

Patricia Marino

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Seeking Desire: Reflections on Blackburn's Lust

Simon Blackburn's recent work on lust¹ is part of a series: one book for each of the seven deadly sins. Not surprisingly, it argues for a sort of no-sin rehabilitation of lust. "Hey," it gently urges, "lust isn't so bad. After all, without it none of us would be here!" What is striking, though, is how gentle the urging is, and how puritanical and traditional the outlook remains. Lust, it seems, is worrisome but tolerable, an urge that comes from a biologically irrelevant place -- more on that later -- that we can, if we are careful and good, occasionally harness for happy ends for two people who care about each other. The book ends with an injunction: leave lust alone! Don't mess with its "freedom of flow," and everything will be all right.

Such a view of lust is, I believe, commonly held. And yet, as I will argue, it is not true to the behavioral facts, and it results in a distorting picture of the ethics of sexuality. First, it does not square with the fact that we pursue lust as a good in itself. Second, pure mutuality is hard to come by and almost impossible to recognize, so Blackburn's account is more restrictive than it may seem. Third, on such a view, masturbation is morally sanctioned only insofar as it mimics real sex; this doesn't seem right. Finally, the injunction to leave lust alone leaves us without guidance on some of the most pressing practical problems of lust, especially given some recent research on the biology of lust in women.

¹ Simon Blackburn, Lust (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

1. On the sources and nature of lustful feelings: why strive to become lustful?

In the “Western Civ” tradition that the book focuses on, lust is represented as a force from nowhere, driving us relentlessly on toward acts of questionable taste and rationality. “Living with lust,” Blackburn writes, “is like living shackled to a lunatic.”² Lust is, of course, a kind of desire, and on the most rudimentary treatment it might be likened to an itch: it arises spontaneously and creates a problem, a problem that can only be solved by eradicating the desire itself. We scratch to get rid of the itch, and good riddance to it; on this view the desire associated with lust is the desire for relief, in the form of orgasm, that will allow us to put the lust behind us and get on with whatever else we were doing. Sometimes the itch might be so strong we might be unable to resist it, and then we might find ourselves feeling overwhelmed -- out of control, transformed into a crazy person who will stop at nothing to get at the object of his desire. Nature put the itch of lust there for obvious procreative reasons, and as long as we channel it with care, don’t enjoy its fruits too much, and don’t lose ourselves in it, we might be OK.

Blackburn explains that such a view should seem odd to our contemporary ears for two reasons. One is that orgasm is not really the focus of lustful desire: a person feeling lust for another may regard an orgasm as “an unwanted terminus, an unwelcome interruption, a possible cause of humiliation and dissatisfaction.”³ And of course, if you feel lust for a particular person in a particular setting, then going home and successfully jerking off may not feel like much of a relief; you may in this case be especially unlikely to feel sated and ready to put the whole matter behind you.⁴ The second difficulty with the rudimentary view is that we do want to “lose

² Blackburn, Lust, p. 2.

³ Blackburn, Lust, p. 14.

⁴ I hope it is clear that I mean the phrase 'jerking off' to apply to both sexes.

ourselves” in lust and sex: a sexual partner who remained in sober self-control from beginning to end would seem rather a cold fish. Putting it all together with a few extra modifications, Blackburn gives us the following definition: lust is “the enthusiastic desire, the desire that infuses the body, for sexual activity and its pleasures for their own sake.”⁵

This doesn’t tell us much about the sources of lustful feelings. On the “itch” model, of course, lust arises from nowhere at all -- or rather, it comes from a biological and uninteresting netherworld. Despite his caveats about orgasm and the like, Blackburn takes a similar approach. On the biological sources of lust, he has nothing to say, pointing out merely that it is not part of his concern: despite all that science might tell us about the play of “the nervous, endocrine, circulatory, and genitourinary systems,” our concern is elsewhere, with the experience of lust, that is, “lust in the human world . . . not the correlates of lust in the body and the brain.”⁶

On the non-biological sources of lust, Blackburn doesn’t have a lot to say either; the only hint comes during the discussion of the sexual pleasures that lust directs us to. In these pleasures, Blackburn explains, “A pleases B, B is pleased at what A is doing, and A is pleased at B’s pleasure.” These pleasures eventually lead to the body taking over, and we become “flooded with desire.”⁷ So there is something about the mutual dance of sexual interaction that leads to increased desires. Something about this is slightly odd -- shouldn’t pleasures lead to satisfaction rather than more desire? I suppose an “uninteresting” biological mechanism is supposed to solve this problem, converting pleasure into increased desire. Somehow, the body takes over and does its thing, transferring delight in our partner into increased lust.

