

# Redefining sexual perversion

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



**Redefining Sexual Perversion** In this essay I hope to establish a new definition of sexual perversion, one that will solve many of the conceptual problems which arise from the work of Thomas Nagel and Sara Ruddick. I shall redefine sexual perversion as that which would be contrary to ones individual sexual nature. In doing this I shall establish that only through the understanding of the individual can an act be described as perverse for to describe in another way (namely through a universal moral law) greatly underestimates the diversity of human sexual desire. Moreover such a definition also leads to the development of negative stereotypes and social stigmas. Once my definition (which I shall call the Natural Definition) has been justified I shall apply it systematically to problems which have arisen in one specific area of sexual ethics: prostitution.

**Perversion in Ethical Discourse** Generally speaking, perversion is a term used in sexual ethics to describe behaviour deemed pathological by its deviation from " normal" sexual desire. The term " pervert" has become imbedded in the social conscious. It is often used as a derogatory term used to describe someone with abnormal or immoral sexual preferences.# The use of the term in this sense has led to it gaining a number of negative connotations. For example: the abbreviated term " perv" has been adopted as a slang term to refer to someone who propositions someone else who does not want their sexual attention. It may also be applicable to, say, a necrophile whose sexual desires and practices may be considered repugnant, immoral, or at least unorthodox. This point is important to remember when looking at perversion in the context of sexual ethics as it demonstrates the emotional content of the term. It is largely due to this emotional content that I feel perversion

must be redefined in order to reduce its influence when it comes to labelling sexual acts. The aim of this section shall be to outline two theories put forward by Nagel and Ruddick. Both have been influential in the area of sexual ethics however I wish to criticise both for ultimately neglecting the diversity and complexity of human sexual desire. This point shall be the focus of my criticism.

The Biological Definition

The first definition of perversion I wish to examine is what I shall refer to as the Biological Definition. # This is where we turn our attention to the work of Sara Ruddick and her paper Better Sex. Ruddick draws a distinction between what she calls " natural" and " perverted" sex. Natural sex is defined as that which may " serve the evolutionary and biological function of sexuality, namely reproduction". # Perverted sex is defined as a deviation from this principle. Ruddick then goes on to state that it is not through these terms alone that we can reach a reasonable understanding of perversion. # Indeed it would be undermining the complexity of the issue if one was to ignore human sexual desire. She therefore stipulates that a sexual act should have the potential for procreation, but this need not be the intent of the activity.

The Psychological Definition In contrast with Ruddick's Biological Definition comes Nagel's Psychological definition. Nagel suggests that if a particular inclination is a perversion then it must meet three conditions. The first condition is that it must be in some sense unnatural, that is a deviation from a normal sexual development.# This point is problematic if we consider what exactly defines a normal sexual development. The second condition is that it must be an inclination rather than a curiosity. For example: if a couple decide to try an unfamiliar practice out of curiosity then the act is by no means a perversion.# Nagel's third condition is that for something to be described as a perversion it must be an act which stems from an unnatural inclination. For example: if someone preferred to be beaten over other types of conventional sexual act then they could be said to have a perverse inclination.# Once again this point is problematic when we consider the nature of normality. A Problem Concerning Individuality Whilst both theories present useful and interesting ways of understanding sexual perversion it is my opinion that they fail to fully appreciate human individuality. I maintain that because sexual inclinations are subjective experiences within the individual only they are in a position where they may judge what they consider an act of sexual perversion to be. This can be demonstrated using the following analogy: consider two people (which I shall refer to as A and B) watching a pornographic film. The film depicts a couple having anal sex. Let us suggest that A finds the depiction incredibly arousing but B finds it distasteful. To A the depiction on screen is in accordance with his or her individual sexual inclinations for he or she finds it arousing. To B the depiction is not in accordance with his or her individual sexual inclinations

and so he or she does not become aroused by it. For B then the act on screen is a perverse sexual act because it does not comply with his or her set of tastes. B would be wrong however in describing the depicted act as universally perverse because A finds it incredibly arousing. It is ones individual sexual desires that defines perversion for that particular person. To define perversion as a violation of a universal law is to underestimate the complexity of an individual's desires. Such a definition may also lead to persecution and negative stigmatism. For example: if a universal moral law dictates that bestiality is a perversion then those who practice it become condemned or labelled as perverts and deviants. Such a negative view of perversion can be overcome using the definition I shall give based upon the individual nature of sexual inclinations.

