

## **Schopenhauer's Sexual Ethics**

### **Abstract**

This chapter examines the ethical matters that arise from Schopenhauer's discussions of sexual love and sexual practices. It presents Schopenhauer's remarks on "pederasty", among other "unnatural lusts", and attempts to disentangle Schopenhauer's judgements on these practices from the principles that guide them. It considers these practices in the light of Schopenhauer's ethics of asceticism and his ethics of compassion and concludes that Schopenhauer's objections to them are not always moral in nature, strictly speaking, and where they are moral, they are not always based on the "unnaturalness" of the practices, but rather the harm they may cause.

### **1. Introduction**

Much of Schopenhauer's thinking about sex is nonsense. Take for example his theory that the will or character is inherited from the father and intellect from the mother (WWR 2 552). It didn't come from nowhere – dubious theories of hereditary intelligence, even specifically matrilinear ones, were in the air in early evolutionary science – but it's convenient for Schopenhauer that his own father was an industrious businessman, and his mother a celebrated writer in her day. Charitably, his willingness to associate mothers with intelligence might look like a reversal of his infamous misogyny, but, as one critic exclaims, 'no! The intellect, remember, is secondary and subservient to the will' (von Tevenar 2012: 153).

On the other hand, Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sexual love has been justifiably praised for its 'stunning originality', as 'path-breaking' and a 'major moment' (May 2011). It came to the attention of Charles Darwin, who quotes Schopenhauer in the revised and augmented edition of *The Descent of Man* (Darwin 1889: 586), and made an impression on D. H. Lawrence, who in 1908 annotated a copy of Schopenhauer's chapter *Metaphysik der Geschlechtsliebe* translated by Mrs. Rudolf Dirck with an omission of the word 'sexual' from the title as 'The Metaphysics of Love' (Brunsdale 1978: 120). The core of this metaphysics is summarized in one line: 'All instances of love ... are rooted solely in the sex drive' (WWR 2 549). It's thoroughly unromantic, and yet it still explains the urgency and seriousness of all romantic matters. No lesser task than the continuation of the species is at stake, and the full force of this collective task is channelled through mere individuals. Schopenhauer characterises it as 'blunt realism' (WWR 2 552). In fact, it offers two distinct but compatible kinds of realism: realism as opposed to idealism (the ideals of love are a fiction, and indeed are the subject matter of much fiction) and realism as opposed to anti-realism (love itself, as the all-encompassing sex drive, is no fiction).

Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sexual love is given a chapter-length presentation in *The World as Will and Representation* (Chapter 44). Ethical matters do bubble to the surface, and certainly there is something instructive about Schopenhauer's view. It explains, for example, why otherwise unsuitable couples find themselves nevertheless pairing up: because their suitability was decided at the level of species-interests, not their personal interests. This is that blunt realism again, but here there may be something therapeutic about knowing it; couples shouldn't necessarily expect to get along with one another, and if they don't get along then they shouldn't necessarily consider it their personal failure. And if they do want to get along, they shouldn't rely on romantic (that is, sexual) love alone. Instead, as Schopenhauer points out, they should aim for a 'friendship grounded in a harmony of temperament' (WWR 2 575). In ideal circumstances – and this is about as ideal Schopenhauer gets on the matter – the foundation for this friendship will be the very same combination of 'mutually corresponding and complementing physical, moral and intellectual qualities' that makes their sexual union suitable in the eyes of the species.

Here there lies another, potentially more troubling, broadly ethical issue: throughout Schopenhauer's theory there is the assumption of an ideal for the human species, a 'pure presentation of the type' (WWR 2 562), at which sexual partnerships unconsciously aim. While he never spells it out in detail, the implication in some places is that this ideal is purely to do with fitness for survival; he mentions, for instance, the risk that 'the race would be too weak to live long' (WWR 2 563) were certain partnerships made or not made. But, as this same language suggests, Schopenhauer's ideal is also racialized. To our relief, his is not a white supremacist racialization of the ideal human type; in fact, Schopenhauer considers whiteness to be unnatural, claiming, strikingly, that 'there is no white race', that whiteness is 'almost an abnormality', and that in sexual love, 'nature therefore is trying to revert to dark hair and brown eyes, as the fundamental human type' (WWR 2 564). Still, any notion of a racial ideal for human beings calls for a cautious approach. I will not attempt to get to the bottom of Schopenhauer's views on race here.

