

## Good Sex as the Aim of Sexual Education

Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker  
*Free University, Amsterdam*

### TWO SENSES OF "GOOD"

An old man who looked back at his life spoke the words: "My life has been *good*." What does this man mean by the word "good?" Does he want to say that he *led* a good life or that he *had* a good life? In the first case, he refers to a *morally* good life, that is, a life that shows moral virtues or conveys a conscientious commitment to moral principles. In the other case, he refers to a *nonmorally* good life, meaning a life that has been happy, satisfying or fulfilling.<sup>1</sup>

We like to see that someone who is just and benevolent is also flourishing and happy. Alas, not only from a conceptual, but also from an empirical perspective, a life can be morally good and nonmorally bad at the same time. Though more unlikely, neither is it excluded that a life is both nonmorally good and morally evil. However, the possibility of these combinations (morally good and nonmorally bad, and vice versa) does not preclude that activities which are good from a moral point of view can be important ingredients of a nonmorally good life. On the contrary, many persons attach so much value to a life of high moral standing that realizing such a life will contribute greatly to their well-being.<sup>2</sup>

The word "good" (and "bad") is also applicable to sexual activities and in this context the same ambiguity can be noticed. The recent published book of Raymond Belliotti is titled *Good Sex*.<sup>3</sup> This title easily creates the impression that the book deals with sex in the nonmoral sense, that is, with sex that is exciting, pleasant or gratifying. However, the subtitle puts us on the right track: *Perspectives on Sexual Ethics*. Indeed, the theme of the book is good sex in the moral sense of the word, that is to say, those sexual activities that can stand the test of moral criticism.

In this paper we shall defend the view that the indicated uses of the word "good" are connected with two central aims of sexual education. The first aim roughly consists in imparting a certain conception of *morally* good sex, that is, a coherent set of moral principles to which sexual activities should comply. A second aim roughly involves the formation of a certain conception of *nonmorally* good sex, that is, a crystallized view regarding gratifying sex and the place of such sex in a flourishing life.

Often sexual education is only interpreted in terms of morally good sex. However, sexual education is not merely an aspect of moral education, it also relates to the development of ideas about nonmorally good sex in a nonmorally good life. In our view, *both* aims are necessary (without these aims sexual education is not complete), and though they are perhaps together not sufficient, they should be the focus of sexual education. It is our intention to give a brief and rather bold account of the nature of, and the differences between, these two main aspects of sexual education.

“GOOD” IN A MORAL SENSE

What do we mean by the adjective “moral,” for instance, when we speak about a morally good life or morally good sex? This question can relate to both our *concept* of morality and our *conception* of morality.<sup>4</sup> Let us start with a brief analysis of our concept.<sup>5</sup> In the common-sense meaning of the word, “morality” is related to care and respect for persons. To put it more precisely, if we designate an action, a motive, an emotion or a trait of character of a certain person as moral, we assume a positive relation between this action, motive, emotion or trait on the one hand, and the well-being or intrinsic dignity of other persons, on the other.

This general and abstract analysis can be elucidated with the following example. About a year ago person *P* stopped smoking. Somebody asks *P* for his reasons and his answer is that he stopped smoking because he did not want to endanger the health of his children by letting them inhale his cigarette smoke. Here *P* produces a distinctive moral reason, since he refers to the well-being of others — in this case, that of his children. But suppose that *P* answers that he quit smoking because he is afraid of getting a grave disease which will prevent him from having a healthy old age. Perhaps such a consideration makes his decision to stop a prudent or rational one, but certainly not a moral one — *unless* he wants to stay healthy because his children are dependent on him, because he wants to be, in his later life, a good grandfather for his grandchildren, or because he does not want to put society to expenses. For these latter reasons are again referring to the well-being of others. In other words, if smoking is considered to be a *morally* bad habit, implicit reference is made to the negative effects on the well-being of others. However, smoking can also be understood as a *nonmorally* bad habit, if for example, one is only thinking of the damage for the smoker himself.