#### Defining Individual Sexual Nature

In order to fully understand the solution I wish to put forward in this essay we must first look at concept of individual sexual nature. By this I mean our personal set of sexual desires and inclinations. By inclination I mean a particular disposition of mind. For example one may have an inclination for a particular type of food or drink. Similarly one may have an inclination for a certain type of action in a given situation, for example to always tell the truth. By personal I mean a subjective characteristic of a person or a self-conscious being. For example, a characteristic of a friend of mine could be that he prefers particular sports to other sports, or that he prefers particular drinks to other drinks. These inclinations for particular things are personal or characteristic of that individual person. By desires I mean the feeling which arises in an individual when they perceive something they want or long for. For example, a desire of mine might be to see my football team win a trophy,

or to visit a certain country, or to eat a certain food. Perhaps most importantly by sexual I mean of or relating to a specific event mental or physical which leads to arousal. For example, a particular act may be described as sexual in so far as it relates to the desire for a particular kind of gratification, that is the gratification that results from a sexual act. A sexual act may be described as any act which generates this particular kind of gratification in an individual. Understanding Perversion in terms of Individual Sexual Nature Now we have clearly defined individual sexual nature as our personal set of sexual desires and inclinations, all of which are inherently unknowable to other people due to their subjective nature, we can move on to identifying exactly what is meant by perversion. By perversion I mean inclinations or acts which would be contrary to ones individual sexual nature. This can be understood using the following example: let us imagine a case where a woman is in deep financial straits. She has no home, no next of kin and no other way of improving her status than selling her body. Whilst she is sure this is her only option if she wishes to change her situation for the better she has no sexual inclination toward such acts. To be more specific the woman's individual sexual nature does not stretch to prostitution. The idea of selling her body is repugnant to her and no sexual satisfaction could be derived from it. Here we have identified what the woman concerned may consider an act of perversion, that is an act which is contrary to her individual sexual nature as she would receive no sexual gratification from it. Only this kind of act should be considered a perversion. Now my position has been established I shall demonstrate how my criticism of both the Biological Definition and Psychological Definition is not applicable when considering the

Natural Definition of sexual perversion. To do this I shall discuss examples from literature and form a number of original thought experiments which encapsulate particular ethical problems which divide moral opinion today.

Prostitution The moral status of prostitution is an issue which plays on the mind of society. Its exact moral status is unclear however many still consider it as an immoral profession. This belief may stem from a preconceived idea of how sexual relations should occur. For example, many believe that only sex between a married couple can be considered ethical. Indeed this notion has been imbedded in society for centuries. Let us consider a theme from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. When Tess's husband is told that she had once been raped she is immediately described as a "fallen" woman, possibly the most negative stereotype a female could be associated with. A similar thing happens in Anthony Trollope's *Dr Wortle's School*. Although this does not relate directly to prostitution it may help us understand where such negative connotations have come from. A more relevant example however can be found in George Bernard Shaw's controversial classic *Mrs Warren's Profession* where a young daughter is shocked to find that her mother spent time as a prostitute in order to earn a good living. This raises the moral issue of whether prostitution should be considered perverse. I refer now back to the thought experiment I presented earlier where I demonstrated my definition of sexual perversion in reference to a woman whose only way to improve her financial situation is to sell her body. The act was repugnant to her because it deviated from her individual sexual nature and so, to her, prostitution is a perversion. Let us consider another example which deals with a woman with a different opinion on prostitution. Imagine a woman in a similar situation. She is poor, has no next of kin and no other way of improving her status than by becoming a prostitute. Unlike the previous woman however the very idea of selling her body is an arousing prospect



which could fulfil her sexually time after time. To this woman prostitution is no perversion as it is in accordance with her individual sexual nature. As both thought experiments demonstrate whether prostitution can be described as a perversion is entirely subjective. Such a definition may also apply to other areas of moral controversy such as incest, necrophilia, bestiality and fetishism, to name just a few. Implications of the Natural Definition I have outlined the Natural Definition and applied it to a specific area of sexual ethics, namely prostitution. Due to the nature of the Natural Definition problems of emotional language no longer apply; the only criteria for an act to be considered perverse would be if it deviated from our own individual sexual nature. If used in this way the term perversion need not imply a type of negative response to a particular act. Moreover the Natural Definition uses human individuality as its starting point. It acknowledges that we each have a set of sexual inclinations which we are powerless to control. They arise seemingly without our consent. Because of this basic understanding we must conclude that the only fair way to define a perversion is on a person-to-person basis for it is not anyone's position to decide for the whole of humanity what is and is not a perverted sexual act. Only by coming to terms with this will headway be made in the area of sexual ethics. Word Count: 2030

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