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How Does Pornography Change Desires? A Pragmatic Account[1]

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Abstract: Rae Langton and Caroline West famously argue that pornography operates like a language game, in that it introduces certain views about women into the common ground via presupposition accommodation. While this pragmatic model explains how pornography has the potential to change its viewers' beliefs, it leaves open how pornography changes people's desires. Our aim in this paper is to show how Langton and West's discourse-theoretic account of pornography can be refined to close this lacuna. Using tools from recent developments in discourse theory, we propose that pornography issues implicit directives, and thereby introduces bouletic components into the discourse.

Keywords: pornography, desires, directives, discourse, feminist philosophy, presupposition

1. Introduction

In 'Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game', Langton and West (1999) famously argue that pornography changes people's beliefs by adding, via presupposition accommodation, certain

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propositions about women and sexual practices into the common ground.[2,3] Their pragmatic proposal is designed to capture two contrasting intuitions about the way pornography works. On the one hand, pornography, like speech, conveys certain *messages* with informational contents—messages about women, their status, their preferred sexual practices, and so on (Cohen 1996; Dworkin 1991, 1994; MacKinnon 1993; Strossen 2000). On the other hand, pornography's content seems to circumvent explicit appraisal, and instead alter people's beliefs in ways that are tacit, suggestive, and hard to take note of—akin to psychological conditioning (MacKinnon 1993; Scoccia 1996). Langton and West's account explains how pornography can do both. If messages about women are added into the common ground via presupposition accommodation, the messages are not 'out there' to be evaluated, and the accommodation of presupposed messages occurs covertly and implicitly. Nevertheless, presupposed messages have informational contents, can be true or false, and are an important part of speech. Thus, Langton and West's account offers an attractive way to explain how pornography implicitly changes people's beliefs by unifying two seemingly opposed views of how pornography changes human attitudes.

Despite its appeal, Langton and West's account is importantly incomplete. While it provides an elegant explanation for how pornography can tacitly change its viewers' *beliefs*, it falls short of accounting for another way in which pornography is often thought to affect people: by changing their *desires*.[4] The authors themselves acknowledge this limitation of their proposal:

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[2] For empirical evidence supporting Langton & West's (1999) claim that pornography changes beliefs and desires, see Donnerstein, Linz & Penrod (1987), Malamuth (1981); Malamuth, Addison, & Koss (2000); Malamuth & Check (1981, 1985); Miller, McBain & Raggatt (2019); Upton *et al.* (2020); Bridges (2019); Kingston *et al.* (2009); Peter & Valkenburg (2016); Tarzia & Tyler (2020); Wright, Paul & Herbenick (2021).

[3] Langton & West (1999) argue that (i) pornography says certain things about women *via* presupposition accommodation and (ii) pornography says those things with special, positional authority. In this paper, we focus on the first claim and remain non-committal to the second. Henceforth, by 'Langton and West's pragmatic account', we will refer to the first claim.

[4] The question of whether desire is political and shaped by ideology—including pornography—has a rich intellectual tradition in feminist philosophy and elsewhere (see, e.g. Bedi 2015; Fanon 1967; MacKinnon 1989; Echols 1989; Solanas 1967/2016; Willis 1983). For recent work on the topic, see, e.g., Eaton (2017), Srinivasan (2018, 2021) and Zheng (2017). For a view according to which pornography doesn't change desire, see Altman & Watson (2019).

> We have ⌈…⌋ said nothing about the important question of whether and how pornography changes desires, whether it produces violent desires, and what the relation between desire-change and belief-change might be. (Langton & West 1999: 318)

Similarly, in a later paper that builds on her and West's theory, Langton (2012) concedes:

> There is something missing in ⌈Langton and West's⌋ pragmatic picture ⌈…⌋. In addition to changing beliefs, pornography and hate speech evidently change the desires of consumers. People who consume pornography come to find desirable things they did not find desirable before. ⌈…⌋ It's not just that consumers come to believe different descriptive or normative propositions. It's that they come to want different things than they did before. (Langton 2012: 85)

In the same paper, Langton issues a plea for more discourse-theoretical work that closes the gap that leaves her and West's account incomplete.[5] But despite the influence of discourse-theoretical approaches to pornography, no one has, to our knowledge, offered such a model. In this paper, we aim to take the action Langton has pushed for.

To this end, we expands on Langton and West's discourse-theoretic model of pornography by introducing an additional discourse element, which is independently motivated by recent developments in discourse theory (Portner 2007, 2017, 2018), and show how our solution supplies the discourse-theoretic model with the resources to accommodate pornography's effects on desire-change in a straightforward way. The solution we propose is this: contents that pornography implicitly adds to the discourse are not only declarative, but also *directive*. Since directives target *preferential* discourse elements—more precisely, they add propositions or properties to the addressee's to-do list—this explains why pornography not only changes viewers' beliefs, but can also change their desires.

The aim of this paper is entirely constructive. Our main goal is not to *argue* for Langton and West's discourse-theoretic account of pornography, but rather to help develop its strongest version. We do this by showing how to fix one of the most salient shortcomings of their proposed

[5] '⌈S⌋ome more action ⌈…⌋ in this direction is, I think, sorely needed' (Langton 2012: 90). See also Eaton (2007: 247) and McGowan (2003: 183).

model, using only resources from discourse-theory. There might be independent problems with their account.[6] Since our model is parasitic on theirs, these would transfer to the expansion presented here. But at the very least, we will show that the inability to account for the influences of pornography on desire is not among them.[7]

Here is a brief outline of this paper. In §2, we start by giving a synopsis of Langton and West's discourse-theoretical approach to pornography. In §3, we introduce the discourse-theoretical framework needed to implement the idea that pornography issues directives, and propose a concrete way it can be utilized to account for pornography's effect on desire. §4 addresses potential concerns about the view that pornography changes desires.