This example is only an illustration of what, according to Michael Slote, is characteristic of our common-sense morality, namely “an *agent-sacrificing* (or *other-favoring*) *self-other asymmetry*.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that one of our actions undermines someone’s well-being, or affects someone’s dignity, is a good reason for considering that action as morally wrong or impermissible. But from a moral point of view it is not wrong to inflict similar harm to ourselves. That can be called stupid, unwise, irrational or even insane, but in itself it is not morally reprehensible. This is the asymmetry that is characteristic of our common-sense morality: ways of acting that are morally permissible when they harm our own well-being or dignity are morally impermissible when they affect the well-being or intrinsic dignity of others.

This asymmetry in our ordinary concept of morality is absent in so-called act-utilitarianism.<sup>7</sup> According to this ethical theory, an action is morally right if and only if its consequences for human happiness are as good as those of any alternative open to the agent. And these consequences concern *both* the happiness of others and our own happiness. This symmetry distinguishes act-utilitarianism from common-sense morality: from the latter perspective, the fact that our actions have beneficial effects on our well-being is in itself considered to be totally irrelevant for the moral evaluation of that actions. Only the well-being of others is of moral importance. Our common or garden concept of morality is, so to speak, not *self-regarding* but *other-regarding*.

## MORALLY GOOD SEX

After this brief analysis of our concept of morality, we are sufficiently prepared for an analysis of a *conception* of morality. By way of illustration we shall introduce a conception of morally good sex that is, in our view, a tenable one. As we have seen, our concept of morality is intrinsically related to the well-being or the dignity of our fellow humans. On the basis of this analysis we can argue that our common-sense morality involves one basic principle: roughly speaking, the compounded principle that urges us to promote the well-being of others and to respect their intrinsic dignity. Now if we speak about a conception of morality, we have in mind a body of principles that we conceive as derived from, or as a specification of, this one complex basic principle of morality. A conception of morality is composed of moral principles.<sup>8</sup> And designating a principle as a moral one implies, by definition, placing it in a certain context of justification; we assume that the principle concerned is based on, or is a specific form of, the fundamental principle of care and respect for persons.<sup>9</sup>

An example of a moral conception is a conception of morally good sex, a conception that consists in a set of moral principles which explicitly relates to our sexual doings and dealings. Just as for conceptions in general, calling such a conception a moral one implies regarding the principles concerned as derived from, or as an interpretation of, the abstract basic principle of care and respect for persons. In other words, such moral principles specify what it means to care for the well-being or to respect the dignity of human beings in the sexual sphere of life. Which principles could that be?

A first example is the well-known principle of *mutual consent*.<sup>10</sup> To put it roughly, according to this principle, sexual interaction with persons who have not voluntarily consented is morally impermissible. In fact, this principle is derived from the basic principle of respect for persons. It is an appeal to do justice to the autonomy of human beings, in this case their capacity to decide for themselves whether or not to take part in certain sexual activities. All behavior that is contrary to the voluntary consent of the persons concerned, including especially a number of forms of sexual violence and sexual intimidation, are morally reprehensible.

Following Belliotti again,<sup>11</sup> we want to underline a second moral principle: the so-called principle of *non-exploitation*. Even if the principle of mutual consent is met, sexual behavior can still be morally wrong, or at least morally dubious. This is the case, for example, when one party takes advantage of another party's vulnerability, or when one person capitalizes on the other person's weak socioeconomic bargaining powers. Such cases of exploitation are forbidden by the second principle, even though the exploited party has voluntarily consented.

This principle, too, can be conceived as a specification of the basic principle of respect for persons, for it prohibits forms of sexual interaction in which the other party is merely approached and treated as a means or an instrument for the satisfaction of one's own desires. But the principle of non-exploitation is as much founded in the other aspect of the fundamental principle of morality, namely, the exhortation to care for the well-being of human beings. Even though the other party

voluntarily agrees with our proposals regarding sexual interaction, if we realize that this person is seriously endangering her or his long-term interests, it is our *prima facie* duty to forbear from that interaction.

