

Sexual Desire and Sexual Perversion

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Abstract

When one feels sexual desire, they often feel it *towards* some object. The particular object that it is felt towards may vary, but the formal object remains the same and serves to unify each token of the emotion. In this paper, I establish that the formal object of sexual desire is something that has the property of being a 'pleasant sexual partner', a role fulfilled by an agent who would reciprocate the relevant attitudes, allowing for the exchange of sexual energy that characterises sexual intimacy upon awareness of like intentions being directed towards it. As such, a correct sexual desire is one in which the subject is justified in apprehending the object of their desire as the formal object, whereas an incorrect sexual desire is one in which the subject lacks such justification. One might then think that incorrect sexual desire characterises sexual perversity. However, an incorrect sexual desire does not carry the same morally negative weight as the concept of perversion, and thus is not enough to characterise perversion. Sexual perversity begins with an unjustified apprehension of something as the formal object and reaches its final morally reprehensible state in conjunction with conditions that outline the subject's lack of concern towards their object's reciprocal status as an agential being.

1. Introduction

One of the most notable efforts to conceptualise sexual desire comes from Nagel in his work "Sexual Perversion". Inspired by sentiments expressed by Sartre, Nagel offers an account of sexual desire that prioritises the *mutual recognition* of oneself and the object of desire as sexual agents.¹ From his account flow conditions that place any instance of sexual desire that appears to disturb the mutual recognition into the category of 'perverse'. Although Nagel provides a working conception of sexual desire, his account does not provide us with an intuitive method of distinguishing between appropriate sexual desires and perverse sexual desires. In this paper, using my own conceptualisation of sexual desire that is informed by the works of both Roger Scruton and Fabrice Teroni, I aim to provide an account of sexual perversion that

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¹ Nagel 1969, pp. 9-13.

allows for the variance of sexual tastes in society whilst maintaining the importance of agent reciprocity.

2. What is Sexual Desire?

In order to elucidate sexual desire, I distinguish it from something that it is often mistaken for, namely, sexual arousal. At the culmination of the discussion below, we shall see that sexual arousal is a component of sexual desire but is not what wholly constitutes it.

Although one feels sexual arousal when they desire another, sexual desire is not wholly constituted by sexual arousal: one can be sexually aroused at no particular or identifiable object, whether by the idea of sex or mere stimulation of the sex organs. Sexual desire seems to have more intentionality to it in that when one feels sexual desire, they feel that sexual desire *for* something. Following Scruton's line of thought in *Sexual Desire*, I begin my analysis of sexual desire by determining what foundation it can be built upon, which Scruton maintains is the primal, reactionary state of sexual arousal: "We can understand desire only if we first display the outline of a more passive state of mind - the state of arousal, in which the body of one person awakens to the presence or thought of another".² Ultimately, I shall argue that Scruton's conception of sexual arousal is better suited to sexual desire, but this shall be addressed after we lay the basis.

Scruton recognises a common way of thinking about sexual arousal, namely, that it is merely a purely bodily state that affects the agent that feels it to the extent that they must engage in a sexual act to relieve the bodily itch, portraying it to be the source of some sort of annoyance or irritation.³ As such, the drive to have sex when sexually aroused is merely a drive to rid oneself of a particular type of bodily irritation. However, Scruton argues that viewing sexual arousal in such a simplistic manner doesn't account for the intense complexity of the state; when one experiences sexual arousal, they do not view it as an annoyance or an irritation that they must relieve at once with the mere act of intercourse. Instead, it is a state in which the body becomes sensitive and aware of the look, the caress, and the intention of the other. The aroused subject experiences pleasure that is born from the actions of the other, under the condition that the other is viewed as a sexual being with sexual intentions towards the aroused subject. This is not to say that arousal is just the feeling of pleasure at the touch of the other, as then there would be nothing to differentiate it from the pleasure experienced when one is hugged by a dear friend or kissed on the cheek by a relative. Scruton claims that arousal is different in that it occurs when one recognises the sexual intention of the other, under which their touch, glance, or look is a vessel of such intention: "Arousal is a response to the thought of the other, as a self-conscious agent, who is alert to me, and who is able to have 'designs' on me".⁴ Thus, Scruton aims to paint an image of sexual arousal as a *reactionary state* that finds its origin in the recognition of the intention of the other. I dissent from this line of thought, suggesting

² Scruton 2006, p. 16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

instead that this intentionality is characteristic of sexual desire as opposed to sexual arousal.

