

UNIT

Sex, Marriage, and Reproduction

Sexuality is an important, powerful dimension of being human. It is therefore important to have an understanding of the moral permissibility or impermissibility of certain types of sexual activity. The role of government in sexual matters also becomes a matter for moral judgment, as people must decide which types of marriage should be recognized and encouraged by the state. Finally, medical and technological advances raise a host of moral questions about reproductive matters. The issues in this section do not question the morality of sexual activity itself, but they do raise questions about the moral judgments we should make about controversial topics involving human sexuality.

Selected, Edited, and with Issue Framing Material by:
Owen M. Smith, *Stephen F. Austin State University*
and
Anne Collins Smith, *Stephen F. Austin State University*

ISSUE

Must Sex Involve Commitment?



YES: Steven E. Rhoads, from "Hookup Culture: The High Costs of a Low 'Price' for Sex," *Society* (December 2012)

NO: Raja Halwani, from "Casual Sex," in *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press, 2005)

Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you will be able to:

- Describe the purported evolutionary origins for the mating preferences of men and women.
- Explain how casual sex frustrates these evolved preferences, especially for women.
- Offer a general definition of casual sex, and explain why it is difficult to define it precisely.
- Formulate your own position on the morality of casual sex and identify evidence supporting your position.
- Identify the main objections to your position and formulate responses to these objections.

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Steven Rhoads offers evidence drawn from a variety of sources, including surveys of sexually active college students as well as research in evolutionary anthropology, to support his two main contentions: (a) casual sex is bad for society in general, and (b) casual sex is especially emotionally damaging for women.

NO: Raja Halwani first discusses the difficulties involved in defining casual sex precisely. He next examines a number of objections to casual sex, and concludes that casual sex need not be morally wrong because each of these objections involves factors that are not, for the most part, specifically intrinsic to casual sex.

For many people, sex and morality are interconnected. Yet, with the exception of specialized issues such as sexual harassment, most contemporary moral philosophers have very little to say about sexual morality. This silence may, in part, be due to the view that many traditional views about sex are outdated and have little relevance to the world in which we now live.

During the ancient and medieval period, moral philosophy was integrated into a larger framework of philosophical theories about the structure of reality and the role of humans within that structure. Ancient Greek philosophers developed elaborate metaphysical theories, which were in turn adapted by medieval philosophers and theologians. According to these theories, humans were different from animals, and in general from the rest of the natural world, because they were rational and were thus thought to have an immaterial or spiritual dimension that was not possessed by other purely material beings. The special metaphysical or supernatural status of humans had consequences for the moral assessment of sexual actions. To the

extent that the certain sexual actions, like casual sex, failed to express, or even undermined, the immaterial or spiritual dimension of humanity, they were morally wrong.

Belief in an immaterial or spiritual dimension to humanity, however, has waned in recent decades, and it is now more common to view humans as purely material beings that form part of the natural world, without any special metaphysical or supernatural status. The view that humans are purely material beings, like animals, has had an influence on contemporary attitudes toward sexual activity. Sexual desires are now considered to be simply a part of our physical nature, like our eating preferences. This view, however, does not automatically mean that it is morally right to indulge these sexual desires, such as an urge for casual sex. After all, we have natural desires to eat certain foods, but that does not mean that eating these foods is good for us. We cannot simply eat whatever we feel like whenever we want to; we must curb our desires and use our reason to choose the correct foods from a nutritional standpoint. Traditionalists take a similar approach to natural sexual desires.

It is not moral to indulge in all our sexual desires. Rather, we must exercise self-control regarding our sexual urges, and use our reason to determine when, and with whom, sexual activity is appropriate. Of course, some modernists disagree, arguing that the analogy between eating and sexual activity is flawed in many ways, not least because eating habits were only minimally affected by cultural attitudes, whereas cultural attitudes greatly affected sexual practices.

Today, we are left with a mixed view toward sexual activity, composed of elements drawn from ancient, medieval, and modern thought. It is clear that we cannot

disregard modern views about human sexuality and simply return to a traditional approach to sexual morality. However, the precise role that modern views should play in sexual morality is not yet clear.

In the following selections, Steven Rhoads argues that our contemporary culture's support for casual sex has had significant negative repercussions, especially for young women. Raja Halwani, on the other hand, argues that casual sex itself is not morally problematic, rather the immorality of certain casual sexual acts stems from factors other than its casualness.