⁵ Blackburn, Lust, p. 19.

⁶ Blackburn, Lust, p. 19.

⁷ Blackburn, Lust; this and the previous quote are on p. 88.

The most important thing missing from this approach is recognition of the fact that we treat lust as something we pursue for its own sake -- a good in itself. This is totally unlike the itch model -- who would want to become itchy? -- and it is untouched by Blackburn's modifications. We cultivate sexual desire, we try to induce it in others, and we mourn its lack. This doesn't apply to everyone all the time, but certainly over the years an enormous amount of time and energy has been devoted to producing aphrodisiacs, not to mention pornography, and lack of sexual desire is clearly classed these days as a miserable malfunction of the human body, to be avoided if at all possible. This is not merely to allow loving partners to have "fulfilling relationships." Many people without sexual prospects are regular consumers of pornography. Presumably many of them are masturbating. Why go to all that trouble, if we didn't want sexual desire for its own sake? Lust isn't a momentary urge that spurs us on to sex; it's a crucial ongoing part of any sexual experience.

In fact, some of the most pressing philosophical questions about lust concern just the appropriateness of tampering with its causes. Should we allow healthy adults to take desire-inducing drugs such as Viagra? What are the effects of medicalizing desire? Is it wrong to pursue desire by using pornography? A view that ignores the sources of lust necessarily leaves these questions unaddressed.

So why ignore them? What Blackburn seems to have in mind is that his "mutual pleasing" picture is somehow paradigmatic, or normative for lust, and I think this is a common view. Lust in mutual pleasing is taken as the best that lust can be, and thus lust arising from any other source -- or, presumably, induced by external means such as drugs -- should be measured against this ideal. Why should this be so? Mutual pleasing is certainly nice, but it's not all there is to lust; many people might say that their most powerful feelings of lust happened in very

different contexts -- even contexts of deprivation. To understand what Blackburn --- and, I believe, others -- have in mind, we'll have to look closer at "mutual pleasing."

2. The ethics of lust with respect to sexuality: the ideal of Hobbesian Unity

On the view being described, "mutual pleasing" is normative or paradigmatic for lust, because of the ethics of sexuality. But this, I'll argue, yields a view both naive and puritanical -- too optimistic and too restrictive about lust. The ideal is called Hobbesian Unity, after Thomas Hobbes, who described the delight in delighting, and the pleasure in being pleased, that sexuality affords us. Hobbesian Unity is meant to represent sex at its best, and in it, our mutual desiring and pleasing goes on happily, straightforwardly, and exponentially. "There are," as Blackburn describes it, "no cross-purposes, hidden agendas, mistakes, or deceptions. Lust here is like making music together, a joint symphony of pleasure and response."⁸ The sexual context is one

⁸ Blackburn, Lust, p. 88. It is interesting to compare Blackburn's description of Hobbesian Unity with Erica Jong's description of the "zipless fuck" in her novel, Fear of Flying: "Zipless because the incident has all the swift compression of a dream and is seemingly free of all remorse and guilt; because there is no talk of her late husband, or of his fiancée; because there is no rationalizing; because there is no talk at all. The zipless fuck is absolutely pure. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not 'taking' and the woman is not 'giving.' No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone" (Fear of Flying (New York: New American Library, 2003, originally published 1973), pp. 21-22). The two ideals share, of course, an emphasis on the lack of hidden agendas and the purity of the encounter. But for Jong the paradigm case is one of strangers, while Blackburn's ideal is friendly to long time lovers. And, of course, Jong's

of “pure mutuality.” This means ideal sex happens only when people are together, in a certain honest and expansive frame of mind, with generous and open attitudes toward one another and themselves. This already seems a bit odd: sexual contexts often feel opaque and strange, and even Blackburn says that we must lose our self-control or risk being a poor sexual partner. Is the only responsible sex had in moments of psychological clarity? But let’s look longer at how this train of thought arises.