2. Langton and West's Pragmatic Model of Belief-Change

In their attempt to explain how pornography can convey hidden messages about women, Langton and West (henceforth: L&W) assimilate pornography into a prominent account of linguistic interaction, famously spelled out in Lewis (1979b). According to Lewis, language functions like a rule-governed game. In the language game, our utterances constitute moves in the game that can, if legitimate, change the score of the language game. Among other things, the score consists of a set of presuppositions: a set of propositions accepted as true; in Stalnakerian terms, the *common ground* between me and the other participants in the game (Stalnaker 1974;

[6] See, e.g. Heck (2021). Several theorists have criticized the Austin-style speech-act framework of pornography, commonly associated with MacKinnon (1993) and Langton (1993), according to which pornography illocutionarily subordinates and silences women. But although Langton & West (1999) take their pragmatic/discourse-theoretic account to be in the service of this speech-act account, it's important to note that the truth of the former doesn't depend on the truth of the latter. It is perfectly possible that the pragmatic/discourse-theoretic account of pornography is true, while the view that pornography illocutionarily subordinates and silences with positional authority is not.

[7] Similarly, we are not committed to the view that discourse-theoretical models of pornography are the most promising analyses of pornography and its moral or legal status. For alternative analyses, see, e.g., Assiter (1988), Dworkin (2000), MacKinnon (1987), Neufeld (2020), Langton (1995).

1978; 2002).[8] Which moves I can make and what they contribute to the score depend on what is currently in the score. For example, in order for a speaker to make the move of asserting 'Even Jane could pass'—in order for the assertion to *make sense*—the proposition that Jane is incompetent must be presupposed and already part of common ground. But this is where linguistic discourse becomes special. In contrast to most other games, linguistic interaction follows a *rule of accommodation*—it evolves 'in whatever way is required to make the play that occurs count as correct play' (Langton & West 1999: 309):

> If at a given time something is said that requires a component of conversational score to be a certain way, in order for what is said to be true, or otherwise acceptable; and if that component is not that way beforehand (and if certain further conditions hold); then at that time, that score component changes in the required way, to make what is said true, or otherwise acceptable. (Langton & West 1999: 309)

So if my move is the assertion 'Even Jane could pass' and no one challenges it, we simply *accommodate* the proposition that Jane is incompetent into the common ground, as to make my move count as legitimate.

L&W propose that pornography operates in the same way. As in linguistic exchanges, we often need to accommodate certain propositions to make sense of what pornography explicitly presents us with. To borrow one of their examples, imagine seeing a woman who gives in to immediate ecstasy upon being gang-raped non-consensually. The explicit message pornography conveys, or what pornography explicitly 'says', is what we see: that the woman gives in to immediate ecstasy upon being gang-raped non-consensually. But in order to make sense of this, in order to make this move count as correct play, we are forced to accommodate propositions such as *Women enjoy gang rape*, *Women's 'no' means 'yes'*, or *Gang rape is permissible* in the common

[8] The Stalnakerian notion of common ground and the Lewisian notion of conversational score are not identical; the conversational score includes the common ground, along with other components of the conversation (for discussions and comparisons, see Camp (2018) and McGowan (2019). We will use 'conversational score' to represent a whole conversation and 'common ground' to refer to the component of the conversational score that keeps track of belief-like states.

ground (Langton & West 1999: 311–312). More generally, for explicit pornographic narratives to make sense, we add certain assumptions about women, sex, and other subjects into the common ground. This is how, according to L&W, 'pornography can say such things, even if it does not explicitly say them' (Langton & West 1999: 312). And if pornography *says* these things, even if only implicitly and tacitly, we have a direct explanation of how pornography can affect its viewers' beliefs.[9]

3. Pornography and Directives

As noted earlier, L&W's proposed pragmatic analysis of pornography accommodates belief-change, but as it stands—and as they themselves note—doesn't provide the resources to explain pornography's potential effects on desires. Through presupposition accommodation, propositions are added to the common ground. But in its traditional formulation, common ground does not include desires, so presupposition accommodation leaves desire unaffected.[10] We now show how introducing an additional component to L&W's discourse theoretic model, one which is independently motivated by current developments in discourse theory, can provide L&W with an elegant account of desire-change. We start by setting up the theoretical basis and subsequently apply it to pornography.

[9] A qualification is needed here: on the standard understanding, common ground represents the propositions *accepted*, not *believed*, by the participants in a discourse (Stalnaker 1974; although this account of the common ground is controversial: Some theorists argue that the common ground should be modeled as representing participants' beliefs. See, e.g. Berstler 2023). However, as Langton (2012) points out, it is straightforward that acceptance *can* turn into belief, which is all that is needed for L&W's argument. Recall that L&W's pragmatic account aims to give an account of the mechanism through which pornography conveys contents, which can in turn change viewers' beliefs.

[10] In a later paper, Langton (2012) entertained the idea of extending the notion of common ground as to include desires in order to address this exact problem. The idea is that by presupposing someone's desire, we can bring this desire into existence through accommodation. To be clear, Langton repeatedly emphasizes that the proposal is 'programmatic' (p. 86), 'exploratory' (p. 86), and that she is 'painfully aware that these are mere gestures in a direction where I would like to see some more action; but something in this direction is, I think, sorely needed' (p. 90). While we think that *as stated*, the idea might run into some technical and conceptual issues, we also take Langton to be on the right track. In line with the constructive spirit of this paper, we aim to flesh out and develop this proposal in a way that is technically and conceptually solid.

