

6-2003

# Review of “Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings, 4th edition”

Randy Cagle  
*Humboldt State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cagle, Randy (2003) "Review of “Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings, 4th edition”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 14.

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 4 No. 2, June 2003

## Book Review

---

*Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 4th edition, Alan Soble, editor. Lanham and Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002. 513 pages.

---

“Among the many topics explored by the philosophy of sex,” Alan Soble says in the introduction to the latest edition of his now classic anthology, “are procreation, contraception, celibacy, marriage, adultery, casual sex, flirting, prostitution, homosexuality, masturbation, seduction, rape, sexual harassment, sadomasochism, pornography, bestiality, and pedophilia” (xx). He follows with thirty readings that, collectively, manage to touch on all of these provocative topics. Impressively, he has constructed a unique and eminently useful anthology rigorous enough to appeal both to philosophers and philosophy majors as well as accessible enough to serve students encountering philosophy for the first time.

The fourth edition is heavily expanded from its predecessor. Soble adds a new general introduction, replaces the third-edition unit on sadomasochism with a one on Kantianism and sex, and expands the units on homosexuality, rape and harassment, and pornography and prostitution. Only the units devoted to conceptual analysis and abortion are unaltered. There is also a much-extended bibliography arranged according to topic, as well as a thorough index and notes about the book’s contributors.

Soble’s introductory chapter, “The fundamentals of the Philosophy of Sex,” is useful in a number of ways. He distinguishes conceptual from normative approaches to the definitive issues of the philosophy of sex. The task of conceptual analysis, Soble says, is to clarify the basic notions of the discipline, such as sexual desire and sexual act, as well as to construct definitions of specific sexual practices, such as adultery rape and prostitution (xx). Normative approaches, on the other hand, inquire “about the value of sexual activity and sexual pleasure and of various forms they take” (xxi). Anticipating many of the issues to come, Soble further distinguishes moral evaluations of sexual practices—such and such is morally wrong, morally obligatory, morally optional—from non-moral evaluation of them—such and such makes for good or bad, healthy or unhealthy sex. Also addressed in the Introduction is the important issue of “natural” and “unnatural” and the question of the relevance of these categories to moral wrongfulness.

Part 1, on conceptual analysis, clearly sets the book apart from most of its competitors, which emphasize almost exclusively the moral and social issues related to sex. The unit begins with a selection directed toward a general readership (excellent for beginning a course on the topic), a somewhat shocking and rather humorous selection from Greta Christina, who recounts many of her sexual exploits and how she came to obsess over the question “What counts, exactly, as having sex?” This question is easily translated, of course, into the philosophical question of what the sufficient

and necessary conditions an act must meet in order to count as a *sexual* act. Accordingly, immediately following are the two essays that virtually initiated contemporary philosophy of sex, Thomas Nagel's "Sexual Perversion" (1969) and Robert Solomon's "Sexual Paradigms" (1974). Both philosophers analyze the concept of "sexual act" in order better to understand the concept of the "sexually perverted." Then come two other well-known essays, Janice Moulton's "Sexual Behavior: Another Position" and Alan Goldman's "Plain Sex." In this opening sequence alone, Soble gives us a rich collection of essays in which a number of important topics are in play. Most prominent are (1) whether the sexual activity is essentially goal-directed, and if so, what the "end" of sex must be and what relation it has to the sexual activity itself construed as a "means" to that end, (2) whether the criterion of sexual act will be primarily physical (Goldman) or primarily psychological (Nagel, Solomon, Moulton) in nature, (3) whether there is any overlap between the categories "unnatural" and "perverted," or between those categories and moral ones such as "morally impermissible". Closing out the unit are articles by Robert Grey, "Sex and Sexual Perversion," and by Soble himself, "Masturbation: Conceptual and Ethical Matters." Soble's essay contains a concise summary of the sometimes dense content of the preceding pages.

The remaining units are devoted mainly to more overtly normative issues. Chapter 2 concerns the morality of homosexuality and of homosexual marriage. Beginning the chapter is a transcript of the famous exchange between John Finnis and Martha Nussbaum on the morality of homosexual conduct. Michael Levin's conservative "Against Homosexual Relation," a new addition, follows and makes for a counterbalance to the liberal and moderate positions of Edward Vacek's "A Christian Homosexuality," John Corvino's "Homosexuality: The Nature and Harm Arguments," and Cheshire Calhoun's "Defending Marriage," which follow Levin.

The moral issues about homosexuality raised in Part 2 make a nice segue way into stimulating but all too brief Part 3. In this unit on abortion, Soble manages to give us essays that escape the traditional "pro-choice" vs. "pro-life" duality. Rather, Sidney Callahan's "Abortion and the Sexual Agenda: A Case for Profile Feminism," and Ellen Willis's "Abortion: Is a Woman a Person?" focus, in Soble's own words "on the logical, psychological and social connections between the abortion controversy and contemporary sexual norms" (xiii).