For Blackburn, the point of thinking of lust in the context of “pure mutuality” is to address the worry that sex might be inherently bad, and that if sex is bad, lust is bad also. In its contemporary, secular form, fear that sex is inherently bad usually focuses on the worry that sex inevitably involves treating persons as objects. When we have sex with someone, we may use various parts of his or her anatomy for our own purposes; we may fail to recognize his or her autonomy; we may treat him or her as something to be conquered or owned, or as easily interchangeable with another. Immanuel Kant, Blackburn explains, thought that only in marriage was such treatment permissible, because marriage is “a contract for each to use the others’ genitals”; as Blackburn wittily remarks, it’s a good thing Kant never tried it. Freud, Blackburn explains, wrote that sex was only satisfying for men if it debased the woman involved. And feminists have stressed how often sex seems to involve a man who fails to treat his female partner as an individual with thoughts, feelings, and rights of her own.

This is the importance of Hobbesian Unity. Here no one is using anyone for anything; we are, instead, doing something together. It’s just like playing music:

ideal is an ideal for pleasure, while Blackburn's is a more complex, morally entwined notion.

Jong emphasizes the rarity of the zipless fuck; I can only think that in the 30-odd years since she wrote the book, they've become rarer still.

with other people, we are sensitive to their actions and moods, mutual success requires delicate timing, and so on. It's a deeply interactive, and respectful, activity. We don't always achieve Hobbesian Unity in sex, Blackburn explains, but that doesn't undermine it as a normative goal, it just means that in lust, as in everything else, things can go wrong. Things really depart from the H.U. ideal when there is no partner, or when can be no "pure mutuality" -- that is, in pornography and prostitution. And these are, for Blackburn, are obviously wanting. "Nobody," he explains, "is going to say that they represent lust at its best, since in neither of them is there a chance of Hobbesian Unity."⁹ The argument for Hobbesian Unity as normative for lust is thus a defensive one: pessimists might see only the ways that sex can go wrong, but we "optimists" can see how sex can go right.

3. Problems with Hobbesian Unity and the "sexual ideal" method

To my mind, there are two grave problems with this Hobbesian Unity approach to securing the moral innocuousness of lust, for two reasons. First, it is almost impossible to know our own and others' motives well enough to recognize pure mutuality when it obtains, and second, there are counter-intuitive implications about masturbation. Related problems, I'll suggest, plague "sexual-ideal" approaches in general.

The general idea here is to tie the moral status of lust to the moral status of sex, then show how sex itself can be morally innocuous. As a defensive move, however, the Hobbesian Unity one is slightly odd. Only a pessimist would be inclined to think that sex needs the kind of defense offered by Hobbesian Unity, since it is only if you think sex is in danger of being inherently bad that you will be moved to find a narrow range of cases in which it is not. So only

⁹ Blackburn, Lust p. 107.

a pessimist would look for this sort of defense. But will a pessimist find the defense persuasive? He will only if pure mutuality in sex is a conceivable goal that we know how to aim for and that we sometimes obtain. Otherwise, we are just as at sea with respect to lust as we were before.

The problem is that pure mutuality almost is impossible to recognize, understand, or aim for. How can we establish that a person has no ulterior motives, that a sex act involves no “cross-purposes, hidden agendas, mistakes, or deceptions?” Our motives and agendas are frequently hidden from us. If Freud is even a bit right, this is true in the deep sense that we can never know what makes us act in a certain way. But we needn’t invoke Freud to see this point, since it is a common experience to find, looking back at one’s life, that the motives we thought we had were far from the ones that appear, in hindsight, to be our true driving forces.

This is especially true in the sexual context. Blackburn emphasizes that a crucial part of a good sexual experience is being able to “lose oneself” in the moment, and if one is lost, one certainly has no understanding of one’s true agendas and motives. Again, it is a common experience to be surprised by what makes one lustful, and surprised by one’s own sexual reactions. Imagine a man who divorces and has sex with a new partner. Is he thrilled because of the charms of the person, because of the novelty, or because of revenge? It may seem to him the first on the eve of the date, the second a week later, and the last after a year. The sex act, from the perspective of the participants at the time, may be indistinguishable from Hobbesian Unity, but may appear in hindsight the ultimate in using another person as a mere means. So pure mutuality is hard to recognize. It is also hard to aim for: how does one try to ensure that one has no hidden motives or agendas, especially if one is supposed to be lost in sex, and one’s perceptions of these change so easily over time? These make Hobbesian Unity hard to employ as a practical idea.

Hobbesian Unity also leads to some counter-intuitive conclusions about masturbation. Of course, when one is alone, there can be no such thing, so solitary lust, on the face of it, is immoral. This seems odd: women are constantly told they have a moral imperative to masturbate: after all, it is only if you know how to please yourself that you will be able to tell your partner how to please you. But perhaps Blackburn does not intend such an extreme stance. In another discussion, he says that pornography might be acceptable if it were used to imagine a caring partner; we might infer that the same holds true for masturbation, and thus as long as I have “mutual pleasing” in my imagination, it seems, solitary sex may be permissible.