3.1. Common Ground and To-Do Lists

Inspired by Lewis's (1979b) analogy, a speech act can be understood as an act that has the potential to update a coordinate (e.g. common ground) on the publicly shared conversational state. It is now widely accepted that the conversational state (or discourse) consists of at least the following three components: the common ground (= informational component), the to-do lists of participants (= preferential component), and the question under discussion stack (= interrogative component). This standard view began with Stalnaker's notion of common ground (Stalnaker 1974, 1978) and has been developed by adding additional discourse components corresponding to interrogatives and imperatives. On Stalnaker's view, the common ground is a set of mutually accepted propositions representing the information that is shared by conversational participants. The canonical function of a declarative sentence is to add the proposition it expresses to the common ground. Parallel to this, others have proposed that an interrogative adds a question to another discourse component, what Ginzburg calls *the Question Under Discussion Stack* (Ginzburg 1995a, b; Roberts 1996).[11] Along the lines of Lewis (1979a), Han (1998), and Roberts (2004), Portner (2004; 2007) proposes that an imperative contributes to what he calls a *to-do list*. On Portner's view, just as a declarative sentence of the form 'Dec: *p*'[12] is a proposal to update the common ground by adding the proposition p to the common ground, an imperative sentence of the form 'Imp: *p*' issued to an addressee is a proposal to update the addressee's to-do list by adding the property[13] expressed by the imperative to the to-do list.

A person's to-do list represents the set of actions that they are committed to taking or making true. According to Portner (2007), to-do lists consist of multiple parts, such as the deontic,

[11] For the purposes of this paper, we can safely ignore the Question under Discussion Stack.
[12] We use 'Dec' for whatever force a declarative sentence conventionally expresses, and 'Imp' for whatever force an imperative sentence conventionally expresses.
[13] Portner (2007) views imperatives as expressing properties, rather than propositions, but we will remain neutral on this issue.

bouletic, and teleological parts. The deontic part of a to-do list is a set of requirements, the bouletic part is a set of desires, and the teleological part is a set of goals. If a property or an action, ϕ-ing, is in the deontic/bouletic/teleological part of a participant S's to-do list, this means that S is committed to perform ϕ-ing because S is required (= deontic) / wants (= bouletic) / is aimed (= teleological) to do ϕ-ing. For example, let's consider the following examples (Portner 2007):

(1) a. Deontic: Sit down right now!

b. Bouletic: Have a piece of chocolate!

c. Teleological: Talk to your advisor more often!

Portner (2007) argues that imperatives may target a specific part of the to-do list. That is, (1a) targets the deontic part, (1b) the bouletic part, (1c) the teleological part. While the essential function of a declarative is to convey information by adding the proposition expressed by the declarative to the common ground, the essential function of an imperative is to make a new requirement / desire / aim by adding the property or action expressed by the imperative to the addressee's to-do list. For example, if (1a) is accepted in a conversation, it will add the property of sitting down right now to the addressee's to-do list, and this means that the addressee is publicly committed to a new requirement (that is, the obligation to sit down right now). If (1b) is accepted in a conversation, it will add the property of having a piece of chocolate to the addressee's to-do list, and this means that the addressee has acquired a new desire (that is, the desire to have a piece of chocolate). In what follows, we will call imperatives of type (1b) *directives*.

To-do lists can contain more than just what's expressed by simple imperatives as in (1a-c). They can also include elements that correspond to conditional imperatives—i.e. sentences of the form *If p, then q!* For example, consider the conditional directive in (2), uttered by Beatrice towards Adam:

(2) If you ever go to Paris, go see the Louvre!

Because (2) is not just a conditional, but a conditional *imperative*, (2) targets Adam's to-do list, and, correspondingly, whatever (2) expresses is part of the to-do list if accepted. In order to capture sentences like (2), we can think of to-do lists as *functions* of common grounds. Suppose that the initial common ground c_0 is empty (i.e. {}) and one's to-do list is {if *p*, then *q!*} relative to c_0. If c_0 evolves into c_1, which is {*p*}, then the to-do list would be {*q!*} relative to c_1. In other words, if the common ground evolves to include new information, the to-do list will be updated accordingly. Applied to our example in (2), if c_0 is empty, but evolves into c_1, which is {*Adam goes to Paris*}, then the to-do list would be {*go see the Louvre!*} relative to the common ground c_1. This relationship between the common ground and the to-do list reflects the way newly acquired information can update our to-do list.[14]

Finally, note that while everyone in a conversation has the same common ground, to-do lists are relative to individuals. If A and B are in a conversation, there is one common ground, but there are at least two to-do lists (i.e. A's list and B's list).[15] Since to-do lists are participant-specific, conversational participants may have different to-do lists. In addition, to-do lists are essentially public. An action ϕ-ing is in a participant *S*'s to-do list *L* only if it is common ground that *S*'s ϕ-ing is in *L*. If *S* is sincere, then *S*'s to-do list will be a subset of what *S* actually intends to do. But if *S* is not sincere, then there might be a discrepancy between *S*'s to-do list and what *S* actually intends to do.

3.2. Pornography and Directives

Let's now see how pornography's desire-changing effect can be explained in this discourse model.

[14] See Charlow (2010) for further discussion of embedded imperatives and related issues.
[15] If you posit to-do lists for groups, and A and B constitute a group, there will be a third to-do list (i.e. A and B's list).