Instead, I want to focus on the ethical issues raised in the appendix to Schopenhauer's chapter on the metaphysics of sexual love. In this appendix, Schopenhauer discusses at length 'pederasty' (*Päderastie*), that is, sexual intercourse of old men with young boys. It ends with Schopenhauer claiming to have 'defended and recommended pederasty' (WWR 2 582), or to be more precise – and this may be important – to have given his opponents 'the opportunity to slander me by *saying*' (emphasis added) that he has done so. Before the appendix, in the chapter itself, Schopenhauer mentions pederasty just once, as an example of how the selection of an object of sexual satisfaction can be 'misled' by the sense of beauty, which 'degenerates into a pederastic tendency' (WWR 2 558). It is this remark that Schopenhauer revisits and reviews in the appendix, which he added to the third and final edition of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1859. He starts by partially reversing the judgment that pederasty is 'a misguided instinct' (WWR 2 576) on the grounds that it is culturally and historically ubiquitous: nothing that happens in every human society could be unnatural or a mistake. Pederasty, Schopenhauer argues, must perform a natural function, and it is his aim in the appendix to figure out what. Nevertheless, he is not prepared to admit that pederasty is natural in every sense: it does not produce children, which, according to Schopenhauer, is the

whole point of the sexual instinct. So, Schopenhauer settles for the following thesis: pederasty is nature's way of simultaneously satisfying the sex drive of those who are too young to produce healthy offspring (boys) and those who are too old to do so (old men).

There is a lot here to unpack. Moreover, the appendix is not the only place where Schopenhauer discusses pederasty in his published works. In *On the Basis of Morals*, Schopenhauer brings up pederasty in conjunction with 'onanism' and 'bestiality', all of which he classifies as instances of 'unnatural lust' (*BM* 132). We can take 'unnatural' here to mean what it does in the appendix, that is, non-procreative, as it is a meaning that he assigns to all three of these sexual acts. Schopenhauer does not doubt that they are rightly proscribed, but he discusses whether the grounds on which they are proscribed are moral or merely prudential in nature. He concludes that, of the three, only pederasty is a moral matter.

This leaves us with even more to unpack, but it also provides us with an opportunity. In discussing the morals of what he calls unnatural lusts, Schopenhauer reveals something of his stance on sexual ethics in general. In this chapter, I take the opportunity to disentangle Schopenhauer's sexual ethical principles from the conclusions he reaches by his application of those principles to specific sexual acts. Although it still leaves a lot of nonsense in Schopenhauer's views on sex, I will conclude that, in the abstract, his general principles regarding sexual conduct are defensible, and that, properly applied, they can even produce defensible conclusions, though they are not conclusions that Schopenhauer himself drew.

## 2. Sex and Asceticism

Ultimately, none of us should be having any sex. To be more precise, each of us would be better off (in some sense) were we to extinguish our sex drive and therefore not want to have any sex. For it is a well-known part of Schopenhauer's philosophy that all of us are creatures driven by the will to life and that this is the source of our endless suffering. The sex drive is exemplary in this respect: 'sexual lust is the quintessence of the whole fraud of this noble world ... For it promises so unspeakably, infinitely and extravagantly much and then delivers so pitifully little' (*PP* 2 285). It is a chief source of 'protracted suffering' but only 'brief joy' (*PP* 2 266). Accordingly, just as the path to salvation is found through the elimination (in some form) of the will to life, so the first step on that path is the elimination of the sex drive: 'Voluntary, perfect chastity is the first step in asceticism or negation of the will to life'; the ascetic 'does not will sexual satisfaction under any conditions' (*WWR* 1 407). The body may continue to manifest the sex drive in the form of genitalia, but the inner negation of the will to life, starting with the sex drive, belies the body (*WWR* 1 407; *WWR* 1 430).