YES 

Steven E. Rhoads

Hookup Culture: The High Costs of a Low "Price" for Sex

In his piece, "Contemporary Mating Market Dynamics, Sex-Ratio Imbalances, and Their Consequences," Mark Regnerus is right to emphasize that sex ratios are extremely important in determining whether men's or women's mating preferences are more likely to be honored. Now that women outnumber men on college campuses, they must compete among themselves by giving men more of what men want if they expect to find male companionship on Saturday night. Women are still the gatekeepers who determine how physical things will get, but, as Regnerus says, they have much more limited choices these days.

But Regnerus points out that even non-college men and post-college men get sex with more women than they used to. Sex ratios in the broader society are not so skewed as they are in college; so, why do men have more relationship power everywhere these days? Maybe there are also more marriageable men than women in the broader society once one subtracts all the disproportionately male homeless and criminal. But the homeless and criminal were *always* disproportionately male. What has changed? Why did women used to get wooed far more than they are today?

In his conclusion, Regnerus says "what scholars and journalists have described as the 'hook-up culture' that has emerged both on and off (and after) college campuses today, I assert, has little to do with sexual culture change, and far more to do with the bifurcated mating market and the sex-ratio imbalances that have emerged therein." But wasn't there always a bifurcated mating market? Collegiate men in the fifties would have been interested in sleeping with a variety of women on weekends just as they are today, but few attractive, educated women were available for those sorts of encounters. Now they are. The sexual culture *has* changed. The collegiate women are available because most of the women's movement has insisted that sexual liberation is an important part of women's liberation and because the Pill seemed to make sexual liberation costless.

If equal proportions of men and women were interested in casual sex on the one hand and in committed sex on the other, the bifurcated markets would not be problematic for women. The problem is not the new arrival of bifurcated markets, but rather the enduring fact that, despite all the huffing and puffing of androgynous feminists, casual sex is not a good fit for women's natures.

For the past 14 years, I have taught a college course on sex differences to juniors and seniors. When we talk about relationships and sex, the vast majority of the women seem very unhappy with the dominant hookup culture. In their papers and in class, time and again, they talk about their girlfriends' post-hookup traumas, even if they manage to avoid them themselves. If the men who these women hook up with do call again, they often only want more hookups, and, as soon as the women push for a real relationship, the men break it off.

I asked one senior who had been a resident advisor for freshmen for two academic years to write up her observations about the college hookup culture. She thought one of her friend's observations echoed many of the chastened freshmen women when she told her, "I hate this feeling—the pressure to sell my body to men, to dress scandalously just to get their attention, just to get them to notice me. Then all they want is a one night stand; they will use me for sex and don't give a shit about me as a person. They don't want to get to know me at all! I keep getting into it, I keep thinking I'll find someone this way—but I only get used every time."

The resident advisor concluded, "even females who try very hard to follow the male example with regard to sex are at a loss. . . . Most of my female friends have tried being in purely physical relationships; not one of them lasted for more than a month. However, we are constantly told that we should be able to enjoy our sexuality with or without a relationship, just like men. When it comes to sex we are encouraged to do what we want, provided we protect ourselves from STDs and pregnancy. Yet we are not taught how to protect ourselves emotionally."

In 2010, together with two college female seniors, I wrote an article for the *Chronicle* (the online version of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) that presented evidence showing that my female students' reactions to casual sex were not idiosyncratic. What is remarkable is that even women who write books about their sexual adventures and want to defend or even tout their sexual freedom end up telling the same story. In *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (1994), Katie Roiphe speaks of feeling "almost sick with the accumulated anonymity of it, the haphazardness, the months and months of towed men." In *Lip Service* (1997), Kate Fillion recounts how she retroactively decided she was in love with every man she had

had sex with and how the power she got from sex "was the power to cause myself emotional pain." Cindy Chupack, an executive producer and writer for the HBO series "Sex and the City," gives us the details of her sexual escapades in *The Between Boyfriends Book* (2004), but confesses that she wants to be more than "a notch in somebody's bedpost"; she is looking for a husband.