According to L&W, pornography adds declarative contents such as *Women's 'no' means 'yes'*, *Women have a secret desire to be raped*, to the common ground. We propose to extend this claim: pornography implicitly conveys *dual* contents consisting of declarative *and* directive parts. On this approach, pornography conveys contents like *Women have a secret desire to be raped, so rape them!* or *Women's 'no' means 'yes', so ignore women's 'no'!* Pornography, then, expresses (non-at-issue) *conjunctive contents*. The first part is declarative and updates the common ground (= informational component), while the second is imperatival and updates the to-do lists (= preferential component). Assuming Portner's picture, the imperatival part of pornography should be understood as targeting the *bouletic* part of a to-do list, which represents the addressee's desires.

Why is it plausible that pornography conveys these conjunctive contents? We propose that the directive part is provided through an implicit argument, in which it figures as the conclusion. We will now show that this follows from standard principles of conversational dynamics.

One way in which language conveys contents that are not said is through presupposition, which is at the center of L&W's proposal. But another way in which language achieves this is through *pragmatic inference*. Broadly, pragmatic inferences[16] are generated if what is said, *p*, in a conversational state *I* (where *I* includes interpretative assumptions, including the common ground and to-do lists of participants in context *C*), implies a different proposition, *q* (cf. Camp 2018: 49). For example, imagine that, in the morning, Hans' mother tells him that he can go to the movies if she gets her paycheck. At noon, she tells him:

[16] In broad terms, we here treat 'pragmatic inference' as the process of inferring what a speaker has meant based on contextual evidence such as what is said, what words are used, background assumptions, etc. Note that conversational implicatures are an example of pragmatic inferences, but not all pragmatic inferences must be conversational implicatures; i.e. not all pragmatic inferences must be generated by ostentatiously flouting one of the conversational maxims. See Bezuidenhout (2015) and Sperber & Wilson (1995) for multiple examples in which presuppositions give rise to further implicatures in the way we outline here. For discussion, see Davis (2024); Sperber & Wilson (1981); Levinson (2000), Recanati (2002); Wilson & Sperber (2012: ch.5).

(3) I got my paycheck.

Given the salient information in the common ground, what Hans' mother implied, but didn't explicitly say, is that Hans can go to the movies. Similarly, imagine that a coach tells their trainee:

(4) Whenever I shout 'now', jump!

When the coach yells 'now', given that the content of the conditional imperative is in my to-do list (and the coach knows that it is, and I know that the coach knows that it is, etc.), the coach implicitly directed me to jump.

The examples above are relatively simple. But the inferential mechanism can be more complicated and involve *interactions* between what is *presupposed* and what is *implied*. Imagine A telling B:

(5) My partner loves this song.

In uttering (5), A presupposes:

(6) A has a partner.

But (6) does not have to be the only content that A implicitly communicates. (6), together with the common ground and to-do list that are part of *I*, will give rise to *further inferences*. Specifically, *in* presupposing (6), A may implicitly imply a directive 'Don't ask me out for a date!' and advise B not to ask A out for a date. To illustrate, suppose the following social principle is prevalent in A and B's social context:

(7) If someone has a partner, don't ask them out for a date!

Correspondingly, what is expressed by (7) is part of B's to-do list, and A knows that it's in B's to-do list, and B knows that A knows that it's in B's to-do list, etc. But taken together, (6) and (7) imply (8).

(8) Don't ask A out for a date!

The result is that, given the contents of the common ground and to-do list, the utterance of (5) not only presupposes (6), but also implies (8). Taken together, the presupposed content (6) and the general principle (7) function as *premises in an argument* that has the directive in (8) as its *conclusion*:

(9)

1. A has a partner.
2. If someone has a partner, don't ask them out for a date!

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3. Don't ask A out for a date!

If L&W's discourse model of pornography is correct, the same mechanical interaction between presuppositions and other pragmatic inferences will apply to pornography: just like in (6)–(8), L&W's declarative contents will interact with *other* contents that are part of the discourse. To illustrate, let's focus on declarative content (10), which, by hypothesis, is added to the common ground via presupposition accommodation.

(10) Slapping women is enjoyable for (cishet) men.

One task of discourse elements such as the common ground and to-do lists is to represent our body of mutually shared background knowledge, norms, and principles. Thus, as before, we can safely assume that part of our common ground and non-declarative counterparts—e.g. the to-do list—represent a general principle, rule or norm for decision-making, some of which have directive force, such as (11):[17]

(11) (Given that certain conditions are met) If ϕ-ing is enjoyable for me, do ϕ-ing!

This general principle is in the form of a conditional imperative and may be subject to further constraints. For example, this principle may be effective only under the condition that ϕ-ing is

[17] See §3.1 for further details about the linking premise.

acceptable. If pornography also conveys that women secretly like to be slapped and so slapping women during sex is acceptable, this condition will count as satisfied. Furthermore, if the viewer is someone who identifies as a (cishet) man, from (10) and (11), the desire-targeting directive (12) will follow.

(12) Slap women during sex!

As in our earlier example, then, (10) and (11) figure as premises into an argument, the conclusion of which is a directive. Schematized:

(13)

1. Slapping women is enjoyable for (cishet) men. **⌜Langton and West's Declarative Content⌝**
2. I am a (cishet) man. **⌜Proposition in the Common Ground⌝**
3. Slapping women is enjoyable for me. **⌜from 1,2⌝**
4. If ϕ-ing is enjoyable for me, do ϕ-ing! **⌜General Principle in Addressee's To-Do List⌝**

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5. Slap women during sex! **⌜Directive Conclusion⌝**

We have now shown what we meant when we said the directive part of pornography is provided through an argument, in which it figures as its conclusion. Given the independently plausible assumption that our to-do lists host several general principles, the declarative contents newly added by pornography figure into arguments whose conclusion is a directive. More generally, the declarative contents that, according to L&W, are added by pornography will 'kick off' implicit arguments with the following belief-desire scheme:

General Inferential Scheme

P1 Langton and West's Declarative Content [in Common Ground]

P2 General Principle [in Addressee's To-Do List]

C Directive Content [in Addressee's To-Do list]

Thus, *both* L&W's declarative content (P1) and the directive content (C) are implicitly communicated through pornography. This is why pornography issues (at least) *dual* contents.