Ascetic chastity is not just a step towards personal salvation; it's a step towards human extinction, which in Schopenhauer's view is not unwelcome. Without sexual need or pleasure, according to Schopenhauer, it is hard to imagine why human beings would choose to procreate at all. It would not appear to be a rational choice, assuming Schopenhauer's pessimism about the value of existence is true. 'Would not everyone,' he asks, 'have so much

compassion for the coming generation that he would rather spare it the burden of existence'? (PP 2 270). To say the same thing from a different starting point, those who do indulge their sex drive in a way that does lead to successful procreation condemn a new generation to the same life of inevitable suffering and misery. As Jorge Luis Borges writes: 'mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men'.

One would assume, therefore, that procreation is the worst sexual offence in Schopenhauer's book, but no. Quite the opposite. Worse than procreative sex, for him, are non-procreative sexual practices. This may be a bit surprising, given that procreation is the necessary and sufficient condition for producing the next generation of sufferers, while non-procreative sexual acts avert that catastrophe. But it isn't so surprising, or at least nothing rare: think of the difference in certain religious attitudes towards masturbation versus sex (or gay sex versus straight sex, or simply attitudes towards contraception). Schopenhauer even affirms the view that satisfying the sexual impulse is worse outside of wedlock (MN 1 276). Schopenhauer is disappointingly unoriginal and conventional on issues like these, in fact – except, perhaps, that he tries to put his own philosophical system behind these old views.

Take onanism for example. Schopenhauer couldn't be clearer about what's worse: '*Onanism* is far more blameworthy than natural sexual gratification' (MN 1 309). The reason he gives is that while (procreative) sexual gratification is 'the most vehement affirmation of life', onanism is 'merely the most vehement affirmation of the body' (MN 1 309). In the case of (procreative) sexual gratification, that is, something is affirmed that goes beyond pleasuring oneself, namely future human existence. In the case of onanism, by contrast, nothing but the self is affirmed. It is all stimulus and no motive (so the argument goes) and therefore unbecoming of human life: 'Man here behaves like a mere plant' (MN 1 309).

These are admittedly early thoughts of Schopenhauer's (manuscript notes from 1815), but something similar is going on when he turns to pederasty – another form of non-procreative sex – in the late works. In the appendix on pederasty to the chapter on the metaphysics of sexual love, Schopenhauer's penultimate remark is as follows: 'The true, final, and profound metaphysical reason why pederasty is reprehensible is that while the will to life affirms itself in it, the result of this affirmation, which is to say the renewal of life, is completely omitted, and it is this result that opens the path to redemption' (WWR 2 582). In *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer states the same argument in a general form before applying it to the case of pederasty. He has just explained that procreation for its own sake – that is, not for sexual pleasure but for producing offspring – would be 'be a very dubious act, morally speaking,' precisely because it results in beings who are condemned to suffer and is therefore 'an act someone might even say relates to conception from mere sexual drive as cold blooded premeditated murder relates to a death blow from rage'. He continues:

The damnability of all unnatural [i.e. non-procreative] sexual gratification is actually based on the opposite ground, because through it the drive is gratified, hence the will to life affirmed, but propagation is missing, which alone keeps open the possibility of negation of the will. This explains why it is only with the onset of Christianity, whose tendency is ascetic, that pederasty was recognized as a grave sin. (PP 2 286)

In other words, while procreative sex without the sex drive is morally dubious (because once the sex drive is out of the picture, we are left with what can only look like a malicious motive), non-procreative sexual practices affirm the sex drive but without any procreation. Each has given up on something – sex drive or procreation – but neither are asceticism, which would give up on both. However, since extinguishing the sex drive is the first step towards asceticism, procreation without the sex drive is at least closer to asceticism, while non-procreative sexual practices, so long as they are indeed merely affirmations of the sex drive, are further off, and here lies the argument for the latter being the worse of the two.

