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Book Review | *The Philosophy of Sex and Love*

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***The Philosophy of Sex and Love*. Alan Soble. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008; 327 pages; \$16.95 paperback; 978-1-55778-875-7**

Alan Soble's *The Philosophy of Sex and Love* is a wide-ranging survey of various topics within, as the title suggests, the philosophy of sex and love. The book is helpfully divided into three main sections: background, sex and love. The first begins with an overview that both draws a distinction and identifies the relationship between the conceptual and normative analysis of the relevant concepts, and their significance. This section also offers a brief history, which summarizes views dating back to ancient western philosophers to contemporary western thinkers. (No mention is made of eastern ideologies.) The remaining eight chapters are divided equally between the subjects of sex and love, respectively. The book is an interesting, informative and entertaining read, and raises a number of provocative questions along the way. Pedagogically, however, I have the following worries: first, it is unclear whether the text is intended for introductory or advanced courses; second, the chapters do not follow a discernible organizational structure; third, there is disproportionate time and analysis devoted to different topics, which might be compensated for by supplemental texts. What I'd like to do here is offer a brief overview of the content of the chapters and explain my remarks about the difficulties of using this text for a course.

The second chapter begins with a brief discussion of the goal and methodology of studying the history of the philosophy of sex and love. This introduction seems to suggest that what follows will be directed towards students who are unfamiliar with philosophy, or at least, the history of philosophy. The rest of the chapter contains a quick introduction of certain prominent thinkers. Throughout the various historical periods, there seems to be a division between a superior (nonsexual) love and an inferior erotic love. A similar dichotomy is present in some views about sex. The worry in this chapter, and through

several others, is that Soble quickly summarizes, and raises some rather undeveloped worries about, these views. There is little time spent on any one author or theory, (specifically, some fleeting worries are mentioned, but no engaging or developed criticism). The intent of the chapter might be to simply provide a cursory glance of some prominent views across different historical periods. But one does not acquire a complete or wholly coherent picture of the view. (There are, however, parenthetical promises for thorough coverage and analysis in subsequent chapters for *some* of these views.)

The second section of the book is devoted to topics that have to do with sex, including: an exploration of sexual concepts, varying views on perversion, sexual ethics and politics. The third chapter begins with an analysis of sexual activity, which attempts to both present various views and also offer some critical analysis. It seems, however, that each conception is quickly dismissed without any consideration of possible ways in which one might defend the theory in question. Perhaps the idea is that the reader herself must engage in such an exercise. But this does not alleviate the worry, because it is not clear what moves are available to the reader. That is, if this is indeed an introductory text, it would be helpful to know the possible ways in which a proponent of the view might respond. For example, Soble considers the view that sexual activity is defined by sexual pleasure. That is, in the absence of pleasure, there is no sexual activity. Soble rejects this conception on the grounds that quality has been confused with the criterion for sexual activity. One might, for example, engage in unpleasurable sex. But, this is not necessarily the case: one might argue that pleasure is a gradable concept and sexual activity must require a certain minimal degree (or type?) of sexual pleasure; anything above this particular level could then contribute to the *quality* of sex.

One might complain that a consideration of such responses should be the task of the instructor, student or class discussion. Indeed, Soble mentions at the end of the chapter that the text has not exhaustively considered the relevant notions, but that this is consistent with the goal of philosophy that invites you to do your own thinking. But note that Soble does take it upon himself to introduce challenges to the views and possible responses to some theories, which makes the presentation of the topics uneven. For example, we learn that Alan Goldman's account of sexual desire ("desire for contact with another person's body" (54)) seems too narrow. If one desires only to smell or look at another, this does not count as sexual desire, according to Goldman. Soble then maintains that Goldman might accommodate such instances by broadening 'contact' to include vicarious/indirect examples. Soble discusses some views at length, entertaining possible responses in some cases and yet not others. The result is that at times, one feels as though he has only provided a superficial and incomplete treatment of some of the views and a more in-depth analysis of others, with no clear reason for such disproportionate emphasis.