Importantly, in their paper, L&W's examples mainly focus on contents that centre around extreme cases of non-consensual and/or violent heterosex, such as *Women's 'no' means 'yes'*, or *Women have a secret desire to be raped.* But since L&W's main aim is to show how pornography changes beliefs via non-at-issue contents, the tacit messages sent by pornography may have a much wider scope, and include declarative messages about condoms, positions, foreplay, consent, beauty, oral sex, body image, STDs, orgasms, anal sex, duration, sex locations, lubrication, aftercare, anatomy, ejaculation, and sex-related communication—just to name a few. Thus, according to our proposal here, pornography may also convey dual contents such as *It is safe and pleasant to engage in anal-to-vaginal sex, so have anal-to-vaginal sex!* or *Sex with condoms is unpleasant, so don't use condoms!*

Similarly, since L&W take on MacKinnon's famous definition of 'pornography' as referring, roughly, to the 'graphic sexually explicit subordination of *women* in pictures or words' (see Langton & West 1999: fn. 1; quoted from MacKinnon 1987: 176), they mainly focus on tacit declarative messages pornography sends about *women.*[18] However, if we put MacKinnon's definition aside and engage with pornography on more substantive grounds, the range of its

[18] More accurately, following MacKinnon, they define it as 'the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context which makes these conditions sexual' (see Langton & West 1999: fn. 1; quoted from MacKinnon 1987: 176).

objects spans much larger. Thus, the targets and objects of the tacit messages sent by pornography may have much wider scope, too.[19]

Our proposed extension preserves the ability of L&W's original account to accommodate both 'reductive' and 'rationalist' intuitions of attitude-change of behavior, and provides a natural answer to L&W's question of what the *relation* between belief-change and desire-change is.[20] In line with the rationalist or 'liberal' family of intuitions, we argue that the declarative premise provides a 'reason' for desire-change. Since general principles are already in viewers' to-do lists, desires are revised in light of these new reasons; hence, desire-change by pornography has aspects of a 'rational' process.[21] In line with the 'reductivist' family of intuitions, our approach preserves the 'hidden' and tacit nature of pornography's influences, as our model solely appeals to implicit mechanisms to explain desire-change. The directive conclusion is never issued explicitly in pornography's messages, but rather implicitly contained in the two premises.[22]

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[19] Just to name a few examples, there is cishet porn with men as its sex objects; there is male gay porn with men as its sex objects; there are various kinds of trans porn, with trans people as its sex objects; there is also a slew of other kinds of porn with objects that aren't human beings at all, and so on. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

[20] As we point out in footnote 8, strictly speaking, the Stalnakerian common ground represents the propositions *accepted*, not *believed*, by the participants in a discourse (Stalnaker 1974; although see Berstler 2023). While propositions accepted can straightforwardly turn into propositions believed, it might even be argued that desires can change via mere acceptance of a proposition. In (5), B might know that A in fact does not have a partner, yet *pretend* and temporarily accept what they don't believe, and derive, on the basis of the merely accepted proposition, that A intends to communicate a directive (i.e. to not ask them out on a date). Settling questions of this sort will depend on how to best represent common ground and its fundamental functions (cf. Berstler 2023; Harris 2020; Stokke 2013; Zakkou 2023), which we stay neutral on in this paper.

[21] Note that for the purposes of this paper, we do not commit ourselves to any kind of (neo-)Humeanism about the belief-desire distinction and related questions about motivation. For example, we are not committed to the view that only desires have motivational force. It is theoretically compatible with our view that other attitudes, such as beliefs and intentions, have motivational force to varying degrees. As a result, insofar as pornography changes, e.g. normative beliefs, these might be directly motivating without mediating desires. Unfortunately, exploring these possibilities in detail goes beyond the scope of this paper, but we thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this question to our attention. We thank a reviewer for raising this question.

[22] Although our model captures important aspects of what motivates both the reductivist and liberal stance, it is also importantly different from either stance—again, just like the original discourse model we rely on. Although pornography changes beliefs and desires implicitly and without the explicit deliberation of its viewers (if it does), it doesn't do it through psychological a-rational conditioning mechanisms. And while the directive contents are the conclusions of arguments, these contents are delivered implicitly, and not 'by offering *explicit* political argument' (Langton & West 1999: 318). On our view, the declarative content conveyed by pornography via presupposition, together with the general principles in one's to-do list, constitute an *implicit* argument. Thus, our view should not be confused with the so-called '(explicit) argument model' that Langton attributes to Dworkin (Langton 2012).

Before we proceed, a couple of clarifications are in order. First, we have so far discussed how pornography may issue directives. But there is at least one way pornography may fail to issue directives. Take example (13). Even though P4 is already part of the to-do list, some people will accept P1 (= L&W's declarative content) when confronted with pornographic content, *but others might not.* As has been pointed out in much work on non-at-issue contents that are added to the common ground through the 'back door', it is possible to reject or block the accommodation of these contents (Cepollaro, Lepoutre & Simpson 2023; Langton 2018; Camp 2018; Haslanger 2011; von Fintel 2004; Heck 2021). If this is the case, the pragmatic inference we outlined in this section won't be initiated. This will have important consequences for desire-formation in pornography viewers: depending on whether you accept the declarative contents implicitly communicated through pornography, some people may acquire certain desires through pornography, but others may not. Thus, the fact that some people can reject the presuppositions triggered by certain pornographic contents can play an important role explaining the *variability* of desire-change through pornography. We will discuss the important issue of desire variability in greater detail in the next section.

