

Sexuality and the Good of Human Relationships

Suzanne Mulligan

It has been argued elsewhere that a new way of thinking about sexuality and sexual relationship is needed¹, and that at the heart of that “new way” ought to be the recognition of the equal dignity of women. The idea of justice provides us with a starting point from which to critique the various sexual, social and economic abuses that support the sex industry, but we need to understand our relationships beyond the minimum requirements of justice. The way in which we think and talk about sexuality ought to affirm the dignity of the person as well as promote human well-being and human flourishing. In other words, our sexual ethic ought to be life-giving and life-enhancing.² Thus, at the heart of that ethic must be an understanding of the good of human relationships.

So what sort of framework might we construct in our efforts to promote a life-giving and life-enhancing sexuality? What are the values or principles that promote such an ethic? American theologian Margaret Farley has developed a framework for what she calls *just love*. The principles she proposes go some way to answering our question, and so we will draw from Farley’s work here.³ It will also be argued that we must evaluate these principles in light of broader social concerns. To that end we examine the notion of the common good, and the extent to which it might assist the fostering of these values among citizens. Let us proceed to the first part of our task. What norms ought to govern a life-affirming and life-sustaining sexual ethic?

Do No Harm

The norm “do no harm” ought to govern all relationships but it is particularly relevant for our sexual lives. In that context, the commitment to do no harm to the other is a commitment not to sexually exploit or harm other people and not to treat them as simply a means to an end. It is a commitment to, at the very least, treat individuals as ends in themselves, ends that are worthy of respect. Otherwise we see people simply as commodities to be utilised and discarded as we deem fit. The harm we can cause to others takes many forms, of course. It can be physical, psychological, or spiritual harm. We possibly identify the physical harm that is perpetrated in the sex industry most immediately; sexual violation can often be accompanied by physical aggressiveness. In some cases women and girls have to endure beatings from their pimps and clients, starvation and malnutrition, and forced drug abuse.

The principle “do no harm”, it could be argued, is especially important in sexual relationships because in those relationships we make ourselves vulnerable in a special way. There is always a degree of vulnerability in any relationship – there is an element of trust involved and we know that that trust can be violated. But the damage caused by betraying trust in the sexual sphere can be more difficult to overcome. As Farley notes, “sexuality has to go with vulnerability. Eros, the desire for another, the passion that accompanies the wish for sexual expression, makes one vulnerable... capable of being wounded”.⁴ In instances where sexual harm does in fact occur there is need for a special type of healing. As Seamus Heaney reminds us, “Human beings suffer, they get hurt and they get hard”. Overcoming sexual hurt may take a considerable amount of time, a lifetime perhaps. And when that hurt takes place in the context of violent and forced sex, specialised services and facilities are likely to be needed in order to help individuals recover and heal.

Thus, “do no harm” is perhaps the most basic starting point in any attempt at constructing a framework for a just sexual ethic. But that norm is not enough on its own. For it points only to the minimum that is expected of us in our relationships. Positive, healthy, affirming sexual relationships are built on much more than the requirement “do no harm”. When we think of the ways in which we flourish, and the ways in which our sexuality contributes

to that flourishing, we think of the maximum that might be achieved in our sexual lives. And so we must consider several other criteria before we can be satisfied that ours is a positive sexual ethic.

Free Consent

Just as the “do no harm” principle is a very basic requirement in any sexual ethic, the idea of free consent is a fundamental condition. As with any relationship or agreement entered into, both parties must freely agree to the terms of the relationship. There are many ways in which one’s freedom can be diminished or taken away completely. Various psychological factors might be at play, fear and intimidation can influence our decisions, and poverty very often forces individuals into high-risk situations. In the context of our sexual lives, Farley describes free consent as “... the obligation to respect the right of human persons to determine their own actions and their relationships in the sexual sphere of their lives”.⁵ Clearly, instances of rape, sexual exploitation, forced participation in pornography violate that norm. Within the Christian tradition free consent was emphasised at the point of entering marriage – the marriage contract/covenant had to be entered into freely and knowingly otherwise it could be deemed null and void. Unfortunately, less attention was given to an individual’s freedom after that point, particularly a woman’s freedom. Although the “right” of both spouses to each other’s bodies was acknowledged, that was usually interpreted as a husband’s right to demand *his* conjugal rights from his wife. Human trafficking and the sex industry are just two examples of how sexual freedom is denied to a person. Free consent is so important that its absence seriously calls into question the appropriateness of the sexual activity or sexual relationship in question.