This is again observed in the chapter on sexual perversion, where Soble carefully explicates Aquinas's view that any type of sex that is not directed towards procreation is

morally impermissible on the grounds that it is unnatural. Soble goes on to question the relationship between ‘natural’ and moral permissibility, and argues, in fact that there is no supportable correlation between the two notions. He then presents Nagel’s view of sexual perversion, but does not raise *any* difficulties for his account. According to Nagel, humans, as opposed to animals, are not only aroused by touching, seeing or smelling the other, but also by the *recognition* that someone else is aroused by my behavior. In order for sexuality to be psychologically natural, a person must be a sexual subject and object. On this view, voyeurism is identified as a perversion because he remains a subject. But surely such a view faces problems similar to those he raised for the other theories. For example, take the case of an old married couple in which a wife is not aroused by acknowledging that her husband is aroused. Moreover, she acknowledges the disparity between his arousal and her disinterest. Is this unnatural? Is there something *perverted* going on here? Soble then goes on to critically analyze the American Psychological Association’s diagnosis of paraphilias. There is a lack of consistent structure and thorough critical analysis.

In chapter five, Soble discusses sexual ethics, beginning with Aquinas and natural law—in particular, their response to the use of contraception—progressing to Kant—explaining that both conservatives and liberals have appealed to Kant in support of their theory—and utilitarianism. Each of these sections attempts to give some examples of what the theory in question permits and what it prohibits. But, the structure of the chapter then takes a slightly different turn and begins to discuss practices such as sadomasochism and love, rather than individual ethical theories. Soble explains that conservatives find the objectification of humans immoral, while others believe that such acts might be performed respectfully. The structure of the discussion has now shifted from discussing individual ethical theories and *their* position on various sexual ethical topics, to focusing on the topics themselves. On an organizational level, this is somewhat frustrating. More importantly, one does not achieve a full understanding of sadomasochism within the context of the full-blown ethical theory, gaining rather only a sketchy summary of how it might be consistent with a given ethical outlook. For example, Soble claims “the utilitarian might conclude that sadomasochism in the long run does more harm than good to the parties and society...for other utilitarians and Kantians, sadomasochism can be engaged in affectionately and carefully, while respecting one’s partner without harm being done to nonparticipants” (104). What does ‘respectful’ sadomasochism involve? Is this even a possibility? Is there some reason to think that sadomasochism might contribute to short-term pleasure but not long-term happiness, of the type that Mill endorsed?

In the next chapter, we see a number of politically significant topics including marital rape, pedophilia, prostitution and pornography. While there is a brief description of how feminists and other theorists approach these issues, there is little by way of elaboration or critical analysis. The main theme throughout this discussion appears to be the

identification of coercion (are women coerced to have sex with their husbands for economic reasons or oppressive social influences, are women coerced—into a careers in pornography or prostitution due to considerations of better pay?). For example, Soble presents Colker's view that women may desire to engage in sex with their husbands not because of an original desire, but rather a result of oppressive social influences. Again, what type of social influences? Why is it difficult to sustain the distinction between rape and consensual intercourse, as Mackinnon claims? Does this have the implication that women are completely deprived of the freedom of choice when it comes to sexual matters, so constraining are the shackles of patriarchal society?

Soble's section on love displays a similar type of uneven attention and space. One particularly interesting and illuminating discussion was on the matter of the common denominator between all types of love, what Soble calls 'C' or 'the fine gold thread'. Here, he expounds certain possibilities, including Plato's Aristotle's and Paul's (the author of the New Testament gospels) positions. This discussion is particularly interesting because it clearly explains, and provides thorough critical analysis of, each of the positions. For example, Soble states that Plato's view of 'C' was limited to the desire for the possession of certain properties: beauty, and goodness. One of the main problems with this view is that it turns out that one does not love another as a *person*, but instead loves some of his/her properties. Soble then lists and evaluates some of the responses available to Plato. This then progresses into a discussion of Aristotle's, and finally Paul's conceptions of the fine gold thread. Ultimately, Soble seems to suggest that each of the different conceptions seem to involve the element of benevolence or concern for the other. But, as Soble points out, such a definition of the common thread has problems as well: to what extent should lovers be concerned for each other? Might one's paternalistic concern for another violate the other's autonomy.

Indeed the section on love seems to be more developed than the previous discussion on sex. However, we run into similar worries in this section as well. In chapter nine, Soble focuses on the links between love, sex, procreation and marriage and their effects on one another. Throughout the chapter, we repeatedly see the question of the permissibility of extra-marital affairs emerge. He presents Aquinas's view that such affairs are impermissible because they have adverse consequences on child-rearing. However, Soble dismisses this view by claiming that such affairs would not undermine the caring of children in economically and educationally developed regions. This seems to be a radically unsupportable statement. But Soble leaves the discussion here. Again, this might be with the intention of provoking discussion, but it also appears to leave the discussion in the text incomplete and unfinished.

Soble's work is informative and can, at times, be amusing. However, the unstructured and uneven presentation of the different topics makes the text somewhat challenging to use in class.