In his conception, Scruton aims to show that sexual arousal is more than a purely bodily state in which the agent itches to relieve a bodily sensation. I counter his view by suggesting that sexual arousal is indeed a *purely* bodily state. To expand, sexual arousal is a bodily state that serves as a reminder that our body craves sexual release, but this craving need not require the intentionality that Scruton prescribes of it. One can become sexually aroused by the thought of a sexual act, an object, or pornography. Furthermore, one could even become sexually aroused subconsciously, as in cases of nocturnal penile tumescence – ‘morning wood’. In these cases, one is not recognising the presence or the actions of another that are indicative of sexual intentionality but is rather experiencing arousal in virtue of being stimulated by something. Essentially, the intentionality of the arousing object need not be recognised for the experience of sexual arousal to be classified as such.

The image of sexual arousal Scruton forms lends itself well to the account of sexual desire I wish to appeal to. Sexual desire is an *emotional state*, coinciding with the reactionary nature prescribed to sexual arousal on his account, which is characterised by both the recognition of oneself as a sexual agent undergoing sexual impulses and the recognition of the object of desire’s role as a willing receptacle for such sexual advances. This mutual recognition brings the possibility of culminating the encounter in a sexual act to the fore. As Scruton says:

My sense of myself as identical with my body, and my sense of you as identical with yours are crucial elements, both in the aim and in the reception, of the arousing caress. I am awakened in my body, to the embodiment of you. Underlying the woman's state of arousal is the thought: “I, in my body, am something for him”, and her response - the 'opening' to his approaches, and all that is entailed in that - must be understood in part as an expression of that thought, and of the interpersonal intentionality that is built upon it.⁵

As such, alluding to Nagel, when one apprehends the object of their sexual desire, they have a double recognition of sorts: they recognise something about themselves and recognise something about the object of their desire.⁶

Given that I am characterising sexual desire as an emotion, I shall endeavour to uncover its nature in the following segment by assessing what triggers the emotion and determining what each particular instance of it has in common.

3. Formal Objects and Correctness

In many cases, emotions are intentional in the sense that they are typically directed at something. For example, in the case of anger, one is usually angry at something or

⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶ Nagel 1969, p. 10 – “A double reciprocal incarnation”.

about something.⁷ At times, one's emotions may invoke actions, but this is not always the case. In *Emotions and Formal Objects*, Teroni claims that these objects that direct the emotions are called *particular objects*, and the role they have is to "individuate instances of emotions belonging to the same kind".⁸ However, when one wishes to uncloak an emotion in its entirety, it helps to determine what is shared by each particular object that directs each instance of that emotion: Teroni calls this commonality between instances of an emotion the *formal object* of that emotion.⁹