The early and the late versions of the argument are not exactly the same. In the early version, procreative sexual gratification is given the relative distinction that unlike in non-human lifeforms, the will is at least ‘excited through an external motive’ (MR 1 309). In the late version, the fact of an external motive does not stop Schopenhauer from casting aspersions on procreative sex – it almost makes it worse for being in some way calculated. They share a stance, however, on what makes non-procreative sexual practices bad: such practices, on Schopenhauer’s view, affirm the embodiment of the sex drive for its own sake. And since the sex drive is the epitome of the will to life, these acts affirm the will to life for its own sake, which is the exact opposite of the direction of travel towards salvation.

What about procreative sex that is done for the sake of sex and not procreation? Surely, one might think, if affirming the sex drive for its own sake is bad, and procreating is also bad (but maybe not as bad), then doing both is doubly bad, the worst of both worlds. Schopenhauer even suggests that self-affirmation of the body is an element in all sexual enjoyment, not just non-procreative sexual practices: ‘I have often said that *sexual enjoyment* is the complete *affirmation of life* (in other words, agreement and harmony of the will with its phenomenon, the body)’ (MN 1 315). He says, furthermore, that ‘satisfaction of the *sexual impulse* is in itself obviously reprehensible since it is the strongest affirmation of life’ (MN 1 276). This would seem to cover any and all sexual satisfaction. But, in his metaphysics of sexual love, Schopenhauer is clear that, unlike non-procreative sexual practices, procreative sex never really happens just for the sake of sex. It may appear that way to the individual; indeed, it must appear that way, since the individual would be unable to recognize the true goal of procreative sex, namely the continued existence of the species in general, as their own motive (unless the individual in question were morally dubious). The sexual instinct, according to Schopenhauer, just is the presentation of the species’ goal as if it were the individual’s own goal of pleasure and happiness (WWR 2 554–54). Though they are unaware, what the individual affirms in themselves in procreative sex goes far beyond themselves and far beyond sex.

### 3. Sex and Compassion

There is another branch of Schopenhauer's ethics in which sexual ethics also briefly appears: his other-regarding ethics of compassion.

Compassion, for Schopenhauer, is 'the sole genuine moral incentive' (BM 197). All and only actions moved by compassion are truly moral. To be moved by compassion is to be moved by the incentive of improving another person's wellbeing, as distinct from being incentivized by one's own wellbeing, on the one hand, which is egoism, or by worsening another's wellbeing, on the other, which is malice, both of which Schopenhauer classifies as 'anti-moral powers' (BM 204). Although genuine moral worth does not originate in following maxims for Schopenhauer (BM 205), compassionate actions are accurately described by the maxim: 'Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can' (BM 203). The two parts of this maxim correspond to the two compassionate virtues Schopenhauer distinguishes: justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) and loving kindness (*Menschenliebe*, literally love of humans, although famously Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion extends to non-human animals). Justice is compassion in the negative form of refraining from harming others, whereas loving kindness is its positive form of helping others.

The kinds of harms listed by Schopenhauer from which the just person refrains are various. They include not only physical pain but also theft, and mental injury 'through offence, worry, annoyance or slander' (BM 205). They extend, furthermore, to 'seeking the satisfaction of my lusts at the cost of female individuals' happiness in life, or from seducing the wife of another, or from corrupting youngsters morally and physically by enticing them into pederasty' (BM 205). The latter set of example harms are notably sexual in nature. The first two may be more connected than they appear at first. The idea of satisfying one's lust at the cost of someone else's happiness might suggest, for example, some form of sexual assault. However, consider Schopenhauer's argument that sex outside of wedlock is 'doubly reprehensible because it is in addition the denial of another's will, for the girl either directly or indirectly is heading for disaster, and the man therefore satisfies his passion at the expense of another's happiness' (MN 1 277). The wording is similar, and the thought may be the same: what Schopenhauer may have in mind in the first example is the potentially harmful consequences of sex from which women specifically may be protected by marriage to their sexual partners. At Schopenhauer's time of writing (and in some contexts to this day), these consequences might include childrearing without additional parental support, and reputational damage. The first two examples may be connected, then, by the issue of marriage.