Respect and Responsibility

Consideration of these first two norms directs us towards the principles of respect and responsibility. Respect suggests that we identify others as ends in themselves rather than mere commodities. Our sexual conduct ought to promote and protect human dignity. And respect, as we shall see below, is intimately connected with equality.

Furthermore, responsibility is closely associated with respect. Responsibility must be exercised in our sexual relationships, and it implies both freedom and knowledge. Couples are called to make free and equal decisions regarding their relationship and any children that might result from that relationship. But we have a responsibility to care for each other also. We must be honest when determining to what extent my relationship is good for the other. Am I/are we in a healthy relationship? Am I being true to my commitment to my partner? Being responsible demands a high degree of honesty and openness. Responsibility is not an easy thing to exercise in our sexual lives, and it requires a certain level of moral maturity. But it is an integral part of being able to live out our sexuality in a positive manner.

Mutuality and Equality

Farley discusses the importance of mutuality in sexual activity. Thankfully we no longer think of our sexual activity in terms of one active partner and one receptive partner. Women were (and still are in some places) thought of as the sexually submissive partner; in many parts of the world women are expected to be submissive and unquestioning, and have little say over the type or frequency of sex they engage in. It is frightening how many men continue to understand their sexual relationships in that way. Gender roles and stereotypes can often impact negatively on our sexual lives. Speaking about the problem of rape in South Africa, Rachel Jewkes and Naeema Abrahams argue that the problem “has to be understood within the context of the very substantial gender power inequalities which pervade society. Rape, like domestic violence, is both a manifestation of male dominance over women and an assertion of that position ... Both sexual and physical violence against women form part of a repertoire of strategies of control.”⁶ But of course gender stereotypes affect how women see *themselves* too. A study carried out in Cape Town in 2005 suggests that many women saw themselves as the submissive and obedient partner in a relationship. Of those surveyed (from both sexes) 27 per cent believed that rape results from something that a woman says, 18 per cent said that some cases of rape involve a woman who wants to have sex, and 29 per cent agreed that rape is often a woman’s fault.⁷ The authors of the survey say that ‘With regard to gender roles, we expected and found that men often viewed women as

passive, subservient, and as fulfilling traditional gender roles. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests South African women are expected to fulfill a stereotypical female gender role by being docile, especially in sexual relationships. However, we found that women endorsed these attitudes at rates that generally did not differ from men.⁸ But as Farley notes, a truly just sexual relationship must include mutuality, both mutuality of desires and of what she calls embodied union.⁹ It is no longer acceptable to think of women as the passive partner – mutual participation and decision-making confirm the equality and dignity of both partners, and in turn contributes to greater responsibility in the sexual relationship.

Of course, attaining mutuality in one's sexual relationships implies that there is equality in those relationships. Kevin Kelly, as outlined in the first paper, argues that there is greater need to affirm the equal dignity of women. And we know that women's inequality (be it social, economic, or sexual) often places them at danger of trafficking and HIV infection. Farley discussed equality not only in terms of affirming the equal dignity of women – she also speaks of *equality of power*.¹⁰ She is surely correct when she states that “the requirements of equality, like the requirements of free consent, rules out treating a partner as property, a commodity, or an element in market exchange”.¹¹

Commitment

It is true to say that a just sexual ethic ought to incorporate the idea of commitment. Fidelity to one's marriage covenant has been a central part of Christian sexual teaching, but the living out of the principle of commitment (particularly in Western Culture) has changed somewhat over the past 30 years or so. We have witnessed increasing numbers of couples now choosing to live together before marriage. But it would be unfair to interpret that as a rejection of commitment – it is, rather, a different manifestation of the norm. However we understand and apply it today, our sexual relationships ought to incorporate some degree of commitment to the other. Otherwise, we risk seeing others only as a means and not as an end in their own right. Although casual sex is more common today, many have questioned to what extent these casual sexual encounters satisfy the person, in the long-term at least.