The formal object of an emotion serves to unify different instances of each emotion type by pinpointing a shared property.¹⁰ As I have established in the previous segment, sexual desire is not reducible to the purely bodily state of sexual arousal. As such, the formal object cannot be a mere desire for sexual release following stimulation of some sort, as cases of sexual desire would then lack the intentionality we are seeking to ascribe to them, rendering them indistinguishable from cases of mere sexual arousal. Furthermore, sexual desire is not reducible to pleasure experienced at the touch of another, as this would not distinguish it from pleasure that comes from non-sexual acts such as handholding, hugging friends and family, or kissing relatives on the cheek. However, it seems a close contender for the formal object of sexual desire to be a desire for intimacy of some sort with another, given that intimacy involves an intentional recognition of the presence of another. Nonetheless, if we identify sexual desire as a desire for mere intimacy with another, we run the risk of including cases which exhibit such intimacy without sexual motivation behind it; for instance, one can be intimate with friends or family. Given that sexual desire is manifestly sexual in nature, perhaps we can modify the intimacy characterisation to hold that to sexually desire an object is to want *sexual* intimacy with that object – sexual intimacy being a type of intentional sexual closeness. Therefore, we can say that the formal object of sexual desire in every case is a pleasant sexual partner where 'pleasant sexual partner' is defined as something or someone that the desirer apprehends as an appropriate receptacle of their sexual intentions which is motivated by the live possibility of culminating such sexual intentions in the sexual act.

In *Emotions and Formal Objects*, Teroni outlines the functions of formal objects in relation to their respective emotions: "The formal objects of emotions allegedly play three roles. They (i) are different for each kind of emotion, (ii) make emotions *intelligible* reactions, and (iii) are fundamental in assessing their conditions of *correction*".¹¹ The second and third of the three conditions are relevant to the discussion on correctness. They are formally stated as follows: (ii) Intelligibility Requirement: "Formal objects are needed to make sense of emotions"; (iii) Correctness Requirement: "Formal objects are needed to assess whether emotions fit their particular objects".¹²

Teroni claims that the two requirements are connected in that the intelligibility of an emotion is characterised by the *justifying reasons* that prompt an agent to take the

⁷ Teroni 2007, pp. 395-96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

¹² *Ibid.*

stance of the emotion – sexual desire in our case – towards the particular object, and such a stance qualifies as an apprehension of the particular object of the emotion being felt:

Fear itself evaluates its particular objects as dangerous on the basis of these reasons; these reasons justify taking the characteristic stance of fear towards these objects, a stance that qualifies as an apprehension of danger. An emotion is a characteristic reactive stance taken towards the apprehension of justifying reasons.... Fear is a mechanism allowing a creature to be aware of danger as a result of the perception of reasons that make the emotion intelligible.¹³

As such, we can classify a sexual desire as *correct* when the subject feeling the sexual desire apprehends the particular object of their desire as a pleasant sexual partner for purposes that are evaluated on the basis of justifying reasons that serve to make the emotion intelligible. It is important to note that the standard by which we deem reasons as ‘justifying’ in order to make the emotion intelligible is set by the sufficiently rational individual. In that sense, if a sufficiently rational individual were to assess the justifications given by the one who desires and conclude that they make their emotion intelligible, then their desire is justified.¹⁴ The following case illustrates correct sexual desire: Sam has a correct sexual desire for Lisa when Sam apprehends Lisa as a pleasant sexual partner because she is conscious, attracted to him, and being receptive of his intention. Insofar as the justifying reasons serve to support the apprehension of the particular object – Lisa, in this case – as an agent who would reciprocate the attitudes necessary for the exchange of sexual energy that characterises sexual intimacy upon the awareness of Sam’s designs on her, the desire is correct.

On the other hand, we can say that an instance of sexual desire is *incorrect* when it does not fit its particular object, i.e., when the subject does not apprehend the particular object of their sexual desire in such a way that is evaluated on the basis of justifying reasons that serve to make the emotion intelligible. For example, keeping with our comrade Sam, we can say that he has incorrect sexual desire for Lisa when Lisa shows no ‘signs’ of being a pleasant sexual partner. In other words, sexual desire is incorrect when the subject cannot provide justifying reasons to suppose that the particular object of their desire embodies its formal object.

It is important to note here that incorrectness and correctness are amoral concepts. Typically, when an instance of sexual desire is negatively morally charged, we would say it is ‘perverse’. However, as I have stated, negative moral judgement for an instance of sexual desire cannot be justified merely in virtue of the instance being incorrect. The following sections will expand on what more is necessary to determine when sexual desire is deserving of denigration.