The third example brings us back, once again, to the case of pederasty. This time Schopenhauer specifies what he thinks is morally wrong with it, namely moral and physical corruption. This is distinct from what he called the metaphysical reason why pederasty is reprehensible, as found in the appendix to the metaphysics of sexual love, namely that in it the will to life affirms itself in a non-procreative way.

But, as with his metaphysical view on pederasty, Schopenhauer's moral view on pederasty is the reversal of an earlier judgement. In the first, 1841 edition of *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, the list of sexual harms given above does not include the line about pederasty, but only the two not obviously connected remarks about the ethics of marriage. The moral judgement of pederasty only appears in the second, 1860 edition. There

is reason to think that this is because at the time of the 1841 edition, Schopenhauer did not yet consider pederasty to be a moral matter at all. For in the 1860 edition, Schopenhauer revises a whole passage from the 1841 edition on ‘the prohibition of unnatural lust’, which includes ‘onanism’, ‘bestiality’, ‘sodomy’, and ‘pederasty’ (BM 132): in the 1841 edition, he regards none of them as moral matters strictly speaking, but by the 1860 edition, he has changed his mind and regards pederasty alone as a moral matter.

The context for this discussion of ‘unnatural’ (read: non-procreative) lusts is the negative side of Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy (as distinct from the positive case he makes for compassion as the basis of morality) in which he extensively criticizes Kant’s legislative-imperative form of ethics (BM 123–80). As part of this critique, Schopenhauer dismisses the general idea of a duty to ourselves. He begins by distinguishing between two kinds of duty to ourselves: duties of right, which we can understand as a duty not to harm ourselves, and duties of love, which we can understand as a duty to help ourselves. He dismisses duties of right to ourselves on the grounds that, on the one hand, what one does to oneself is what one will, and, on the other, one is not harmed by what one wills (since to be harmed just is for one’s will to be obstructed). He then dismisses duties of love to ourselves on the grounds that we are already naturally inclined to help ourselves, so it cannot be the object of a duty (BM 131–32). Schopenhauer proceeds to give examples of purported duties to ourselves in order to demonstrate that they are not, in fact, moral duties, though he thinks they might be rightly proscribed and prohibited on purely prudential grounds. One example is suicide, which, he argues, there are no genuine moral motives against (except, perhaps, from a standpoint higher than ‘the usual ethics’; see BM 132). The other examples of purported duties to ourselves are the prohibitions against so-called unnatural lusts.

In the 1841 version, he follows through the line of argument he has set up so far: any prohibition against these acts is not based on any moral duty to ourselves (nor to others). In order for these to be considered moral matters on Schopenhauer’s own account of ethics, ‘which treats of the relationships between human beings,’ they must be traceable ‘in an unforced manner to the concepts of justice and loving kindness together with their opposite’ (BM 132n.). But non-procreative sexual practices, according to the Schopenhauer of 1841, neither violate justice nor, in themselves, are they malicious: that is, they do no harm to other people. Schopenhauer extends this to pederasty, at this point, by appeal to a rule he has already invoked in order to undermine the idea of duties of right to ourselves: no injury is done to him who wills it. In other words, no harm is done by pederasty so long as it is done by the will of both parties (so the argument of 1841 goes).