Casual sex is just that – it is casual, no strings attached. But we generally long for something more meaningful and fulfilling in our lives. Again, Farley notes that “more and more readily comes the conclusion drawn by many that sexual desire without interpersonal love leads to disappointment and a growing disillusionment. The other side of this conclusion is that sexuality is an expression of something beyond itself. Its power is a power for union, and its desire is a desire for intimacy.”¹²

Life-Giving and Life-Enhancing

For a great deal of the Christian tradition sexual intercourse was justified or excused because it had the potential to bring forth new life. For much of that tradition procreation was seen as the “primary end” of marriage, while other dimensions such as the fostering of love between the spouses were thought of as “secondary ends”. We have thankfully moved away from those rather forced categories, and although the raising of children is given special place in the Christian understanding of marriage it is not at the expense of what we might call the other “fruits of marriage” – the fostering and nurturing of love between two people, the support and friendship that is enjoyed within marriage, and the fulfilment/completeness that can be experienced by couples. We might call these the *life-giving* and *life-enhancing* aspects of sexuality. These terms are used here in a broad sense, and not confined to the procreative dimension of sexual activity. The life-enhancing aspect of intimate relationships is one that perhaps needs to be promoted more in contemporary Catholic teaching. Our relationships can bear fruit in many ways; they can enhance our lives, make us happier and more fulfilled people. Our sexual relationships should be no different in that respect.

Social Justice

And finally the norm of social justice has a profound relevance for sexual ethics. At first glance that norm may seem a little out of place until we consider the ways in which our sexual choices impact on society. It is true to say that there is a social dimension to our sexual activity and so social justice ought to be a guiding principle in any sexual ethic. For too long we thought about our sexual relationships as having little to do with so-called “public

morality”. But we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that there are indeed social repercussions to sex. As Farley remarks, “a social justice norm in the context of sexual ethics relates not specifically to the justice between sexual partners. It points to the kind of justice that everyone in a community or a society is obligated to affirm for its members as sexual beings.”¹³

Furthermore, social justice demands that couples take responsibility for the consequences of their love and sexual activity. That certainly includes bearing responsibility for any children that may result from intercourse, but it must also include other social dimensions of our sexual lives. Increasing levels of sexual and domestic abuse in society demand a re-evaluation of our sexual mores. Tough questions have to be faced with honesty and determination. Are we the kind of society that tolerates the subordination of women? Are we the kind of society that tolerates the abuse of women and children (physical or sexual)? Do we tolerate the establishment of lap-dancing clubs and accept the frequenting of such clubs as a normal part of societal life? Are we serious about eradicating gender inequality? Do we accept gender stereotypes that place both men and women at risk of sexual harm? Are we serious about tackling the problem of human trafficking in our own country? Any attempt to answer these questions will require public debate involving a variety of groups. But that debate must be critical, honest and open if we are to confront the sexual challenges of our society.

The Youth of Today

But are these ideals appealing to young people? This is exactly the question that Farley poses in her work. She is convinced that young people can, and in fact do, relate with many of these norms. I tend to agree. In fact, I would suggest that justice provides us with an excellent starting point for sexual discourse with younger people. Other ideals – for example, that our sexual relationships ought to be life-enhancing – are ideals that most can relate to, irrespective of age. Despite the often voiced lament that “the youth of today” have no sexual morality, it seems to me that many young people have very high sexual ideals indeed. And these sexual ideals tend to relate to the kind of justice issues that we have been discussing. Farley concludes by saying that “we know the dangers as well as ineffectiveness of moralism, and the

potential dangers of narrowly construed moral systems and rules. We do not yet know whether an ethic of just love and just sex will transform any young person's understanding or action. Insofar as we care about our children, it is worth a try."¹⁴

The Common Good

We mentioned above that there is a social dimension to our sexual morality. This brings us into the realm of the common good. To what extent do our sexual values contribute to the common good, and in what way might our understanding of and commitment to the common good affect our sexual values?

In *Gaudium et Spes* the common good is described as the 'the sum total of social conditions which enable people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.'¹⁵ Similarly, *Dignitatis Humanae* explains that 'The common good of society consists in the sum total of those conditions of social life which enable men to achieve a fuller measure of perfection with greater ease. It consists especially in safeguarding the rights and duties of the human person.'¹⁶ But these definitions get us only so far. We need to delve much further if we are to discover what is meant by the concept. The common good, if it comprises the *sum total* of conditions which encourage human flourishing, directs us beyond a purely economic reading of social organisation. Within many branches of economics priority has often been given to the maximising income; society and its citizens, we are told, fare better where income levels increase. If one is to follow that line of argument then one might conclude that the common good can be more effectively realised where we stimulate economic growth. But, of course, there are many flaws with that hypothesis. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Product (GNP) can only tell us a certain amount about how we are faring as a society. Neither indicator relays information about social inequality or social exclusion, for example. GNP may increase. In fact, on paper a nation may appear to be doing very well while members of that same nation may experience serious social and economic inequality. One of the strengths of the idea of the common good, therefore, is that it directs us beyond an exclusively

economic reading of society and asks that we assess broader social, cultural, religious, and political concerns. There is no doubt that income plays its part when it comes to human flourishing – we have greater choice and opportunity when we have access to capital. But human flourishing cannot be reduced to, or achieved, by economics alone.

