

## NARCISSISM AND OBJECTIFICATION

Commentary on: *The Advantage of Having a Female Partner*

My first reaction to Danaye-Elmi's eloquent paper is that she has run into a bad set of men. That reaction, however, is much too simple. Progress has indeed been made. Before the pathbreaking research of Masters and Johnson (published in two books in 1966 and 1970), both men and women used to believe that there was something called a "vaginal orgasm," produced in mature women by vaginal intercourse alone, without clitoral stimulation. Women who found that they did not have orgasms in this way were very often made to feel incomplete or inferior because they had only "clitoral orgasms," if any orgasms at all. My college roommate saw a therapist for years for this problem, and was told that she had not come to terms with her femininity. After Masters and Johnson, however, anyone who cared could learn that women never have orgasms without clitoral stimulation, and that the entire distinction between "the vaginal orgasm" and "the clitoral orgasm" was nonexistent: all orgasms are clitoral. Sometimes vaginal intercourse indirectly creates enough such stimulation to cause an orgasm, but, as the research showed, that was typically not enough, not for most women. At this point, women stopped feeling guilty and started asking their partners to be more attentive to their needs (if they hadn't done so already without reading the research, just by understanding their own bodies and what their bodies actually required). At this point, too, many men, at least, made it a point of pride and/or decency to be attentive to what women's bodies really required, and there was at least some improvement in the level of sexual understanding and communication between men and women. Those who didn't care about these things could no longer have the excuse of ignorance.

Nonetheless, the problem that the extract from Lawrence displays has not gone away. A recent issue of *Cosmopolitan* (which I perused, I hasten to add, in a dull moment at the hairdresser, when I could not read a philosophy manuscript I was supposed to read because I did not want the perm solution to spill on it!) contains an article on what women need in bed, which women are urged to tear out and give to their male partners. The article emphasizes the great importance of foreplay for women, the relatively slow rate of a woman's initial arousal compared to that of a man, and also the importance of the man's not pressuring the woman constantly during intercourse by asking, "Are you coming yet?" So it would seem that the problem has not gone away. Many men are still focusing primarily on their own sexual needs and are impatient with the different needs of women.

Although I think Danaye-Elmi's specific legal argument is ingenious, it seems to me that we do better to approach the problem, first, at a higher level of generality. I shall then return to law via a detour through feminist theory, but my legal approach to issues of both sexual orientation and sex equality will still be more general than Danaye-Elmi's, because I think that it is in this way that her problem is best addressed.

All right, if it isn't excusable ignorance, what is this male behavior? I'd call it narcissism. Narcissism is the personality defect that consists in attending overwhelmingly to one's own needs, desires, and fears. For the narcissist, other people exist, in a shadowy way, but they are not fully real. They loom up the other side of the huge inflated self, as facilitators or inhibitors of the self's projects. It is usually convenient for the narcissist to project onto these half-real others motives and desires that suit the self, rather than to inquire about the real other's real motives and desires. The appeal of pornography consists largely in the fact that it enables (and reinforces) this sort of projection, allowing the reader or viewer to live in a completely narcissistic universe, where others are nothing more than the projections of the wishes of the self. For the narcissist, "real" sexual activity is nothing more than pornographic fantasy attached to a conveniently warm body.

Immanuel Kant thought that all human beings become narcissists when they have sexual relations. His thought was that the powerful sensations and urges characteristic of sexual arousal make it impossible to attend to the otherness of the other person. So intent is the aroused person on his or her own gratification (and Kant included both men and women in this critique) that real concern for a real other is not possible, at least not then.

Kant seems to me wrong about sexual relations. There can be, and frequently are, sexual acts in which the partners take delight in one another

in a non-narcissistic way, really focusing on the other person's needs and even taking additional sexual pleasure in their ability to gratify those needs. Kant is right, however, when he suggests that the problem of narcissism is a common one, when such powerful and urgent bodily needs are in play. Most starving people are also narcissists, and would steal a crust of bread from their brother if they had to. Sex is less imperious than acute hunger, but it is imperious nevertheless. So there is always danger afoot: people who are ordinarily attentive to their friends may become narcissists in sexual relations, all the more since in sex deep anxieties and insecurities are exposed and the self therefore needs not just pleasure, but also protection. What the mere drive for pleasure does not produce by itself, fear may well succeed in creating.

Both men and women can be sexual narcissists. What form might a woman's sexual narcissism take? Well, one example might be a scoffing or contemptuous attitude toward a man who was experiencing sexual difficulties. Let's not forget that women are always ready to perform, and men are not. Literature is replete with examples of women holding that fact over the head of vulnerable men, in a way that certainly suggests an indifference to the men's own feelings and experiences. Another form might be an anxious focus on one's own sexual state. Women who have difficulty having orgasms are sometimes so wrapped up in this difficulty that they assume that the man's pleasure will take care of itself, and they don't think very much about it. Both of these are cases of narcissism.