In the 1860 version, Schopenhauer backtracks. He continues to insist that there is no well-founded moral prohibition against onanism, which is ‘chiefly a vice of childhood, and combating it is much more a matter of dietetics than of ethics’ (BM 132). He insists that bestiality, too, is not a moral matter: while it is ‘a wholly abnormal offence’, it is indeed so abnormal that it is contrary to human nature, and so ‘speaks against itself and deters more than any grounds of reason would be able to’ (BM 132). The argument here seems to be that bestiality is so contrary to the human will that it is rarely willed, and therefore rarely a moral matter, or when it is willed the reasons against it go deeper than mere morality. For instance,

in the original 1841 version of the argument, Schopenhauer mentions that all these lusts, by virtue of being ‘unnatural’, that is, non-procreative, are ‘offences against the species as such the species through which and in which we have our being’ (BM 132n.) rather than offences against other members of our species. (It’s mysterious, however, why Schopenhauer doesn’t see bestiality as a genuinely moral offence against the non-human animal involved, given that he extends his ethics of compassion to non-human animals.)

Pederasty, by contrast, is treated differently in the 1860 version. Contrary to his 1841 presentation of the argument, Schopenhauer states that pederasty does fall within ethics for the following reason: ‘it infringes against justice, and the “no injury is done to him who wills it” cannot be made to count against this – for the injustice lies in the seduction of the younger and inexperienced party, who is physically and morally corrupted by it’ (BM 132). By 1860, then, Schopenhauer no longer believes that willingness can cancel out the harm done by pederasty. One of the harms he states here is the one also stated in a different part of the 1860 edition, as mentioned above: physical and moral corruption. However, here he pinpoints the injustice more specifically to the seduction of young and inexperienced people into this state of corruption. Bearing in mind the wider context of this argument – that is, Schopenhauer’s rejection of moral duties to ourselves – his strategy seems to be to agree that pederasty is morally wrong after all, but not because of any duty to ourselves, rather because it is an other-regarding matter (unlike, say, onanism) and the other party is harmed by it.

#### **4. Sexual Ethical Principles**

From Schopenhauer’s moral judgements about sexual practices, we can extract some principles for sexual ethics. The first and primary one is a good start: sexual practices that harm others are morally prohibited. The second is quite good as far as it goes: sexual practices that do not harm others are not morally prohibited.

There is an argument to be had over whether and to what extent the second principle admits exceptions or requires qualifications. The possible exceptions that troubled Schopenhauer – the ‘unnatural lusts’ that do not harm others but may seem morally prohibited – may not be the same as the ones that might trouble us. Schopenhauer’s way of denying these exceptions is to argue that any repulsion people might feel towards sexual practices that do not harm others – either self-regarding sexual practices or other-regarding practices where the other party is willing – is not based on anything moral, but either prudential reasons or supposedly deeper metaphysical reasons to do with the interests of the species. We today, however, may be less concerned about, say, onanism, and have no strong moral feelings about it to explain away. Whereas, we may be more concerned about genuinely self-destructive sexual practices – practices, for example, which may involve or result in inflicting significant bodily or psychological harm upon oneself. Instead of explaining these away by reference to prudential reasons (including medical reasons) or metaphysical reasons, some may want to review Schopenhauer’s arguments against duties to



ourselves; they may want to argue that we do have a moral duty to not harm ourselves and/or a duty to love ourselves, and these duties prohibit those practices. Others may want to follow Schopenhauer's lead in arguing that even here the will has the final word: if someone has acted this way, then they have willed this way, and they cannot be harmed by achieving whatever they have willed (even if they can be damaged or destroyed by it). One side of the argument validates our feelings of apparently moral concern for people who perform self-destructive acts, while the other respects that what someone capable of deciding for themselves chooses to do is none of our business, morally speaking, so long as they aren't hurting anyone else.