¹³ Ibid., p. 413.

¹⁴ Determining what characterises the ‘sufficiently rational’ individual is a heavy task, which undoubtedly lies beyond the scope of this paper, as with consciousness. I take a sufficiently rational individual to be one who can fully understand the justifications presented and accordingly provide a reasonable assessment of their validity.

4. Sexual Perversion

In “Sexual Perversion”, Nagel offers an account of sexual desire that holds that sexual desire is characterised by the mutual recognition of agents. On his conception, agents go through several steps when they experience sexual desire that characterise a sexual interplay of sorts: I first become aware of myself as a sexual agent, then become aware of you, then become aroused at noticing you, then you become aroused at me, then I become aroused at you aroused at me, etc.¹⁵ Nagel holds that anything that disturbs this process of back-and-forth sexual awareness is labelled as perverse.¹⁶ This notion lends itself well to my definition of incorrect sexual desire, as when a sexual desire is incorrect, the subject of desire lacks justification for their emotion, i.e., the particular object of their desire is not correctly apprehended as a pleasant sexual partner, namely something that can reciprocate the relevant attitudes. Translating this to Nagel’s account, this may take the form of a disturbance of the condition that requires the object of one’s desire to be aware of themselves, then aware of the other. As follows, we can start the analysis of sexual perversion with the following trial definition: if a sexual desire is incorrect, then it is perverse.

Now, it is intuitive that when we call something ‘perverse’, we give it a morally derogatory label; furthermore, when we say a sexual desire is incorrect, we are implying that it is bad in some way or that it has gone wrong, so it seems fitting to equate the two. However, we can think of cases of sexual desire that are incorrect, but don’t seem to be deserving of moral denigration, for instance, sexual desire for inanimate objects. If one has sexual desire for an inanimate object, they have an incorrect sexual desire because they are not justified in apprehending the object of their desire as a pleasant sexual partner, namely something that would reciprocate the relevant attitudes necessary to characterise sexual intimacy upon awareness of like designs being directed towards it. It seems evident that, for example, if one were to sexually desire a broomstick, the broomstick is literally incapable of reciprocating, so their desire is incorrect, but not evidently perverse. Thus, incorrectness alone does not get us where we need to be in order to capture the morally negative content of the label ‘perverse’.

Perhaps we can try something like the following: a sexual desire is perverse if the object of one’s desire is incorrect, and furthermore, that one sexually desires this object *insofar* as they have an incorrect desire; namely, one sexually desires an object insofar as they cannot justify their apprehension of the object of their desire as a pleasant sexual partner. So, to illustrate this, suppose one has a sexual desire for an animal: their sexual desire is incorrect, as they cannot provide reasonable justification for their apprehension of the object of their desire as a pleasant sexual partner, but furthermore, that they desire the animal insofar as the animal is not something that would reciprocate the relevant attitudes. This seems to be getting us closer to what we need because, if we suppose that the lack of reciprocity is a feature of what makes the object desirable to the agent, it is akin to saying that the agent is taking advantage of the object of their desire, which, at least intuitively, seems morally reprehensible.

¹⁵ Nagel 1969, pp. 9-13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14; explicitly stated on p. 13.

However, I can conceive of a case in which one sexually desires an object. Let's suppose we use the broomstick example again, and their desire is incorrect, and furthermore that they desire the object insofar as the broomstick would not reciprocate, but this person is not really blameworthy. The broomstick is an inert object and would not object or consent in any case because it lacks consciousness. Perhaps what is needed is a definition of perversity that accounts for both the mental state of the desiring agent and that of the desired object.