The Good of Human Relationships

As social beings we cannot function adequately in isolation. We are born from relationship and there is a deep human need within us to enter into relationship. For that reason the understanding of the common good found in the social teaching of the Church strongly promotes the social dimension of our lives and recognises that the good of each individual is intimately connected to the good of others. There is a temptation to identify the common good with the extrinsic aspects of our lives – the goods that we utilise, the services available to us, the income that we earn, the environment in which we live, the various educational and health infrastructures that exist and so on. And for good reason, for these things play an important part in our overall well-being. But of course when we think of human flourishing, human happiness and well-being we think not only of these external commodities and services that we can avail ourselves of. We (hopefully) also identify the many relationships that enrich our lives. And so the relationships that we enter into form an integral part of the common good, properly understood. David Hollenbach goes so far as to describe these positive relationships as the ‘preconditions’ for the sharing of goods and commodities within society. He goes on to say that “The quality of such relationships among a society’s members is itself part of the good that is, or is not, achieved in it. One of the key elements in the common good of a community or society, therefore, is the good of being a community or society at all. This shared good is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being.”¹⁷

It is true that many relationships – be they personal or professional – may serve as means to other ends. Having a good working relationship with ones colleagues, for example, may be of benefit when it comes to my securing a

promotion at work. But there is something amiss if we *only* see these relationships as a means to an end, or indeed if we seek them only for the ends they may secure for us. Hopefully we can identify a more fundamental value inherent in them also. Or to put it another way, we say that positive human relationships are important *in themselves*. They enhance our lives. They often bring out something in us that might otherwise lie dormant. We feel affirmed through the positive ties we establish with others. As Hollenbach puts it, positive relationships are not merely a means to human flourishing but are in fact a *fundamental part* of human flourishing itself.¹⁸

This shared life of communication and interaction with others, in all its aspects, is good in itself. This helps explain why the common good of social life cannot be disaggregated without remainder into the private goods of the people who are members of the society. For such disaggregation dissolves the bonds of relationship that constitute an important part of good lives. If we overlook these bonds of relationship, the goods of the relationships themselves will not be part of the picture of the common good ... The common good, therefore, is not simply a means for attaining the private good of individuals; it is a value to be pursued for its own sake. This suggests that a key aspect of the common good can be described as *the good of being a community at all* – the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.¹⁹

In trying to promote the good of human relationship, and the significance of this for the common good, we begin to see some of the richness of that concept. But fostering a sense of the importance of human relationship for the common good of society is not an easy task. One might argue that the provision of various social services or the achievement of a certain level of income can be attained more easily, in the sense that we can target those goals in a more mechanical way and implement practical steps to secure them. Of course, I am not suggesting that this is a straightforward task or a burden-less one. We all know the very real challenges that we face at present in our own country on those fronts. But they are tasks that can in some way be ‘targeted’. It may take years to implement, but there are identifiable steps

that can be taken to achieve our goals. However, promoting the idea that positive human relationships are an essential part of the common good points to a different reality, one less easy to target in the mechanical manner already mentioned. Working towards a sense of the good of human relationship must be a gradual process; it is not something that can be forced or imposed on citizens. It presupposes the existence of mutual respect and the recognition of the dignity of each member of society – values that must be nurtured among us over time. And so we can say that mutual respect is a precondition of the positive relationships that form such an important part of our lives and of our overall good. Mutual respect makes genuine social interaction possible. And social interaction is an essential part of a good society.

Critical Citizenship

Why is social interaction so important? The idea of critical citizenship helps us answer that question. Critical citizenship implies a number of things. Being critical suggests that we are informed, that we can responsibly discern what is our good and the overall good, that we are willing to engage in respectful dialogue with others even when we might not like what they stand for. That engagement in dialogue in turn implies intellectual openness – that we are willing to be open to the possibility of surprise rather than remain entrenched in our own worldview. Citizenship points to social engagement and the participation of *all* in the common good. It also suggests a willingness to acknowledge our duties as well as rights. In other words, a proper sense of citizenship ought to push us beyond the boundaries of self-interest. We are part of a greater whole, and although the individual must never become smothered by the collective whole, we as individuals have obligations to others that extend far beyond our own immediate context. The Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs captures the point well when it reminds us that:

The attempt to delineate human beings simply as individuals with inalienable rights does not do justice to the full truth, because it ignores the manner in which we have been nurtured in and through our membership of a multiple of overlapping communities. As members of a society, a local community and a

family, all of us have rights, but equally we have responsibilities. These are not co-terminus with our duty to be law-abiding citizens. We can and must speak about the duty of active citizenship, which is nothing more than an honest acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the society to which we belong. In practical terms, this concept of active citizenship translates into an attitude of solidarity to our fellow citizens, an attitude that is marked by 'a willingness to give oneself for the good of one's neighbour' beyond any individual or public interest.²⁰

Thus, critical citizenship demands that we honestly and prudently attempt to work out what values best affirm our shared vision of society. But how do we conclude which values are worth preserving and protecting, especially given the increasingly pluralistic nature of Irish society? The idea of critical citizenship points us towards another feature of the common good, namely the need for *respectful dialogue*.

Respectful Dialogue

Without respectful dialogue we cannot speak of critical citizenship at all, and without that we cannot begin to try to tackle the social and economic problems that threaten the common good. Mutual respect and equality are the preconditions for debate about the common good. And that debate is crucial if we are to decipher what is meant by the concept in the first place. The conversation must be inclusive, respectful, and it must be an ongoing conversation. It can be difficult at times to move beyond the demands of local loyalty and see the broader needs of a society or of a nation. Local loyalty, of course, is not something to be dismissed out of hand; it can have an important and constructive role in the life of the community. But equally, local loyalty can at times hinder our ability to see the broader goals that we ought to be working towards. Hollenbach speaks of "intellectual solidarity" and the ways in which it can contribute to fruitful dialogue with "the stranger". For Hollenbach, intellectual solidarity plays a vital part in our efforts at identifying "the good life". It implies an openness and a hospitality towards other religious and cultural worldviews. The conversations that must take place between different cultural, religious and political groups

may be uncomfortable ones. Indeed, agreement may be an unusual outcome of those conversations. But conversation is vital, and difference should not become an obstacle to genuine intellectual encounters with others. Hollenbach is surely right when he tells us that plurality of culture or tradition could more positively be understood as opportunities for intellectual engagement and imagination.²¹

Hollenbach believes that intellectual solidarity is deeply important if we are to revitalise the idea of the common good today.²² The pluralistic and culturally diverse nature of our human community calls for intellectual solidarity with those around us, for we otherwise risk becoming isolated and entrenched, seeing others as nothing more than “strangers within our gates” and rivals to the goods that we desire. Diversity, be it cultural or religious, is not an insurmountable obstacle to a shared vision of the good life. Indeed, the dialogue that ensues from engagement with other traditions is itself good and something that ought to be cherished. A shared vision of the common good is only possible through a serious intellectual encounter with others.²³

Concluding Remarks

The injustice of human trafficking, and the sexual exploitation that so often accompanies it demands both national and international responses. Some countries have amended their national legislation to help tackle prostitution and trafficking. Ireland has some way to go on that front, but tentative steps have been taken. However, law can only do so much. The sex industry exists because the demand for paid sex is high. If we are to take the problem seriously then we need to ask difficult questions of ourselves as a people. We must assess the sort of sexual values that we espouse, and consider the need for a new framework for our sexual lives. A number of principles have been proposed here that, it is argued, ought to shape that framework. As we have seen, Margaret Farley’s work has made a major contribution to Catholic sexual discourse in that regard. But others may well add to that list – it is not the final word on the subject. It is hoped, however, that we find here the beginnings of a debate that might help us in our evaluation of the sexual mores that govern our lives.

Trafficking has broader social implications also. For too long we tended to think about sexuality as a private matter. Obviously, people are entitled to privacy, but our sexual activity often has social ramifications. Human trafficking is facilitated by a host of social and economic injustices, issues which seriously threaten the common good of a society (not to mention the violation of individual rights that is inherently part of the business). Ireland is now classified as a “destination country” for traffickers. As we attempt to work out and live out the demands of the common good we must confront the tough ethical questions that this raises for us. To what extent are we failing to realise the common good by our hesitancy to overcome the violence of trafficking? To what extent does the concept of the common good help us to better understand our obligations to all members of our society? These questions can only be answered through genuine dialogue with others, through a serious and committed intellectual enquiry into the nature of “the good life”.