None of this would surprise John Townsend, an evolutionary anthropologist whose extensive research has led him to conclude that women often go through an experimental stage where they try casual sex, but they almost always end up rejecting it. According to Townsend, for women, intercourse produces feelings of "vulnerability" and of being used when they cannot get the desired emotional investment from their partners. In Townsend's studies, these feelings occur even in the most sexually liberated women. Despite this group's free-thinking attitudes, their emotions make it impossible for them to enjoy casual sex.

Like other evolutionists, Townsend hypothesizes that men are more eager for sex than women because eons ago men with powerful sexual urges passed on their genes in greater numbers than men with moderate or low inclinations for sex. Men back then also would want sex with lots of mates because more mates would mean more offspring. In contrast, women who took advantage of any and every sexual opportunity would not produce children who thrived as well as choosier women. Women who mated with unusually strong or healthy men or men willing to commit ample resources to their children's needs would increase their children's likelihood of survival. Thus, through the ages, women with such tastes would be more apt to reproduce and rear their offspring successfully. Although some of the tastes and preferences that enhanced the survival of our ancestors in the past make less sense today, according to evolutionary psychology, these same tastes and preferences remain part of our genetically inherited psychological makeup and affect our decisions even when we are unaware of them.

Other social scientists report the same sex differences that Townsend does. Edward S. Herold and Dawn-Marie Mewhinney found that females who hook up get less enjoyment and feel more guilt than men do. Denise Hallfors and colleagues found that female teens are many times more likely than male teens to become depressed after sexual encounters with multiple partners. Catherine Grello, a clinical psychologist, and colleagues found that the college men who sleep around the most are the least likely to report symptoms of depression whereas female college students who engage in casual sex the most are the most likely to report depression.

In their book, *Premarital Sex in America*, Regnerus and coauthor Jeremy Uecker report that having more sexual partners is associated with "poorer emotional states in women, but not in men." The more lifetime partners the women have, the more likely they are to be depressed, the more likely they are to cry almost every day and the

more likely they are to report relatively low satisfaction with their life as a whole. Paul Chara and Lynn Kuennen's research seems to support the female souring effect that Townsend found. Chara and Kuennen asked young women and men in high school and college whether they would be willing to engage in sex after a wonderful first date. On average, college seniors are certainly more sexually experienced than ninth graders. Yet 30% of the ninth grade women said they would be game for sex after that great first date while only 5% of college senior women said they would be. The trend for young men was the opposite. About 30% of the ninth grade boys said they would have sex after the great first date, but fully 60% of the college senior men said they would do so.

My female students tell me that the emotional pain that casual sex causes women goes largely unreported because the women are often ashamed that they care about men who treat them like strangers the next morning. These women don't want the men involved or the rest of the campus to know about their tears.

Our *Chronicle* article prompted some private correspondence with a sociologist who thought the magnitude of the gender differences in emotional costs of casual sex was relatively small. More generally, she thought, "in the industrialized West we may be nearing the very first point in human history [when] social and physical costs associated with women's promiscuity are lowered enough to actually get a chance to see what women would do and like if not constrained by fears of pregnancy, childbearing or social stigma."

So, we know that since the beginning of recorded history, it is men not women who are eager enough to have sex with a variety of women that they hire prostitutes. We know that in the privacy of their bedrooms, men consume pornography presenting a variety of quasi-anonymous female bodies, while women consume romance novels in which sex occurs with a special man who feels an all-consuming love for the heroine. We know that, if space allowed, there is far more research that could be offered supporting the position that men like casual sex more than women. Some of this research is so cross-cultural that it bears titles such as "Universal Sex Differences in the Desire for Sexual Variety: Tests from 52 Nations, 6 Continents, and 13 Islands." Moreover, we now have had three generations of young women come of age since the sexual revolution. But still, we are told, it is too soon to come to any conclusions about women's sexual nature. We need more time. Such is the power of the dominant paradigm—sex differences are to be seen as gender differences, small and socially constructed.

I wish Regnerus had qualified his argument less broadly. He writes: "many, many women don't mind this new sexual economy" and "plenty of them like to spend some time in less-serious relationships." "Plenty" in absolute terms or relative terms? It's a big country. There could be plenty, and it could still be only a small fraction of the number of men who like casual sex.