Nonetheless, it does seem to me that Danaye-Elmi is right: narcissism is a particular problem in relations between men and women. Recent psychological research on adolescent boys has shown some reasons for this. In *Raising Cain*, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson discuss boys for whom the feelings of others—including their sexual partners—are not fully real. They trace the problem back to inadequate treatment of young boys' fear and shame. Research shows that parents, including mothers, don't spend nearly as much time talking with little boys about their emotions and feelings as with little girls. When a boy asks, "Why is Johnny crying?" he typically gets a cursory answer. A little girl gets a longer answer—because the parent, and usually it is the mother, just expects that her daughter will be interested in emotions, and doesn't expect that her son will. The result is that such boys grow up emotionally illiterate, full of the usual human fear and anxieties, but unable to talk about them, and unable to imagine the inner world of another because they have never cultivated their own. Not surprisingly, such boys treat women like objects. They have no way of making them real to themselves. Sadly, cultural

stereotypes of masculinity all too often underwrite these practices, telling everyone that a real man doesn't need to think about messy things like emotions and feelings.

So there is a general problem about how boys learn to negotiate and express their humanity. This problem leads, in turn, to an inadequate grasp of the humanity of others. In sexual relations, these difficulties are revealed in a form that is heightened by the acute vulnerability we all experience in sexual relations. These difficulties are further compounded, in heterosexual relations, by the many cultural inducements to consider women as delicious objects for the delectation of men, rather than as real and separate beings. The feminist critique of objectification applies, as well, to sexual relations between men, or between women. There can be little doubt, however, that objectification is a particular problem in male-female relations.

Objectification—treating as an object someone who is really a person—is a complex notion. In *Sex and Social Justice*, I argued that it involves a number of distinct types of treatment: denial of autonomy, instrumentalization, denial of particularity, denial that the other's thoughts and feelings matter, denial that the other's bodily integrity matters. But instrumentalization, I argued, is at the core of what is objectionable about objectification. If a man thinks that a woman is a kind of trophy, something there to gratify his status, or pride, or desires, this can lead directly to other baneful types of object-like treatment. For our purposes, what's relevant is that viewing women as instrumental naturally conduces to an indifference to women's real feelings and thoughts. If she is just there to gratify the man, then what she thinks and says makes little difference, except insofar as it affects the likelihood that he will get what he wants.

Objectification of women by men is a particular type of narcissistic denial of another person's reality. As such, it very likely has the deep human causes that Kindlon and Thompson identify—fear of one's own weakness, inability to confront one's own fear and weakness. Cultural factors, however, already play a role in their scenario. The shame that a "real man" feels at the thought that he might be afraid is a driving force in turning such a man away from self-understanding and understanding of others. And, as mentioned, the repeated depiction of women as tasty objects for male delectation makes it all the easier to refuse such understanding.

To these factors we can now add sex hierarchy. As John Stuart Mill wrote in *The Subjection of Women*, little boys are all too often brought up to believe that simply in virtue of being male, they are superior to one half of the human race. This thought, Mill says, turns them into petty despots

who must have their way, no matter what it means for the other person. The idea of one's own superiority (not at all incompatible with fear and shame about one's real weakness) reinforces the thought that women are merely instruments for the man's own use. Thus, a culture of hierarchy further reinforces narcissistic objectification.

What might the remedy be for these ills? Many women of my generation despaired of a remedy. As a point of principle, they sought out sexual relations with women. By now, feminist women are less committed to the ideal of lesbian separatism, because it seems evident that the future is not unalterably bleak. Many men are not narcissists, and male children can be brought up in ways that go against bad social norms. The remedy, then, would appear to be informal and educational, creating new pictures of gender that are less oppressive than the old pictures.

What does law have to do with all of this? Catharine MacKinnon, the leading feminist critic of objectification, happens to be a lawyer, so, unlike those of us who are feminist philosophers or poets or novelists, she focuses on that question, and she has gone a long way with it. MacKinnon's analysis of sex equality focuses on the goal of doing away with hierarchies of power based on sex. As with race, so too with sex: the equal protection of the laws is not satisfied with formally similar treatment. It requires an end to hierarchies of domination. MacKinnon has put this insight to work with great success in the analysis of sexual harassment, and with illuminating insight, if not practical success, in the analysis of pornography. By contemplating the changes in the workplace that have occurred since 1970, one can see that law does make a difference, that women are at least less likely to be viewed as object for men's use and pleasure, simply because men know that they cannot get away with that. I've been in the academy since 1964, when I entered college, and I've seen great changes. It is difficult to believe that these changes are utterly unconnected with more general changes in men's attitudes to women as sexual partners, hard though it would be to trace these causal connections.

What of same-sex unions, Danaye-Elmi's topic? First of all, it is common to claim that the anxiety America currently feels about same-sex unions is really part and parcel of an anxiety about female equality and independence. Andrew Koppelman and Sylvia Law have argued that discrimination against gays and lesbians is, in that sense, a form of sex discrimination. Their contention is perceptive and very likely correct.

I would prefer, however, to emphasize a more general connection between the feminist analysis of equality and the issue of same-sex unions.

The deep insight in MacKinnon's analysis of equality is that a genuine commitment to equality entails that there be no feudalism, so to speak: no class of privileged persons in law, and no class of subordinate persons. Right now, gays and lesbians are a class of subordinate persons, denied rights that lie at the heart of a human being's chances for flourishing. They are in effect being treated as mere objects, mere instruments for the use of the dominant group, who in good narcissistic fashion treat lesbians and gay men as fear-fantasies, projections of their own insecurities, rather than as people in their own right. We can hardly claim to be against narcissism and in favor of equality if we allow this. So the general goal of extending full legal equality to gays and lesbians is an important part of the larger goal of creating a society that does not systematically objectify any group of its citizens. If law could create such a society, then we'd have a much better shot at solving the psychological and social problems that beset male-female relations.