There is, then, a third principle to consider: willingness is sufficient to neutralize the harm in any sexual practice. In other words, voluntary sexual practices are harmless. Depending on whether we accept this third principle or not, the second one is more or less defeasible. If we do accept it, then mere volition can render any sexual practice harmless and therefore permissible. If we do not accept it, then volition alone is not enough. Schopenhauer does accept the principle, but to understand the complexity of the issue better, it's worth returning to Schopenhauer's reversal of his judgement on pederasty.

For it may appear that Schopenhauer does not accept the principle in the end. He may appear to realize that in the case of pederasty, the willingness of both parties is not sufficient to neutralize the harm. He says, after all, that 'the "no injury is done to him who wills it" cannot be made to count against' the injustice of pederasty. This is precisely the point he changed his mind about between 1841 and 1860. But it would be incorrect to read Schopenhauer as claiming that willingness is insufficient to neutralize harm in this (or any) case. Within Schopenhauer's philosophy, willingness should always be sufficient; 'no injury is done to him who wills it' is always true. Since being harmed or injured just is the denial of one's will for Schopenhauer, one cannot be harmed or injured by achieving what one wills. One may be physically or psychologically damaged by what one wills, of course, but the point is that this damage would not be unjust. In other words, then, if something done to someone is willed by them, there is no injustice in the first place for their will to count against. Therefore, when Schopenhauer says pederasty is an injustice and willingness cannot be made to count against it, he must mean that, in fact, the harmed party does not will it.

Why is this so? Once again it is important to consider Schopenhauer's wording: 'for the injustice lies in the seduction of the younger and inexperienced party, who is physically and morally corrupted by it.' Youth and inexperience seem to play an important role. Certainly, the harmed party is the younger and inexperienced one, and it is they who cannot will it. Is the point that the young cannot will any sexual practices involving other parties? On some definition of willing and the young (e.g. consent and being below the legal age of consent, respectively), this would be a good principle. Unfortunately, we cannot simply assume that Schopenhauer has something like this in mind. Instead, I want to draw attention to the role that 'seduction' (*Verführung*) might play in his claim.

An interesting feature of Schopenhauer's moral theory is that 'cunning' (*List*) is as much as form of compulsion as 'force' (*Gewalt*). The difference between them – that one exploits the law of motivation while the other the law of physical causality – does not make a

moral difference in Schopenhauer's eyes (BM 212). Cunning works by presenting false motives to the intellect, which could include all kinds of subterfuge, including tricks, half-truths and omission of information, although Schopenhauer focuses on a paradigm case: lies. One usually has an unjust motive for lying, according to Schopenhauer: one doesn't just want to disinform someone for the sake of disinforming them (why bother?) but for that disinformation to motivate them to act in a way that is favourable to you but not to them (otherwise, why lie?). In other words, in practice, lying always go against someone's will, and usually unjustly so. He deduces that a coerced promise is not binding, which, given that cunning itself is a form of coercion, would include promises made under false pretences as much as promises made under force.

Applying this thinking to Schopenhauer's judgement on pederasty, the reason why the younger and inexperienced party cannot will pederasty in a way that would neutralize any harm, even in circumstances where they appear to will it (e.g. expressing verbal consent), may be that their willing would be under false pretences. This may be what Schopenhauer has in mind when he says specifically that the injustice lies in their seduction. It would explain why Schopenhauer adds that the younger and inexperienced party is 'physically and morally corrupted' by it without at that point saying that the injustice lies in the physical and moral corruption itself: it may well be that the physical and moral corruption is a harm inflicted on the younger and inexperienced party by the older and experienced party, but there is another harm prior to that harm, namely the cunning used to compel the younger and inexperienced party into that corruption. The fact that cunning is involved may not be unrelated to the fact that it is used against a younger and inexperienced party: by virtue of being younger and inexperienced, they are not in a position to understand what they are getting into, and more specifically that what they are getting into may go against their will.