This move strikes me as ad hoc. It seems ad hoc because the essence of pure mutuality is the role of the other person, so how can that role be equivalent if the person is merely imaginary? In fact, it seems that if objectification and so on are the worries, masturbation should be more simply morally in the clear, since there is no danger at all, and thus pure mutuality shouldn't come into play. This suggests that what is at stake morally is not the internal mental state of the participants, but their effect on one another: if there is no other, there is no one to harm, and so there should be no worries. In this sense the invoking of imagination seems misplaced.

Furthermore, the range of masturbation activities that comes out morally permissible here seems too narrow to me: what is wrong, after all, with masturbation as a purely physical act, imagining nothing, or masturbation accompanied by a non-mutual fantasy? Imagine a woman who masturbates while imagining that she is receiving a technically proficient but professionally distant “massage”. The non-involvement of the masseuse may well be part of the pleasure, and while I can do no more than appeal to intuition here, it is my intuition that such a fantasy involves nothing wrong at all. Another question is whether, on the Hobbesian Unity view, I must imagine only a caring partner. Often it is unclear in a fantasy when one is participating and

when one is watching; these can shift from moment to moment without our direct control. It is sometimes hard to say when the excitement is from identifying with the fantasy actors, and when it is from picturing them. Would mutuality here require identification as a way of securing the participation of the fantasizer? Or would picturing mutuality be enough?

One might think the intent here is merely to say that Hobbesian Unity is just one way to secure the moral permissibility of sex, that it provides a necessary but not sufficient condition. Then perhaps one may offer another condition that secures the permissibility of masturbation. Blackburn's discussion of pornography, however, suggests that he intends otherwise: though he has some pornography-tolerating intuitions, he secures them with reference to an imagined caring partner, and this suggests appeal to some kind of mutuality forms the core of any sexual defense.

To my mind, the whole sexual-ideal approach is a distortion. This method frames the ethics of sexuality in terms of an ideal -- here is what sex should be like, and when it is it is good -- and represents alternative sex as ethically troubled failure. But this way of thinking can't help but overstate both the goodness of the ideal and the immorality of the alternatives. Even great and happy-minded sex isn't as pure and happy as Blackburn represents it -- it's naive to think that humans have this kind of insight into and control over their emotions. The psychological state of our partner may be unavailable to us; and our own psychological state may be other than we thought -- perhaps we are subconsciously motivated by darker forces than we realize. Should this alone make sex immoral? Blackburn implies that his is a liberal view, but seen this way, it seems quite restrictive.

4. Women need wooing? Women, biology, desire-enhancement, and seduction

In describing the evolutionary story about lust, Blackburn cites a cliché: “women need wooing but men just need a place.” Is this true? And if it is, what does this say about female lust? What do women need wooing for? Whatever we think of the idea, the fact that this is a cliché itself suggests that for a large part of the population, lust is not a force from nowhere, but must be stirred, awakened, in particular ways and in particular contexts. This suggests a further problem with the Blackburnian idea of “leaving lust alone.”

Some fascinating recent research on the biological angles of this subject involves the studies aimed at “Viagra for women.” In a recent New York Times article, reporter Gardiner Harris describes how Pfizer has decided to give up trying to show that Viagra might help women with sexual dysfunction.¹⁰ The reason, Pfizer says, is that the relationship between arousal and desire is so much more complicated for women than for men, that increasing their arousal did not necessarily increase their desire to have sex. As the leader of the research team puts it, “There’s a disconnect in many women between genital changes and mental changes . . . This disconnect does not exist in men. Men consistently get erections in the presence of naked women and want to have sex. With women, things depend on a myriad of factors.”⁷ The result is that improving men’s ability to get erections dramatically improves their sex lives, while improving the “outward signs” of arousal -- such as increased pelvic blood flow -- in women just doesn’t have the same effect.¹¹

¹⁰ "Pfizer Gives Up Testing Viagra On Women," The New York Times, Saturday, February 28, 2004, Business/Financial Desk.