Second, you might accept a directive, and update your to-do list with the corresponding content, although you, in a sense, do not 'really' have the corresponding desire.[23] For instance, consider again (2), in which Beatrice says to Adam:

(2) If you ever go to Paris, go see the Louvre!

Now, it turns out that Adam doesn't like art museums; however, Adam does want to impress Beatrice. So, Adam accepts the directive just because he wants Beatrice's approval. The familiar distinction between instrumental and intrinsic desires is well-suited to capture what's going on in examples of this kind. Instrumental desires are those the possession of which is explained by

[23] We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

appealing to other, more basic desires, while intrinsic desires are desired, at least in part, for their own sake (Hume 1748/2008; Smith & Harcourt 2004; Schroeder 2006). For example, I might hate bananas, but might desire to eat them as a means to stay alive on a desert island. Similarly, in our example, Adam merely desires to go to the Louvre (if in Paris) instrumentally to satisfy his desire to impress Beatrice. For our purposes, it doesn't matter whether directives change your instrumental or intrinsic desires—we merely claim that pornography can change your desires, be they more or less instrumental, via the mechanism laid out in this section.[24]

Finally, whether pornography will affect your desires will, in part, depend on whether you feel *addressed* by the directive in question—in other words, on the social attribute that is salient to you in acts of identification when engaging with pornography. Thus, there's another way in which pornography may affect different people differently. To illustrate this, consider argument (13). For the argument to go through, P2 in (13) must be true *and* reach a certain threshold of salience for the viewer. After all, we can identify with others on the basis of multiple attributes, where gender and sexual orientation are only few of them. Thus, certain arguments that could potentially be kickstarted through pornography will be effective only for those who ascribe a certain salience to a relevant social group, *and* identify with that very social group.

4. Desires, Actions, and Fictions: Possible Objections

4.1 Desires and Actions

One important objection to the framework we develop is that many consumers of porn with problematic contents evidently do not develop new action-oriented desires. After all, many people who watch, say, violent pornography will not themselves become sexually violent. Can the

[24] An interesting question, raised by an anonymous reviewer, is whether the distinction between *wanting* and *desiring* captures the instrumental-intrinsic distinction. We won't discuss this issue at length here, especially in light of the rich literature on the nature of desire, but we acknowledge that this question deserves further exploration.

discourse model developed here explain the different responses between different pornography viewers?

Yes. In §3.2, we have already seen ways pornography may fail to issue directives in the first place. But even if pornography issues directives, directives can be *rejected* and fail to update any desires. For example, if someone issues the directive 'Smoke!' to me, this doesn't necessarily lead to me smoking or even forming the desire to smoke, because I can simply reject the directive. In this case, I will not update my to-do list, and not develop any new desire. However, *if* I form the desire to smoke in response, the directive will certainly be a key element of the explanation behind the desire-formation. To illustrate, compare an analogous situation including belief and assertion. Suppose my friend tells me (or, if you will, a character of a movie states):

(15) Seoul is part of the Korean province Gyeonggi.

Upon hearing (15), I might not come to believe its content—e.g. I might know that (15) is false on independent grounds, or I might think that my friend is really bad at geography. But *if* I come to believe (15) in response to the utterance, the fact that my friend told me (15) (or I heard (15) stated by a character in a movie) will certainly be a key part of the causal story behind my belief acquisition. The same point holds for directives and desire.[25]

Next, even if I accept the directive and update my to-do list, thus acquiring the desire to smoke, this *still* doesn't have to lead to my smoking. This is because there could be a stronger countervailing desire in my to-do list.[26] I may have a desire to avoid lung cancer and this desire

[25] We take this point to apply to an objection made in Heck (2021). Heck notices that presupposition accommodation doesn't have to go beyond the local context: I can accept a presupposition for the purposes of a conversation without believing it, and drop it thereafter. We agree that this is possible, and we suspect that L&W would agree. No one says that it is a necessary consequence of the discourse-model that belief (or desire) ensues, just like it is not a necessary consequence of accepting explicit assertions that belief ensues. Someone might tell me that vaccines cause autism, and, because of certain background conditions, I accept the utterance—e.g. I might be too tired to protest, or see it as pointless, or want to be polite, or want to build trust, or want to hear more. But this doesn't make it any less true that if we want to give an explanatory story about how people change other people's beliefs about vaccines, telling each other certain things about vaccines will play a causally central role.

[26] It is possible to have inconsistent desires and so have an inconsistent to-do list. Accordingly, Portner's framework allows to-do lists to have inconsistent obligations, desires, goals, etc. (Portner 2007).

can offset my desire to smoke. Thus, desire doesn't always lead to action. This lesson also applies to sexual desires. Even if one acquires, say, violent desires through violent pornography, this doesn't necessarily lead to violent actions. This is simply because there could be a stronger countervailing desire in one's to-do list—for example, the desire to not be legally prosecuted. A prediction of this is that if pornography leads to desires that aren't easily offset by other desires, the corresponding desire should be more likely to be realized. This will plausibly be the case for many less extreme contents implicitly conveyed through pornography, such as some of those listed in §3.2.

4.2 Pornography and Other Fictional Representations

Another concern about discourse-theoretic accounts of pornography is that they might *overgeneralize*. After all, pornography doesn't seem special, so other forms of fictional media should have similar attitude-changing effects. Take car-chasing movies. If the discourse model is right, watching *Fast & Furious* should lead to the formation of desires for, say, illegal speed racing, heists, and car chasing (and, similarly, the formation about certain beliefs about car-chasing etc.). So, does watching fictional narrative material, such as *Fast & Furious*, lead to acquiring new desires? And if not, what's the difference between watching pornography and watching, say, car-chasing movies?