Surely, an adequate conception of morally good sex is not only composed of the principles of mutual consent and non-exploitation, well-known general principles, like the prescription to keep one's promises or the prohibition against deceiving one's fellow man, also relate to the domain of sexuality. Moreover, an adequate moral conception of sexuality is not only an appeal to mutual care and respect between sexually interacting parties, it also incites us to avoid possible harmful consequences of our sexual activities on outsiders. Think, for example, of adultery, which spreads an unpleasant scent of immorality, due to the multi-dimensional deceit against an "outsider."<sup>12</sup>

We now have an impression of a conception of morally good sex, and not only of the formal characteristics of such a conception, but also of the constitutive substantial principles. That impression is, we think, sufficient for a clear understanding of the first aim of sexual education, an aim that is connected with good sex in the moral sense of the word. For if we pursue this aim, we are trying to instill a conception of morally good sex into the child. Our intention is that the child internalizes the principles that are constitutive of such a conception or, perhaps stated more adequately, that the child develops into a person who is disposed and able to observe such principles in the sexual sphere. Fostering such processes of internalization or development actually comes down to the cultivation of moral virtues, of which care and respect for persons are the cardinal ones.

This aim of sexual education is completely identical for every child. That is to say, all children, without exception, are expected to acquire the *same* conception of morally good sex. Regarding this aspect of sexual education, there is no place for individualization. On the contrary, because everyone is expected to observe the principles in question, the moral development of all children is adjusted to the same pattern. We will see that in this respect, the first aim of sexual education is essentially different from the second aim, the aim that is related to *non*morally good sex.

#### "GOOD" IN A NONMORAL SENSE

Common-sense morality is not only agent-sacrificing, it is, paradoxically enough, also agent-*favoring*.<sup>13</sup> Again, a brief comparison with act-utilitarianism can elucidate this characteristic of common-sense moral thinking. According to this particular form of utilitarianism, an action is morally wrong if another option has better overall consequences for human happiness. This definition of "morally wrong" makes act-utilitarianism an extraordinarily demanding theory. Not only is every action, according to this theory, either morally right or wrong (and therefore, only those actions are morally permitted that are morally right). Furthermore, even if an action has remarkably good consequences for human happiness, if those consequences are less than optimal, the action is morally wrong.

Here an important difference with our common or garden morality arises. According to this form of morality, a great number of personal projects which have no optimal effects on human well-being are morally permitted, that is, such activities

are neither morally right nor morally wrong. Think, for instance, of doing research in philosophy of education. In comparison to philosophical reflection there are most certainly other pursuits that have substantially better overall consequences for human well-being. Yet, contrary to act-utilitarianism, we do not consider these philosophical projects morally wrong. From a moral point of view, such research activities are permissible (or, perhaps stated more accurately, morally neutral), which means that designations like “morally right” or “morally wrong” are simply not applicable.

Consequently, we can argue that ordinary morality leaves us a lot of elbowroom, a morally neutral area for realizing numerous personal projects and interests. Certainly, we have seen that common-sense morality, by virtue of the moral principles that are connected with care and respect for persons, imposes many restrictions. But within these limits we are free to arrange our life in a way of our own. To put it differently, contrary to act-utilitarianism, common-sense morality allows us to organize our lives in accordance with different (and sometimes even conflicting) conceptions of the *nonmorally* good life. But what do we mean when we say that a life is good from a nonmoral point of view? And is it possible to make a distinction between a concept and conceptions in this context too?

As is well-known, in philosophy, different explanations have been given of the *concept* of a nonmorally good life, and, such accounts are classified in different ways.<sup>14</sup> These conceptual explanations are known as theories of *personal well-being*, since discussing the nonmoral good is almost identical with giving an account of the well-being of a human individual. In our view, the best explication of our common-sense notion of personal well-being is offered by the so-called *rational preference* theory.<sup>15</sup> According to this theory, individual well-being or human flourishing is a function of rational preference satisfaction; the better we succeed in satisfying our rational preferences, the better our life will be from a nonmoral perspective.

On the one hand, this theory is attractive because the nonmoral good is not detached from our own preferences (or from our wants, aversions, etc.), as is the case in objective theories of well-being. In such theories, criteria are formulated and defended that provide a basis for appraisal of a person’s level of well-being, which is independent of that person’s own preferences. However, the question is, How can a supposed objective good (an activity, an experience, etc.) contribute to someone’s well-being if such a person does not want that good, even after careful consideration? Think, for example, of the highest good in the ethics of Aristotle: theoretical contemplation. Is a person who practices this intellectual activity really better off, even though he really hates such mental exertions on the basis of his own experience?