¹¹ As with any study like this, we might want to be wary: aren't these researchers just projecting what they already believe onto their subjects? We might note, here, that Pfizer has a huge

For background, the Times reporter consults Dr. Marianne Legato (professor of clinical medicine at Columbia University and director of the Partnership for Gender Specific Medicine), who says that the disconnect between desire and arousal is so extreme that women “often don’t have any desire for sex until they are physically in the act of lovemaking.”¹² How does sex ever get off the ground? The story summarizes Dr. Legato’s view this way: “getting a woman to connect arousal and desire . . . requires exquisite timing on a man’s part and a fair amount of coaxing.”¹³ A pretty old-fashioned idea! Even if this is a little bit right, it suggests a real departure from the Hobbesian Unity ideal. Mutual pleasing doesn’t always lead -- magically and biologically -- to lust and desire. All kinds of factors come into play; past histories, psychology, relationships, distractions, and so on, and even in the best of cases, attention and care are required.

The article only touches on the philosophical issues, which are complex. One of these is the appropriateness of “norms” of sexual desire. On the one hand we have fear: isn’t it a distortion to suggest that there is some level of desire that is “normal,” and that women who don’t have it are somehow defective? Is lust really something we want to medicalize in this way? Leonore Tiefer, a clinical psychologist in New York, says, “I don’t think there is an answer to what women should want sexually.” On the other hand, as I discussed in the first section, sexual desire is a good people don’t want to be without: why shouldn’t women have the

interest in generating the opposite conclusion, so at least we need not suspect them of loading the dice that way.

¹² This raises all kinds of strange questions -- how could anyone ever know this? what is 'lovemaking' exactly? But I will ignore these here.

¹³ Dr. Marianne Legato in "Pfizer Gives Up Testing Viagra On Women."

same access to desire-enhancing drugs that men do? As the Pfizer researcher puts it, “To women who have it, female sexual dysfunction is real and distressing, and to say it’s an invention is an insult to women’s health.”

A Blackburnian approach leaves all these questions -- crucial philosophical questions about lust -- untouched. Of course, one can’t say everything about lust in one short book, but there are two specific reasons to be dissatisfied with this particular omission. First, one of the main themes of the book is that we should “leave lust alone,” that when it appears in the right context it will be fine. But the moral of these difficulties is that lust does not appear in the right contexts -- sometimes we want to want, and the question is whether, and how much, we should be able to alter ourselves to satisfy that wanting for desire. Second, the pure mutuality approach focuses on lust as it functions in a certain range of sexual contexts. But we might hope that a theory of lust might tell us about lust on its own terms, and provide some direction with respect to the questions, “Is lust valuable? How valuable is it?” Only by understanding the value of lust can we start to understanding whether the pleasures of lust are worth the potential problems associated with desire enhancing drugs.

Whether or not Dr. Legato is right about female sexuality, I think it’s safe to say that for women, as well as men, a reflective desire to have or not to have sex can come apart from the phenomenological feeling of desire. Those complaining of a low sex drive are saying that while their abstract, reflective desire to have sex is present, and even strong, their phenomenological feeling is absent. In his characterization of lust as “the enthusiastic desire, the desire that infuses the body, for sexual activity and its pleasures for their own sake,” Blackburn suggests that he takes lust to be associated with the phenomenological feeling, and not the reflective desire, and this seems a reasonable move to me: lust is a feeling of desire more than anything. But, as in the

Viagra-for-women case, any approach that ignores the sources of lustful feelings, and their relationship to our standing desires, leaves us ill-equipped to ask after the various ways that people try to induce lust in others.

Consider seduction. In our culture, the idea has a double edge: on the one hand, some people may want to be seduced -- they may want their partner to induce in them the phenomenological feeling that appropriately goes with their standing desire. On the other hand, seduction seems dangerously close to compromising a person's autonomy; if the object is overcome with lust, it may render him or her unable to heed any relevant reflective desires -- reflective desires that may in fact change while the seduction is going on. The person who wants to be seduced may even be happy with this latter characterization, and may say that what they want is to feel a lack of control, to lose their autonomy. Can such a thing happen consensually? My own view is that this may be a puzzle with no answer: there may be no way to satisfy someone's desire for a violation of autonomy without, in fact, violating his or her autonomy. The moral is not that seduction is always wrong, but rather that it is an inherently risky business. Even in the best case, in which the reflective desires of the subject is well known ahead of time, seduction always invites the possibility that, because those reflective desires change, a person may feel later that their autonomy was not respected.

The point here for the analysis of lust is that just as ignoring the sources of lust leaves us unable to grapple with questions of technological means of inducing lust, so it also leaves us in the same boat with respect to non-technological, and indeed, quite traditional, means of inducing lust.