I suggest the final definition of perversion: a sexual desire is perverse *if and only if* (1) the object of desire has a condition of consciousness that ascribes them agenthood, (2) the object of desire must be able to incur harm from unwelcome sexual advances, (3) the sexual desire is incorrect, and (4) the desiring agent is indifferent to the incorrectness of their desire.¹⁷ It is important here to emphasise that indifference is what makes the desire perverse, rather than ignorance. The indifference of the agent who desires means that they do not care that they are not justified in apprehending the object of their desire as someone who would not reciprocate upon gaining knowledge of the intentions being directed towards them

To illustrate this and make it clearer, let us go back to our friends Sam and Lisa. We would say that Sam has perverse sexual desire for Lisa when (1) Lisa is fully autonomous; (2) Lisa is able to incur harm from the unwelcome sexual advances; (3) Sam is not justified in apprehending Lisa as something that would reciprocate upon awareness of sexual designs being directed towards her because she is not giving any signs that suggest her openness to a sexually charged interaction with Sam; and (4) Sam is indifferent towards the fact that he is unjustified in apprehending Lisa as someone who would reciprocate the relevant attitudes if she was aware of like designs being directed towards her – Sam is indifferent to Lisa's lack of reciprocity. This seems to get us to the area we need to be in to fully encompass the negative content of perverse sexual desire.

In order to test this definition for practicability, let us run it through some fetishes and practices that are commonly cited as perverse and see if it classifies them as such. Let us focus on voyeurism first – a fetish in which one gains sexual pleasure from spying on unsuspecting people in compromising positions such as when they are nude or engaging in sexual acts.¹⁸ Now, a note about this particular fetish: it would cease to be classified as such if the victim were aware of their being watched and also derived pleasure from that experience. I am focussing on cases of unwelcome spying, akin to what we would call a classic case of a 'Peeping Tom'. This is perverse for the following reasons: (1) the victim is conscious and thus has the ability to reciprocate or not, and they are not reciprocating; (2) the victim has the ability to incur harm and would incur harm upon gaining knowledge of the voyeur's actions; (3) the spy is incorrect in apprehending the victim as someone who would reciprocate upon awareness of designs directed towards them, as no evidence points to their being reciprocal – if they knew that they were being spied on, they would not be pleased; and (4) the spy is

¹⁷ The indifference notion was inspired by a comment made by a comment given to me at the Undergraduate Philosophy Conference at the University of Toronto St. George Campus.

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

indifferent towards the lack of actual reciprocity and potential reciprocity, for they derive sexual pleasure from the fact that they are spying on the victim while the victim is unaware. This action is tantamount to a violation of the victim's privacy, which would be an unwelcome intrusion to the person being spied on.

The penultimate fetish I would like to assess is exhibitionism, a fetish in which one derives sexual pleasure from exposing themselves to nonconsenting others.¹⁹ This fetish is perverse because (1) the victim(s) are conscious; (2) the victim(s) can incur harm from the actions of the exhibitionist; (3) the exhibitionist is incorrect in apprehending the victim(s) as individuals who would reciprocate upon awareness of designs directed towards them, as no evidence points to their being reciprocal. Not only is there a temporal constraint in that the 'flashing' occurs too quickly for the victim to be able to show reciprocal signs prior to the act, but there is no reason for the exhibitionist to assume that their victim would reciprocate, given they flash an unwitting audience. Finally, (4) the exhibitionist is indifferent towards the incorrectness of their sexual desire, for they derive sexual pleasure from the fact that they are exposing themselves to an unwitting, nonconsenting, nonreciprocal audience.

The final case I would like to consider is rape, and I will assess rape committed on a fully aware and conscious victim and rape committed on an inebriated or unconscious victim separately. The former is evidently perverse on the definition given, and I will argue that the latter is as well, but for different reasons. When one sexually desires the thought or commission of rape on a fully sentient victim, their desire is perverse because the victim has the ability to either reciprocate or not, and they are not in any way reciprocating. The victim can and is incurring harm from the actions of the rapist, the rapist has an incorrect sexual desire, and the rapist is indifferent to the incorrectness of their desire.