We think that forming new desires and beliefs in response to watching *Fast & Furious* is possible—and correspondingly, that the discourse model *in principle* generalizes to other types of fictional narrative media. In fact, we take there to be important continuities between pornography and narrative fictional art more generally; nothing we say here applies exclusively to pornography. Not only pornography, but narrative fictional art more generally, makes salient to us certain practical options that we haven't yet considered, or issues corresponding practical

prompts, and can thus shape our desires. And some of these practical prompts might be more problematic than others. Applied to *Fast & Furious*, viewers may in principle acquire a belief like, e.g. that driving fast and recklessly is enjoyable. This belief, together with the general principle that *if ϕ-ing is enjoyable to you, do ϕ-ing!*, may imply a desire-targeting imperative.[27] However, at the same time, there are crucial differences between pornography and *Fast & Furious* that explain why it's less likely that you'll want to participate in illegal street races upon watching the latter.

Let us first say a little more about why fiction can change desires and beliefs about the *real world* in the first place. As L&W—along with many theorists on fiction—emphasize, we often extract a significant amount of information about the real world from fiction,[28] since 'most fictional stories play out against a background [...] of purported fact' (Langton & West 1999: 316; see also Lewis 1978). For example, a reader of Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* will learn about the conditions in US women's prisons, one of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* will learn something about poverty in St. Petersburg in the 1860s, a watcher of Netflix's *The Crown* will learn something about the Royal Family, and so on. Correspondingly, in all these cases, the acquisition of new information might lead to the formation of new desires. Even fiction that is set in environments quite different from ours, such as science fiction or fantasy novels, can teach us a fair amount about, for example, social relationships, moral norms, practical possibilities for our own conduct, and human psychology. As Currie (1990: 49) puts it, fiction is like 'a patchwork of truth and falsity, reliability and unreliability, fiction-making and assertion'. *Whether* we will extract a given set of information from fiction will depend on a couple of things, however—among others whether the piece or genre is taken to have epistemic authority over a domain. For

[27] Recall from earlier that desire doesn't always imply action, simply because of the possible presence of other countervailing desires. In this case, a viewer might have a countervailing desire to stay alive.
[28] This point is acknowledged widely in the literature on fiction, even by those who are skeptical about the thesis that fiction asserts anything, be it implicitly or explicitly (see Cooke 2012, 2014). See fn. 36 for further discussion and references.

example, we might confer epistemic authority over matters of love but not over questions concerning the laws of nature to a romantic witchcraft novel, given that the existence of witchcraft clashes with too much of our background knowledge.

This is where the essential difference between pornography and something like car-chasing movies lies. While pornography is considered an epistemic authority on the 'sexual game', car-chasing movies are not considered an epistemic authority on the 'driving game'. Both Langton and her opponents (e.g. Antony 2017; Heck 2021) agree that pornography functions as an epistemic authority on the sexual game in the sense that people learn the 'rules of the sexual game' from pornography.[29] But people do *not* learn how to drive from car-chasing movies. As a result, viewers do *not* acquire from car-chasing movies a proposition like *driving fast is acceptable/permissible/legitimate.*

Someone might worry that this answer only pushes our original question back. *Why* is it that pornography has epistemic authority over sexual issues, and, say, car chasing movies don't? Although this important question isn't the focus of our paper, we agree with other theorists (Heck 2021; Srinivasan 2021) that the difference in epistemic authority is (at least partially) a result of the difference of the quality of our epistemic environment relative to these two domains.[30] How much epistemic authority I assign to someone can depend on my own epistemic situation. In general, the worse your epistemic environment regarding matter X is, the more likely you are to assign epistemic authority about X to someone who speaks on matters of X. But in many societies—including US-America—the epistemic environment that surrounds us in matters of sex is (in)famously bad. The epistemic environment relative to questions of driving, however, is

[29] What they disagree about is whether pornography also has a *positional* authority over the sexual domain, and so pornography not only gives information about but also *determines* the rules of the sexual game.
[30] Roughly, an epistemic environment is the totality of resources and circumstances relevant to achieving some positive epistemic status—knowledge, understanding, justified belief, and so on (the characterization strongly overlaps with Blake-Turner's (2020: 9) formulation). See Marin (2022) for a different characterization.

not. As a result, pornography serves as a socio-educational resource over questions of sexual behavior and has epistemic authority over desires in a way that *Fast & Furious* doesn't.

Why is our epistemic situation so different when it comes to these two domains? There are various reasons for this; we will confine ourselves to pointing to just a few. While we have explicit formal education on how to drive, there's no comparable level of formal education on *real sex.*[31] Within the US, if sex education is offered at all,[32] it is often restricted to so-called 'abstinence-only' or 'abstinence-plus' programs, which focus on the moral and pragmatic benefits of sexual abstinence and the shortcomings of being sexually active (Blanton 2019). Even more comprehensive classes rarely, if ever, involve detailed and nuanced information about *the whole range* of actions, expectations, communication and decision-making skills, etc. that are part of real sex. Nor do they provide critical examination and reflection of currently operant cisheterodominant norms and pornographic material, which could be conducive to sexual and so-called 'porn literacy' and help block its influence. This seems to be one among many crucial differences between pornography and examples like car chasing movies or ego-shooter video games which are often appealed to in order to reductio the claim that pornography changes attitudes.[33]