The specifically-targeted moral issues of Parts 2 and 3 set the stage for Chapter 4, in which it is "sexual morality" in general that is in question. The Chapter begins with the infamous fragment from Kant's *Lectures on Ethics* in which Kant highlights what he thinks is the intrinsically degrading and "instrumentalizing" nature of sex—in any sexual act one treats himself or another as a mere thing for the attainment of physical gratification—and claims that only within traditional marriage is sex morally permissible. Following, Thomas Mappes provides a cogent and compelling, as well as clearly more plausible, account of what "sexually using" another person might consist in. Soble again follows with his own essay, "Sexual Use and What to Do About It: Internalist and Externalist Sexual Ethics." Finally, Irving Singer closes out the unit with "The Morality of Sex: Contra Kant" who, in contrast to Kant's "pessimistic sexual metaphysics" (Soble's language) offers a "positive sexual" metaphysics which emphasizes the pleasurable and unifying power of sex over against its reductive and objectifying aspects.

Part 5 is devoted to the issues of rape and sexual harassment. In particular, the issue of whether we can ever hope to draw a clear distinction between sexually harassing and non-harassing behavior is dealt with in the first two essays by Robin Warshaw, "Is This Sexual Harassment?" and Mane

Hajdin, “Sexual Harassment and the Demarcation Problem.” H.E. Baber’s famous paper “How Bad is Rape?” and Soble’s own analysis of Antioch University’s sexual offense policy, together with Robin West’s “The Harms of Consensual Sex,” and Alan Wertheimer’s “Consent and Sexual Relations” take up the problematic notion of consent and its relevance to moral assessments of sexual acts and social policies.

Part 6 is devoted to issues regarding pornography and prostitution. Soble’s rationale for including them in one unit is that they “both involve, in their own way, performing sexual acts for compensation,” as well as, arguably at least, the objectification of women (and occasionally of men). The articles on pornography include selections from Sally Tidale—from her book *Talk Dirty to Me*—Martha Nussbaum’s “Objectification,” and Soble’s own “Pornography and the Social Sciences.” Laurie Shrage’s “Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution,; Igor Primaoratz’s “What’s Wrong With Prostitution,” and Pat Califia’s “Whoring in Utopia” round out this final unit.

With all the new additions, the book is somewhat less manageable than its predecessor. There is more here than any teacher can hope to cover in a single semester, but, as always, the payoff is a wide variety. Soble’s selections do show an Anglo-American or “analytic” bias with regard to his subject matter, and thus many stimulating articles that could be included are not. It is largely in this respect that Soble’s book fails to measure up to some of the competing anthologies in the field (see, for example: Baker, Robert B., Wininger, Kathleen, and Ellison, Frederick A., eds. *Philosophy and Sex*. 3rd ed. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998.), which offer a broader perspective. A teacher dedicated to a more “pluralistic” approach will thus have to supplement the book with additional material.

Still, there is enough in Soble’s book of interest to almost anyone. In the classroom, my students have found the readings both difficult as well and provocative, but always engaging. Students taking their first philosophy course will naturally find the opening unit on conceptual analysis the most taxing. The more concrete and pragmatic issues of the later chapters make the readings more accessible, and put less strain on the instructor to explicate for the students; he or she can place much more emphasis on discussion. The above reservations aside, Soble’s book is pedagogically very good, able to interest both the philosophically trained as well as introductory-level students—I have found it superb for my department’s upper-division general education Philosophy of Sex and Love course—and is thus highly recommended.

Randy Cagle  
Humboldt State University

Review. "This is the only book currently on the market that covers a vast expanse of topics of sexual ontology, gender identity, sexual ethics, and non-traditional sexual preferences and relationships in a thorough and systematic way. It truly reflects the ever-changing landscape of the issues surrounding sex in 21st century, representing the top-notch quality of work done by the experts in the field." "The Philosophy of Sex takes up important questions of the day. What does sex mean for our identity? For our relationships? What kinds of sexual actions are morally acceptable and which are not?" "This new edition of The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings is an intriguing and helpful collection of essays"including classics as well as new essays on more contemporary topics. In this new fifth edition of The Philosophy of Sex, Sobel and co-editor Nicholas Power have collected thirty contemporary essays that explore philosophically, conceptually, and theologically the nature, social meanings, and morality of contemporary sexual phenomena. Contributors address myriad topics, including cybersex and the Internet, masturbation, contraception, sexual perversion, gay and lesbian sexuality, same-sex marriage, casual sex and promiscuity, pedophilia, rape and date rape, sexual use and objectification, sexual relationships between teachers and students, pornography, and prost... The editors provide a comprehensive bibliography of over 700 philosophical and general readings in sexuality. L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy 261-286 (in The Wittgenstein Reader). 3. Philosophy of Mind. Consciousness and Physicalism. Theories of the mind: functionalism and representationalism Putnam, H (2002), "The Nature of Mental States" in Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary and Classical Readings, Chalmers, D (ed.), Oxford University Press. (ca 12 sider) Armstrong, D (2002), "The Causal Theory of the Mind" in Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary and Classical Readings, Chalmers, D (ed.), Oxford University Press. The Harvard Review of Philosophy 8, 39-52. First Philosophy, The Second Sex, and the Third Wave, pp. 19-46 in Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, & Feminism. New York: Columbia University Press 2001. There are no reviews yet. Be the first one to write a review. 62 Previews. 3 Favorites. Purchase options. Better World Books. DOWNLOAD OPTIONS. download 1 file.