On the other hand, when one sexually desires the thought or commission of rape on an inebriated or not fully aware victim, they may appeal to justifying reasons in order to defend their desire, such as 'they are aroused', or 'they are not resisting', maintaining that their desire is correct. They are mistaken for several reasons. First, the victim's autonomy is impaired, which removes their ability to reciprocate or resist. Even if the victim is aroused, they lack the situational awareness that they require in order to make self-directing decisions. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, they are incurring harm even if they are not conscious. All of this goes to show that rapists do in fact have perverse sexual desires, despite what 'justification' they attempt to appeal to. Furthermore, they are indifferent about their lack of justification because they know that their desire is incorrect – they have all the relevant contextual information – and they still act on their desire. As follows, in any case, rape is a perverse sexual desire.

An important note to make at this point is that, evidently, if sexual desire is correct, meaning that the desiring agent is justified in apprehending the object of their desire as a pleasant sexual partner, namely someone who would reciprocate the relevant attitudes and intentions upon awareness of such designs being directed towards them,

¹⁹ Ibid.

then it is not perverse. An interesting finding along the same line of thought is that some sexual fetishes that have been previously assessed as perverse are no longer classified as such; for instance, polygamy, as well as sadism and masochism.²⁰ Deviation from the 'norm' does not necessarily make one privy to moral denigration. The origin of perversity finds itself in incorrectness and then follows a process of evolution with the addition of the other features outlined by the four conditions that bring it to its final, morally reprehensible state.

5. Shortcomings of the View

Even though my account effectively classifies several fetishes into the categories of perverse and not perverse, there are a handful of cases that escape clear classification. The first subset of problematic cases includes those that feature objects of desire with questionable agenthood. In order to illustrate this shortcoming, I will consider cases of bestiality, paedophilia, and sexual desire for robots or AI.

First, we can assess bestiality – a fetish in which a human sexually desires non-human animals. The difficulty in classifying whether cases of bestiality are undoubtedly perverse comes from the fact that organisms vary in how they behave in virtue of having different capacities and cognitive abilities. As such, it is hard to determine both (a) whether the non-human animal is undoubtedly fully autonomous or has a level of consciousness that makes it fully aware of its circumstances to the extent necessary to make self-directing decisions, and (b) whether the non-human animal is showing signs of reciprocation or distress during the commission of the sexual act by the human. It seems evidently perverse if a human is forcing themselves on an animal and the animal is showing overt or clear signs of distress – thus violating condition (2) of the definition of perversity – but what if we conceive of a case in which an animal does not resist the sexual advances of a human? Do we have enough evidence in any case to determine whether the animal is reciprocating or consenting? I would still call it perverse when a human engages with an animal sexually without knowing definitively whether the animal intends to reciprocate or is reciprocating, according to its unique way of doing so, even if it is not resisting. In order for the human to avoid classification as perverted when engaging with a non-human animal, they would have to know enough about the mental state of the animal in order to tell without a doubt that the animal is fully aware and understanding of their circumstances, prompting them to reciprocate the relevant desires and attitudes, which in many instances is not the case. It is easier with humans because we have become accustomed to verbalising and making explicit our consent or non-consent, and even when we are unable to do so, we know why we are unable to do so. Given that we have an idea of what conscious agency looks like for a healthy individual that is not inebriated or incapacitated in any way, we can tell when something is incapacitating or impeding us. We do not have the same ability for other species because of the presence of a communicative barrier.

²⁰ Nagel 1969, pp. 14-15.

Another troubling case is paedophilia. We can see that if a child is not reciprocating or is showing overt signs of distress or harm, following the conditions given for perversity, then the adult's desire is perverse. However, what if we conceive of a case in which the child does reciprocate or is showing signs of being receptive to the adult's intentions? There is much to be said about the reciprocal status of a child: is there a point before the legal age of consent that the child can be said to be sufficiently aware or cognitively mature enough to have an awareness of their circumstances?²¹ If the answer to that question is 'yes', then cases in which the child consents and would reciprocate, namely correct cases of sexual desire, are not perverse on my account. This is an unfavourable conclusion because the account must provide intuitive results, and intuitively and legally, paedophilia ought not to fall under the scope of 'acceptable sexual desire'. Appealing to the legal age of consent helps my account by drawing a definitive boundary between when a child is said to have the capacity to make fully autonomous decisions. Although such a boundary may be arbitrary, it is necessary in order to prevent needless harm from being imposed on children that may not have had the level of awareness required in order to protect themselves or reject the advances of the adult.

