where and how we think such questions should come in, as well as how we should respond to them, and even more importantly to each other. Attending to such questions itself engages us ethically. Not, however, in the moralizing sense of asking us to devise plans and actions to dissolve possible conflicts or tensions between us, but in the need to acknowledge that these difficulties in understanding, in coming to see something as meaningful that first only strikes us as distant and different, are our own. Recognizing this existential feature may indeed be troubling.⁸

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⁸ This discussion is in significant respects an outgrowth of conversations I have had with Salla Aldrin Salskov over the years. I am grateful to Natan Elgabsi and Ryan Manhire for valuable comments during the writing of the chapter and to Ingeborg Löfgren for incisive remarks on reading *The Argonauts*.

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