Testosterone raises the libido, and there is reason to think that, on average, women who are the most attracted to casual sex have above average testosterone for their sex. The women Townsend studied who had the most casual sex experience had characteristics that have been associated with high testosterone. They competed in traditionally male sports and rejected traditional female roles and sexual morality. Because they found "sex outside of marriage totally acceptable," they were "shocked by their intense emotional reactions to their experiences. They honestly believed that they could enjoy sexual relations that involved little investment from their partners. They did not expect these emotions, could not understand them, and were surprised and disturbed by their inability to control them. These feelings were not part of their sex-role ideology and that is why the women were caught off guard."

Regnerus says, "It's not true, of course, that starry-eyed women are now simply being more efficiently duped or hoodwinked by skirt-chasing, commitment-phobic men." Does he really know from his findings that the women who have had the most lifetime partners and who are now crying almost every day did not begin with high hopes for romance with the men they spent time with? The Hallfors study, mentioned previously finds in its sample of pre-college youth that sleeping with multiple men comes first and depression second. At the University of Virginia, my classes tell me that freshmen women are more likely to participate in the hookup scene than upper class women. I'm told that some frat boys call the freshmen coeds "fresh meat" and think they are more easily charmed into bed.

When Regnerus says "most women tend to prefer (and are more apt to enjoy) sex in stable, committed, romantic relationships," does he mean "most" or a "very large majority"? If "most" women prefer committed sex, but "plenty" prefer less serious sex, it's hard to see why the bifurcated markets are the grim problem for women that he says they are. Regnerus believes that as women age, they become concerned about commitment phobic men and their declining fecundity. This makes it sound as if women are not troubled by casual sex until they are in their thirties. Townsend and I believe instead that women are troubled by the time they are college seniors—or before if they have had many sexual partners. It is past time to repeat Townsend's research—to see whether casual sex is only attractive to a substantial proportion of women during an experimental period.

Regnerus says that "the sky is not falling"; it is true that the hookup culture will not lead to a cosmological catastrophe. But is it a "big deal"? I think it is. I suspect that Regnerus does as well, but an exceedingly cautious tone on this subject is necessary for a young scholar trying to make his way in sociology.

Regnerus is right to link the hookup culture with non-marital child births and to argue that women would not choose an ever lengthening and circuitous

journey to marriage. Since children brought up by their biological parents tend to fare much better than with other arrangements, our society should want the mating market to reflect women's preferences far more than it does now.

In what follows, I will have more to say about how casual sex affects women. But when considering here broader societal effects, it is important to talk about how the hookup culture affects men. There is much discussion these days about young men's failure to thrive. But the discussions rarely mention sex.

We know that young men used to be willing to settle down with one woman and raise a family. They used to be willing to answer to a boss for 40 to 50 hours a week for 40 to 50 years. But men hate to be told what to do. Why, then, did they become reliable partners and providers often answering to their wives as well as their bosses? Perhaps because they could not get appealing women to pay attention to them unless they had "prospects." Men had to be marriageable and ready to commit or most women would not have sex with them. Most men still want marriage in a distant future, but they see no reason not to partake of the bodily charms of many attractive women in the meantime. To bed these women at their age in this age, men find that good pectoral muscles (thus time in the gym) are at least as useful as good career prospects (time in the library).

It will not be easy to weaken the casual sex culture. But here are some places to start:

Sex Education

Women in my classes do know that they are more likely than male peers to have an unwanted pregnancy after sexual intercourse! But it seems half or more have never been told of other relevant facts about sex—and not just about the emotional costs of casual sex. They generally do not know that they're much more likely than men to get a sexually transmitted disease from contact with an infected partner; that they're much more likely than males to become infertile if they are infected; that the birth control pill dampens their sexual interest and pleasure; or that the Pill scrambles sensory (sub-conscious smell) messages, making them more attracted to men with immune systems similar to theirs rather than immune systems unlike theirs. The scrambled signals are a risk factor should one fall in love with a man while on birth control pills. If a woman marries the man and tries to have children with him, she will have somewhat higher odds of repeated miscarriages and perhaps of having more vulnerable offspring. Current "just the facts" sex education ignores important facts that young women have a right to know.

Student Health Services

As explained in the book *Unprotected*, the student health services on most college campuses do a woefully bad job of addressing the problems for women arising from casual sex.