Yet another fetish that straddles a similar line is sexual desire for robots, given that the question of the level of their consciousness is a contentious debate. As of now, there still seems to be a clear line drawn between human consciousness and that of even highly developed AI, but it is not inconceivable that as time progresses, and subsequently so does technology, this could change. This poses an issue for my account because it makes it difficult to determine whether we ought to treat sex robots as inert objects or agents deserving of moral consideration. For, if we consider them inert objects, then sexual desire for one would be incorrect, but not necessarily morally reprehensible. Alternatively, if we come to realise that they share the level of consciousness that we do, effectively rendering them able to understand and reciprocate intentions and designs of the relevant sort, they are also included within the scope of moral consideration.

The second implication of the account is that we leave out of the definition of 'perverse' desires for inanimate objects. As follows, one can have a sexual relationship with their table, for instance, and not be labelled as a pervert, which might not be the intuitive answer. In order to illustrate this worry, I would like to provide a case study: Edward Smith is a 'mechaphile', a person who is sexually attracted to different types of vehicles, whether it be aerial transportive vehicles like aeroplanes, trains, or simple cars. He had hundreds of such sexual partners before he committed to his Volkswagen Beetle.²² The first thought that many may have upon considering this case study is, 'this has to be perverted', but I stand by my account and suggest instead that Edward is not a pervert, but a man who simply has an *incorrect* sexual desire, and as stated previously, incorrectness and correctness are amoral concepts. This is because in desiring what he desires and carrying out the subsequent acts that spur from such desire, he does not harm anybody – the object of his desire cannot incur harm in virtue

²¹ World Population Review, 2020.

²² Moye, 2013.

of the fact that it is inanimate. Much can be said about what constitutes harm for another, but the most important potential receptacle of harms in virtue of Edward's acts are the cars themselves, and given that they are inanimate objects, they aren't being harmed at all.

The discussion on the nature of sexual desire for inanimate objects raises questions about fetishes like necrophilia, in which one derives sexual pleasure from the notion of carrying out various sexual acts with a corpse. If we consider a corpse to be nothing more than an inert object which physically cannot reciprocate in any case, akin to a car or a broomstick, the necrophiliac has an incorrect sexual desire, but not a perverse one. In this way, it would be reminiscent of our discussion on inanimate objects: one can be said to have an incorrect sexual desire when it is towards an inanimate object, but they do not seem to deserve moral denigration for it. However, this treatment does not cohere to our intuitions about necrophilia, namely, that it ought to be classified as perverse. Upon further examination, we can see that my account can classify necrophilia as perverse because even though the corpse itself lacks consciousness or agenthood, and thus lacks the ability to incur harm, the corpse can still be harmed in virtue of the fact that it once was animate, whereas a broomstick, for instance, never was and never will be. In virtue of the web of connections a person builds before they die which they are only able to do because they once were alive, they are identified by more than just their physical status. This motivates the thought that they ought to be respected in ways which inanimate objects are not.

6. Conclusion

Having an account on hand that effectively distinguishes cases of appropriate sexual desire from cases of sexual perversion is of the utmost importance, not just in a philosophical context, but in a legal or general social context. In this paper, I have aimed to construct a conceptualisation of sexual desire that paves the way for determining appropriate sexual desires from perverse sexual desires. The exceptional cases that I have outlined that seem to evade clear classification are not indicative that the account itself suffers from a dysfunction. Rather, they are reminders of the complexity and malleability of society and the organisms that compose it.²³

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