The distinction between reflective desire and phenomenological lust raises one final issue about lust from the female perspective. If the researchers are right -- in any sense -- that

women's lusts are contextual and responsive to a range of factors, then women are wronged by approaches like Blackburn's that treat lust as a force from nowhere, but they are also wronged by claims that because women take less active roles in pursuing sex, women's sexual desire is weaker than men's, or less important to them. In his sex-for-judges book, Sex and Reason, Richard Posner claims that it's fairly obvious that women's sexual desire is less, or weaker, than men's. Men pursue sex, he says; they fill up the bars; they go to prostitutes; they buy pornography; and so on. Essentially, they bear very great costs in order to get sex, and this shows their greater level of desire. Women, he says, are pursued: all they have to do is walk into a bar and the guys are on them like flies. Do they? Well, yes, but not all that often. And this, Posner claims, shows that despite low costs -- all they have to do is show up -- women don't go out of their way to get sex, and therefore we ought to conclude that women's sexual desire is significantly weaker than men's.¹⁴

Posner does not merely remark this in passing; his belief leads him to write almost exclusively about male sexuality in the book. If Dr. Legato's view on female sexuality is even a little bit right, it becomes almost impossible to even quantify something like real female sexual desire, never mind comparing it to that of men on a scale. What would we be measuring? Women's lustiness in already sexualized contexts? Their desire to put themselves in situations in which they know they will feel lustful? Their bereftness at being unlustful? None of these hits the mark. What Posner thinks he is measuring in men -- the stable, come from nowhere, itch-like

¹⁴ One may also wonder whether Posner is right that the cost is less for women; the dangers of rape and assault are obvious, but the danger of being labeled a slut is also important.

need to have sex -- may not even have a correlate in female sexuality.¹⁵ So a Blackburnian view reinforces bad ideas about female sexuality, ideas that contribute to its being misunderstood and mismeasured.

Perhaps it may seem I am overdoing it here: after all, if women are lustful in fewer contexts than men, then in some straightforward way, they are less lustful. Here we will have to distinguish between being lustful in fewer contexts, and being lustful in contexts that simply don't arise very often. If a person is seldom put in situations requiring bravery, but distinguishes himself in this regard when those situations do arise, I think he is not less brave than someone called on to exercise his bravery more often. If women are lustful in a variety of contexts, but these don't arise very often (because, for example, they include being well-rested, relaxed, and so on), then I think this should not count against women's lustfulness in general.

More importantly, though, it seems to me what we're really interested in measuring here isn't just the phenomenal feeling of lust but sexual desire in some more complicated way. If these go together less often in women than in men, then measuring lustfulness in men may seem appropriate when measuring pure lustfulness in women is not -- it misses the element of reflective desire. That is why one wonders why measuring women's desire to put themselves in lust-inducing situations, or their bereftness at being un lustful, may not give a more accurate picture of women's overall sexual desire, than simply measuring their phenomenological lust. It is commonly pointed out that if women are less often phenomenologically lustful, this has as much to do with the stress of the dual responsibilities of work and home-making as anything else. Even if women are less lustful in the sense that fewer contexts make them lustful, there still

¹⁵ Martha Nussbaum mentions some related objections in "Sex, Liberty, and Economics," reprinted in her collection, Sex and Social Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

seems to be reason to doubt whether this conclusion should affect judgments about their overall desire. And it seems to me this is what we are really interested in.

Yes, the stereotype is that while men cruise around looking and available, women are picky and trying to find the right guy. Why not conclude from this simply that men are less attractive to women than women are to men, or that they fail to bring about the conditions that will make women lustful? At some places, Blackburn suggests that there in other times and places, women are and were considered the really lustful sex. If that's right, perhaps the situation is not that women are lustful in fewer contexts, but rather that the contexts that make them lustful are less often around in this particular time and place.

I have argued that Blackburn's account of "lust from nowhere" and mutual pleasing suffers several problems. It ignores the fact that we pursue lust as a good in itself. Pure mutuality is hard to come by and even harder to recognize, and masturbation should not be morally acceptable only as an imitation of sex itself. The choice to ignore the sources of lust, and the advice to "leave lust alone," leave us unable to grapple with some of our most pressing philosophical puzzles about lust. Women's lustfulness may be especially contextual and it's a mistake to conclude women are therefore less lustful. What is needed, instead, is a focus on the moral status of lust as distinct from sex, and a study of its relationship to reflective sexual desire, with particular attention to the sources of lust and the appropriateness of the things we do to bring lust about.