On the other hand, the attractive feature of the rational preference theory is that it is not the satisfaction of all our preferences that is considered to contribute to our personal well-being, but only the satisfaction of our *rational* preferences (or rational wants, rational aversions, etc.). How exactly a rational preference should be defined is a subject of philosophical discussion, but we can roughly maintain that such

preferences can stand the hypothetical test of *ideal* deliberation. Such a form of deliberation can be described as critical reflection on preferences, in a cool hour and clear state of mind, without making logical errors, and on the basis of all relevant information. Take, for example, a student who aspires to a research position in philosophy of education. She indeed obtains an appointment, but unexpectedly the job turns out to be rather disappointing. The satisfaction of her preference to become a philosopher of education hardly contributes to her well-being because it is not a rational one. For if she would have known ahead all the implications of doing this type of research (not only practically, but also emotionally), that is to say, if she would have been acquainted with all the relevant information, then she would not have preferred that particular position. In short, the preferences that function as a measure for someone's well-being are only those preferences that will survive a hypothetical process of an ideal reflection.

#### NONMORALLY GOOD SEX

Up to now we have elucidated our concept of a nonmorally good life. Though this analysis was very brief indeed, it can serve as a point of departure for drawing an outline of a *conception* of the nonmoral good and, more specifically, of a conception of nonmorally good sex.

A conception of the nonmorally good life is, at least with regard to its essence, composed of intrinsic values or, to be more precise, of beliefs about which aspects of our life are of intrinsic value to us. Such values correspond with intrinsic preferences, that is, the things that we value intrinsically are, by definition, the things that we prefer in themselves (and not only as means to something else or because they are useful). For example, because drinking a beer, cycling on a summer evening and nosing around in an encyclopedia are things that one of the present authors prefers in themselves, these activities are of intrinsic value to him.

Next, a conception of nonmorally good sex can be characterized as a system of beliefs concerning the intrinsic value of particular sexual activities and experiences. Deliberately we have chosen a rather broad definition, since a conception of nonmorally good sex does not only relate to kinds of sex that we more or less value intrinsically, for example, heterosexual or homosexual activities, sex within or without a loving relationship, sex with one individual or group sex. Also included in such a conception (and we want to emphasize this point) are beliefs about the relative intrinsic value of sexuality in our whole life. For example, are we hedonists who consider sex to be the highest good? Or are we rather ascetics who place sexuality at the bottom of their value hierarchy?

Now suppose that our life is in line with our conception of the nonmoral good. We perform those activities and have those experiences that, according to our own conception, are of intrinsic value. Do we then have a flourishing life, a life full of "weal" and little "woe?" Not necessarily. For though our intrinsic values are the expressions of particular intrinsic preferences, these preferences are not necessarily *rational*. And only the satisfaction of rational preferences counts in determining the level of our personal well-being. Suppose, for example, that a young adult who grew up in a conservative environment has acquired a strong aversion towards everything

that has to do with homosexuality. For him, only heterosexual contacts have intrinsic value. Moreover, suppose that our adolescent would have preferred homosexual contacts, if he would have known that, for him, such interactions are really gratifying. Then his aversion against homosexuality is not rational, since it would not survive a process of ideal deliberation. Therefore, living a life according to such an aversion will not promote our youngster's well-being.

On the basis of the preceding, one can easily understand the nature of the second aim of sexual education. Pursuing this aim comes down to facilitating the formation and development of a conception of nonmorally good sex, and in particular, of a conception that is the expression of rational preferences. This addition is not unimportant. As educators, our aim should not only be that the child acquires beliefs about the possible intrinsic value of sexual activities and experiences, the main point is that we make sure that such valuations are rooted in rational preferences. Only then will practicing a conception of nonmorally good sex be beneficial. After all, this is what we have in mind while pursuing the second aim: that the child grows into an adult with satisfying sexual relationships in a flourishing life.

There are striking differences between this aim and the first mentioned aim of sexual education. We have seen that the content of the first aim — that is, beliefs about morally good sex — is the same for all children. However, one may assume that the content of the second aim — that is, beliefs concerning nonmorally good sex — will vary from child to child. The sexual life that is nonmorally good for one person can differ in important respects from the sexual life that is nonmorally good for the other. Regarding the nonmoral good, then, sexual education cannot consist in imposing general demands; the aim will have to be adjusted to the specific talents, possibilities, needs and desires of the individual child.

