

Making Sense Out of Bioethics

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Sexual Atoms & Molecules

A major issue in bioethics today involves "informed consent," but some try to make everything about consent. This is especially notable when it comes to ethical discussions around the exercise of human sexuality.

In a thought-provoking 2015 article entitled *Liberalism Can't Understand Sex*, author and researcher Jason Morgan challenges the reigning cultural view that sees sexual activity as acceptable between any two or more individuals as long as they freely consent to engage in it.

He notes that in such a framework, "all activities are equal, as long as we have obtained consent when those activities involve others." This assumption about the equivalence of all consensual activities, however, is dubious at best, given that sexual activity affects and engages us in a way that is radically different from other human activities.

Morgan notes that "sex, unlike anything else we might do with another person, transcends the self while radically reorienting it within a new, shared context with our sexual partner. Consent assumes that sex will not do this, that sex will leave two people as fully autonomous after sex as they were before. But this is precisely the one thing that sex was designed *not* to do. Sex, even if entered into based on a free agreement between two autonomous people, by its very nature dismantles the autonomy upon which the consensual understanding of sex had been based."

In other words, sex touches us at a deeper level than other activities, binding us to another and speaking a language not of autonomy or transient engagement, but of communion and enduring self-gift. To suggest that sex is just about being sure you gave consent before the clothes started flying is to leave young people unfulfilled. That's what happens routinely in hook-up experiences and patterns of cohabitation.

Morgan sums up the central flaw in consent-based notions of human sexuality this way: the 'yes' given to sex and premised on individual autonomy is "fundamentally different from the 'yes' in which human sexuality is designed to operate: a 'yes' to the other in his or her spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical entirety. Sex functions precisely to break down autonomy and overcome the overweening sovereignty of the self upon which consent is ultimately based."

He continues: "By contrast, sex draws two people into the most intimate form of community, forming a new relationship based on a shared totality of existence. Where liberalism deals in a world of unjoinable, antagonistic atoms, human sexuality strives to bring two atoms together in order to make an entirely different molecule."

By talking about consent *ad nauseum*, we misdirect young people down primrose paths, away from the unique anchoring power of love in marriage, wherein the full experience of the human sexual encounter, embodying both transcendence and sacrifice, is able to be lived out.

This plenitude of sex cannot be adequately captured by the vagaries of in-the-moment consent, which reduces and over-simplifies the bigger question of whether or not to have sex to the choice between "yes" or "no" regarding a particular act of intercourse.

Instead, the "yes" or "no" raised by sex is not just to the physical joining of two bodies, but to the richly rewarding and sacrificial intermingling of two selves becoming one entity in a life-long union of persons. This commingling automatically expresses the strongest and most authentic human affirmation each one can give to the other, even to the point of embracing each other not only as spouses but also as parents in the potentially life-giving act of marital intimacy.

Those who partake of sex within a loosely committed relationship like cohabitation, on the other hand, sense — especially women — that the troubling absence of a marital commitment ultimately connotes an incomplete, inauthentic and unstable promise about love.

By pushing back against the hollow notion of "consent-for-tonight" and encouraging chaste continence until marriage, we initiate the process of restoring sex to its rightful place — not as contractual or bargained recreation, but as the unrestricted gift of one for the other and the reception of that same gift.

In this perspective, unique to the setting of marriage, men and women give of themselves for the sake of each other. Such a form of mutual honoring involves the sacrifice of oneself in an other-centeredness that can and often does elevate the dignity of each to a new and transcendent level.

The ethical issue, in sum, is not merely one of mutual consent, but of authentic interpersonal good. Consenting to harmonious hedonisms or reciprocal exploitation is obviously against the good of the individuals involved, as anyone who has ever been sexually objectified, used and discarded sadly knows. Consent is necessary, but not sufficient. What also is needed is to secure the mutual, lasting good of the parties involved.

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