This might be a completely wrong way to take Schopenhauer's point. Nevertheless, there's a lesson to be learned about how willingness to a sexual practice is achieved and, importantly, how it is not. On pain of committing an injustice that is morally equivalent to physical coercion into a sexual practice, the will must not be disinformed. I have proposed that Schopenhauer eventually passes judgement on pederasty on the grounds that the younger and inexperienced party does not really will the practice (rather than willing it but this not being sufficient) because their will is disinformed. But willingness could fail in this way in contexts other than youth and inexperience. We have here the foundation for a general ethics of seduction based on the insight that just because seduction goes through the law of motivation rather than that of physical causality, it is no less possible for it to be misused as a form of coercion. To return to a remark quoted earlier, Schopenhauer may have cunning in mind when he refers to the harm of 'seducing [*verführen*] the wife of another' (although given the depth of Schopenhauer's misogyny, one fears he has in mind offences against another man's property). To take a fictional example that fits this harm, in some versions of the story of Don Juan, he succeeds by impersonating the lover of the woman he is seducing. With this seduction technique – if you can call it that – the Don uses cunning in a way that everyone should agree is coercive and wrong. This example is extreme, but we should be vigilant for subtler ways in which the will is misled by various forms of seductive cunning.

## 5. Conclusion

Schopenhauer often condemns sexual practices he calls 'unnatural', but I have argued that he does not always condemn them for their unnaturalness. Some of them, for example onanism, he does not condemn as morally wrong at all, although they might still be condemned for non-moral reasons. Others, for example pederasty, he does condemn as morally wrong, but not because he thinks it's unnatural, rather because he thinks it causes harm. I have read Schopenhauer's use of 'unnatural' as meaning non-procreative, which in the light of his views about the value of existence might have appeared to Schopenhauer as a virtue not a vice. But here lies the only broadly ethical reason why Schopenhauer opposes 'unnatural' sexual practices which is genuinely related to their unnaturalness: engaging in sexual practices independently of the instinct to procreate is, according to Schopenhauer, a pure affirmation of the sex drive, which is itself the quintessence of the will to life.

Writing about Schopenhauer's views on these matters is made difficult by his use of language that to us is archaic – onanism, sodomy, pederasty. It's hard to decipher exactly what he means by these terms not just because of their connotations but also their ambiguity. For example, by onanism he might have meant masturbation or coitus interruptus (I've assumed he meant masturbation). By sodomy he might have meant anal sex or gay sex. By bestiality he might have meant sex between humans and animals, or just any sexual practice that is deemed to be depraved (in the 1841 version of the passage on the 'unnatural lusts', Schopenhauer lists onanism, *sodomy* and pederasty, but in the 1860 version he lists onanism, *bestiality* and pederasty). He conflates pederasty with simply being gay. For the most part he uses the word *Päderastie* but in the same breath he speaks of 'male homosexuality' (WWR 2 577) or male love (*Männerliebschaft*). One commentator wrongly takes the entire appendix on pederasty simply to be 'about male homosexuality' (Magee 1997: 347).

It will be good to be clear: pederasty and gayness are not to be confused. Moreover, whether he intended it or not, the reasons for Schopenhauer's moral judgement on pederasty do not extend to gay relationships. Schopenhauer's judgement on pederasty crucially depends on a younger (much younger) and inexperienced party who is thereby not in a position to give informed voluntary consent; this is not a feature of gay relationships. There is no reason why gay relationships cannot be perfectly in keeping with the principles of sexual ethics that I have disentangled from Schopenhauer's judgments on specific sexual practices.

This represents a larger missed opportunity on Schopenhauer's part. The only risk he expresses a willingness to take is giving his opponents the opportunity to slander him for finding some grounds for defending pederasty (while at the same time judging it immoral anyway). But given his basic principles – that all and only sexual practices that cause harm to others are morally prohibited, and that informed voluntary consent is sufficient to neutralize

any harm – Schopenhauer has the makings of a case to resist over-moralizing about sexual practices where no one gets hurt, a wholly unpuritanical sexual ethics.\*

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