

# Mappes' theories of sexual morality

Experience, Human Nature



Some feminists have been accused of providing a negative view of sex, suggesting that all sex is rape and that males are the negative gender. Yet, what Dworkin and MacKinnon were really talking about was that the difference between consensual sex and rape is one of degree and not of kind (Kinloch & Grebowicz 2004). In other words, the same sex act occurs in rape or consensual relationships, and sometimes it is difficult to tell when a rape has occurred or the sex was desired. When examining sex, there are many points of view. Thomas A. Mappes writes about the idea of using another person for sexual gratification. Are people really being used? What is coercive and what is consensual? These questions loom when one examines the subject of sex.

Mappes begins a piece entitled "Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person" with the notion that if in fact the nonmarital sex is not immoral, and that sex without love is not immoral either, then it stands to reason that there are no substantive moral restrictions on any acts of sex. This is a different concept to fathom. It would mean that anything goes attitude would prevail and that orgies in the street would be permissible much like animals gather to mate. Yet, the reality is that human beings are modest. They hide their sex lives from their acquaintances. Some engage in relationships behind closed doors like Jesse James and Tiger Woods, but even when such clandestine affairs are out in the open, individuals explain it away as an addiction.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what sexual morality is. Mappes employs Kantian ethics to make his points, noting that it is wrong to use A to get to point B if in fact the only reason to use A is to get to that B position. In other

words, a man may date a woman and have sexual intercourse with her and derive satisfaction. Yet, the sex act should take place in the context of love, for example, and not just to derive pleasure. If however the man uses the woman to get from point A to point B and for his own uses alone, then he is using her. He talks about voluntary informed consent however (Mappes). When Mappes talks about using another person, he does not imply that the use is immoral. It merely exists.

When lying is involved, then the sexual act is deceptive (Mappes).

Depending on the circumstances, holding back information may be considered a form of deception (Mappes). One can imagine that if a woman is dating a man and does not know that the man is married, then she is being duped. Consent is tricky however. Someone may be used by another but both individuals really know what is going on. The rape victim who is forced at knife point is obviously someone who is not consenting to sex (Mappes). That is coerced. However, someone who consents to sex under unusual circumstances, is not necessary being forced, even if there is some coercion or unsavory expectations in the mix.

It seems as if coercion and deception are important elements when it comes to using another human being sexually (Mappes). The author concludes that using another person can only occur when someone either deceives, coerces, or takes advantage of someone's desperate situation (Mappes). Many things enter the picture. Is there a threat involved, or an offer? In other words, is there coercion? An example is that in the film *Indecent Proposal*, a rich man offers a needy couple one million dollars for one night of sex. When

they agree, their lives change. The wife does not realize how difficult living will be after essentially prostituting herself. There was no coercion. She was lured into it, but arguably she was used because a very rich man would take advantage of a poor couple. One can use the same logic to explain why women become prostitutes. Many say they are just paying the bills. Yet, one has to wonder if the situation is truly one where there is coercion or an exercise of free will.

A similar storyline to *Indecent Proposal* comes from a recent episode of *Gossip Girl* where in an intricate plot; Blair is willing to sleep with her boyfriend's cousin in order to win an empire back. She does it for the boyfriend, but in the end, it appears that she has not done the right thing. She was tricked into giving herself to someone she despises in order to change her circumstances. How does one know what an offer is really a threat? What question might be asked to determine whether a statement is an offer or a threat? One may ask what the outcome would be if one says yes or no. In the case of the film or television program mentioned, the outcome would result in a reduced amount of money and worldly goods. No harm would come to either woman or man. Yet, if the outcome would be loss of life or torture or something along those lines, then the offer would be construed as a threat. Coercion thus is not always equated with a threat.

The author makes the point at the end that using another person occurs only when someone either deceives, coerces, or takes advantage of someone's desperate situation (Mappes, 2007). This is true in that in all of these instances, one may use another sexually, but there are other situations

where one may be used. For example, someone may enter into a relationship where a man is rather superficial. Perhaps he has narcissistic personality disorder and cannot love anyone in a deep sense. A woman enters a relationship with him and adores him. She does not realize he cannot love to the depths that she can. She falls in love with him but the problem is that he really cannot love her back. They have sex and she feels close to him, but he does not feel the same way even though he says “ I love you.” He is not lying. For him, he loves her, but it is not in the same way she loves him. When he breaks up with her because he is bored of the relationship, and then starts a sexual relationship with a younger, more attractive woman, the woman who was “ dumped” feels used.

In respect to Mappes’ position, the author makes a good case, but there may be times when a coercive offer is part of the equation and there is an obvious use of another, or when there is no explicit sense of using another, someone will feel used. In the case of the narcissist, is the significant other really being used? Much depends on the mind of the reader. There is no coercive offer. If the woman feels used, that does not mean she was. There was no coercion or threat, so on some level, this case that appears to oppose the author really helps to support his point.