Moreover, as educators, we do not exactly know beforehand what kind of life, with regard to the nature and place of sexuality, will be nonmorally good for this particular child. Thus the content of the second aim of sexual education is not only individualized, it is also largely *terra incognita* for us, and probably increasingly unknown the younger the child is. Our aim is the development of rational preferences without knowing much in advance about the content of those preferences. Consequently, with regard to this second aim, sexual education should not mainly be demanding, disciplining or exhorting, but should rather consist in giving advice, creating space, indicating possibilities, and especially, in initiating and sustaining what Michelle Fine calls “a discourse of desire.”<sup>16</sup>

This account of the second aim of sexual education does not preclude the possibility of general aspects of human well-being. Indeed, one need not be an adherent of a so-called objective list theory to defend the view that things like accomplishment and deep personal relations are prudential values in *every* human life,<sup>17</sup> or that pleasure and completeness are *general* criteria of nonmorally better sex.<sup>18</sup> However, because such values are, by definition, rather abstract, they give us little to hold on to. Even if we know that affective personal relations are a central aspect of the nonmorally good life, we still do not know the specific version of this kind of relationship that fits us best. And though pleasure may be a general

characteristic of nonmorally good sex, this insight does not even begin to answer the question of which sexual activities will be a pleasure to us. In other words, general prudential values offer educators only a very global orientation. Adequate sexual education can be understood as creating conditions that stimulate the child to fill in that orientation in a personal and authentic way. And of course, all of this should remain within the boundaries of what is morally permissible.

---

1 See W.K. Frankena, "Educating for the Good Life," in *Perspectives in Education, Religion, and the Arts*, ed. H.E. Kiefer and M.K. Munitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970), 17-18 and W.K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 62.

2. See Frankena, "Educating for the Good Life," 38-39; James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 26, 68-70.

3. R.A. Belliotti, *Good Sex: Perspectives on Sexual Ethics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

4. If a concept corresponds to a word (or a term), this concept is roughly identical with the (or a) meaning of that word. Consequently, analysing our concept of morality and clarifying the meaning of the corresponding term amounts to the same thing. A conception is a (normative or descriptive) view concerning a particular issue or subject. Therefore, presenting our conception of morally good sex consists in putting forward a normative view on sexual activities. See J.W. Steutel, "Konzepte und Konzeptionen: Zum Problem einer Analytischen Erziehungsphilosophie," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 37, no. 1 (1991): 81-96.

5. We do not claim that the notions and distinctions that are clarified are universally shared. On the contrary, it is quite possible that they are only part of common sense in liberal democratic societies. What we do claim, however, is that these notions and distinctions are useful and appropriate.

6. Michael Slote, *From Morality To Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5; see M. Slote, *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 10-11.

7. See Slote, *From Morality To Virtue*, 6-7.

8. According to common-sense moral thinking, a conception of morality is composed of certain principles. We do not, of course, deny that other and quite different conceptions of morality are possible (e.g. an ethics of virtue). However, we think that these other accounts are not competing with a morality of principles, but only (albeit often important) complements.

9. See J.W. Steutel and Ben Spiecker, "Rational Passions and Intellectual Virtues: A Conceptual Analysis," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 1 (1996).

10. Belliotti, *Good Sex*, 195-200.

11. *Ibid.*, 201-5.

12. See Richard Wasserstrom, "Is Adultery Immoral?" in *Philosophy and Sex*, ed. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984).

13. See Slote, *Common-Sense Morality*, 10-11; Slote, *From Morality To Virtue*, 4.

14. See Shelly Kagan, "The Limits of Well-being," in *The Good Life and the Human Good*, ed. E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 493-502.

15. See Griffin, *Well-Being*, 11-23; R.J. Arneson, "Liberal Democratic Community," in *Democratic Community*, ed. J.W. Chapman and Ian Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 202-5; R.B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 110-15.

16. Michelle Fine, *Disruptive Voices. The Possibilities of Feminist Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 35 ff.

17. See Griffin, *Well-Being*, 64-68.

18. See Sara Ruddick, "Better Sex," in *Philosophy and Sex*, ed. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984).