[31] The dire status of Sex Education in the United States has repeatedly been emphasized by expert organizations such as Planned Parenthood, and confirmed in the empirical literature. A 2016 study by the Guttmacher Institute found that, counterintuitively, even *less* U.S. teens are now receiving sex education than in the past (Hall *et al.* 2016).
[32] Currently, only 24 US states (and the District of Columbia) mandate Sex Education as part of students' school curriculum (Planned Parenthood 2016). In some of these states, parents can opt their children out of Sex Ed classes, and 'abstinence only' advocacy is mandatory. This even includes states that count as generally progressive, such as Massachusetts.
[33] See also Heck (2021), who notes: 'Adolescents are often starved for information about sex. What they get at school, and very often at home (in contemporary English-speaking societies, at least), is not just laughably inadequate but is not even directed at the question to which they really want to know the answer: how one actually has sex with someone (else). What passes for sex education, when it is not just thinly veiled sex-shaming and fear-mongering, is often limited to elementary biology and personal safety [...]. Even what one might have regarded as basic anatomical information—e.g. the function of the clitoris—is often omitted, for fear that acknowledging that sex is pleasurable might send the wrong message. Moreover, it should hardly be news that adolescents (and even adults) sometimes fail to engage with media critically. So, even if we do not know exactly why, it would hardly be surprising if some viewers failed to appreciate that 'porn sex' is often very different from 'real sex' and so 'learned' unfortunate lessons.' (Heck 2021: 22)

In fact, due to its taboo status, it can even be hard to obtain relevant *in*formal education on how to have sex. The same is evidently not true for the domain of car-driving. You can't just walk up to anyone and ask them questions about sex.[34] Sometimes, you might even have qualms asking a person close to you questions about sex. And to make matters worse, all this is happening against a background in which we have a poor perceptual evidence-base for sex. Sex in the real world is usually *private*, so we simply do not *see* sex happening in real, everyday life (except if we ourselves are part of it). In short, the epistemic status of sex seems diminished on multiple fronts, all of which constitute key sources of knowledge formation: formal education, informal testimony, and perception.[35] As a result, we don't have rich, reliable background knowledge that would block the acquisition of misinformation and/or desire updates through pornography. To the contrary—because our epistemic situation is so grim, pornography becomes one of the few epistemic resources for matters of sex that we have, and we will be more likely to accept issued directives as a result.

In sum, then, the difference between the influence pornography and car chasing movies have on our desires can readily be explained by the different properties of our epistemic environment about these matters, and, consequently, the difference in epistemic authority we confer to these sources. This difference will impact how likely it is that we accept certain assertions as true, and that we accept certain directives and, as a result, update our desires.[36]

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[34] Researchers in social science and communication frequently report that sexual communication between parents and especially boys or adolescent sons is infrequent (Ballard & Morris 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman 1999; Epstein & Ward 2008; Kim & Ward 2007; Nolin & Peterson 1992), and that adolescent often turn to peers or media for information. As Epstein & Ward (2008) point out, peers will often, in turn, be informed by media themselves.

[35] For empirical research on the (mis)educational effects of pornography, see, e.g. Wright (2011, 2012, 2014); Wright, Sun & Steffen (2018); Miller & Stubbings-Laverty (2022); Epstein & Ward (2008); Wang & Davidson (2006); Terán & Dajches (2020); Dajches & Terán (2021); Sun *et al.* (2016); see Aubrey, Dajches & Terán (2021) for a review.

[36] An important objection made by Cooke (2012) against this kind of response—i.e. that we extract information about the real world from fiction, especially when we confer epistemic authority—is that it doesn't follow that pornography *asserts* the contents, or is *morally responsible* for the formation of resulting false beliefs. For example, along with much work in aesthetics, we might hold that narrative fiction, including pornography, doesn't assert anything, but merely *invites to imagine*. The appropriate attitudes to take towards pornography's contents, be they

5. Conclusion

The constructive aim of this paper was to extend the explanatory reach of a pragmatic, discourse-theoretical model of pornography. To this end, we showed how a pragmatic model of pornography—initially proposed in Langton & West (1999) and Langton (2012)— can be refined to explain pornography's effects on desires. We proposed that pornography's declarative presuppositions figure as premises into arguments that have *directives* as their conclusions. In that way, pornography contributes to the introduction of bouletic components into the discourse. We also explained why it is possible that pornography sometimes doesn't induce desire (or belief) change, why it sometimes doesn't result in action, and why it changes desires although other fictional media, such as *Fast & Furious*, don't (or to a lesser extent). Of course, there might be independent, more foundational problems with a pragmatic approach to pornography (and narrative media more generally). We were not concerned with these problems here, because our aim was to show which problems the approach *doesn't* have.

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implicit or explicit, are thus *imaginary* beliefs ('i-beliefs') and desires ('i-desires') (Cooke 2012, 2014; Currie 1985, 2010, 2020; Livingston 2005; Todd 2012). While we undoubtedly sometimes extract information about the actual world from pornography, if this practice goes wrong, the epistemic blame falls on us, not pornography. As he puts it, 'unless there is some blameworthy authorial negligence or intent to mislead, acquiring false beliefs can hardly be held against the work or its author' (Cooke 2012: 238). We think this is an important objection that merits substantive response and engagement. While we think there is a powerful response—one that appeals to communicative norms and negligence—it merits more elaboration than we can do justice to here; hence we will take up this question in future work. We thank an anonymous reviewer for inspiring us to think more about the relation between fiction and belief/desire change. For further literature on this and related topics, see Cooke (2012, 2014), Currie (1995, 2020), Friend (2008, 2011), Goffin & Friend (2022), Lewis (1978), Sainsbury (2010), Marsili (2023), Eaton (2007, 2008), Liao (2013), Liao & Protasi (2013), and Langton & West (1999). McGlynn (2021) explicitly discusses (and criticizes) Cooke's argument.

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