Women's Centers

There are few questions that college women ponder with more concern than what to do about invitations to have sex. Women's Centers could provide an invaluable service if they provided forums and counseling addressing the subject. On a number of occasions I've asked my classes whether it would be good or bad for women if their percentage on campuses went from 57 to 60 as seems possible in the not too distant future. The vast majority of my female students think it would be terrible. They know that more women and fewer men will make it still harder for them to find a good man ready to commit. Women still want to marry, and they want to marry men who are *at least* as educationally and professionally accomplished as they are. Perhaps we could encourage Women's Centers interested in outside the box thinking to sponsor forums on ways to get a higher proportion of men prepared for and interested in a college education. Leonard Sax and Christina Hoff Sommers could be asked to help on this project.

Religious Institutions

The historic teachings of Christianity, Judaism and Islam all include a belief in sex differences, and their doctrines about sexuality are unfriendly to casual sex. Their institutions could do more than they now do to teach young women and young men about how casual sex harms both sexes, particularly women.

Parents

It is with reluctance that I make unsolicited suggestions for what parents might say to their daughters about their relationships with men. Young women will have differing life plans and may or may not have boyfriends. Still, I wonder about the advice that parents give their graduating daughters who have boyfriends of whom the parents approve. My students tell me that the parents often advise their daughters to "not even think about getting married until you have a graduate degree and have begun your profession. With a 50% divorce rate it is too risky to get married right out of college." The first problem is that these parents have some facts wrong. The divorce rate for all Americans is not 50%; it is more like 43%. More importantly, it is much less for college graduates—about 33% of marriages to those without college degrees end in 10 years, while only about 11% to those with college degrees end in 10 years. The median duration of marriages for those who end up divorcing is 8 years, so that 11% is not likely to be doubled over the college graduates' lifetimes.

Marriages of couples who marry in their thirties are more likely to last than those that commence at an earlier age. But later marriage does not necessarily mean happier marriages. Husbands and wives who marry in their mid to late twenties are more likely to report that they are very happy than are those who marry at a later age. And marriages that are *both* stable and very happy are more likely to commence in the couple's early to mid-twenties than later. Moreover, the 22-year-old woman

in love with a boyfriend with "prospects" might not get another attractive proposal later. About fifty-seven percent of college graduates are women. This means that about 14 out of every 57 graduate women (just under 25%) will not be able to marry a man who is also a college graduate, at least one who has not previously been divorced. And many women who don't marry until their early thirties will have sexual relations with and cohabit with men who will break up with them. The therapist Patricia Dalton has written of the difficulties she has with thirtyish female clients who are "acting like a wife" while their partners are "acting like a boyfriend."

Dalton is convinced that sex makes the breakups much harder on women. She acknowledges that, though she can perhaps help these women in some ways, "the emotional costs of breaking up over and over . . . are hard to calculate." Dalton says she "can't magically restore the hope, optimism and innocence that these world-weary women have lost."

I wonder whether parents who advise their daughters to avoid marriage soon after college think about what dating and mating is likely to be like for their daughters between, say, 22 and 32. And, they may or may not think about the fertility pressures that the later marriage brings with it.

Women are deeply relational. Ninety percent of married women say their marriage makes them happy all or most of the time; only 60% say the same about their job.

Young Women

Economists assume that we can tell what people like by their revealed preferences. Most of the time we can. If people take up tennis or softball and begin playing more, we can fairly assume that it is because they have come to enjoy those activities more. As argued above, this assumption doesn't work with casual sex for women. Townsend finds that adventurous, untraditional women who are initially attracted to casual sex, in time find that their feelings will not cooperate. It does not make them happy, and they become less and less inclined to participate as time goes by. Moreover, as unfair as it may seem, men who enjoy sex with lots of women usually prefer to marry women who have not had lots of sex with lots of men. (Evolutionists argue that men's aversion toward wives with promiscuous pasts runs deep because the aversion makes it more likely that they will not end up unwittingly raising other men's children).

Women who conclude that casual sex does or would make them unhappy can choose not to participate. But to get a more female friendly mating culture, they will need to unite with other women. Danielle Crittenden has argued that "if women *as a group* cease to be readily available—if they begin to demand commitment (and real commitment, as in marriage) in exchange for sex—market conditions, will shift in favor of women."

Women who participate in casual sex make it harder for the majority of women to get dates and committed sex. They make it harder for women to live in a world where they are courted and respected. We live in a very

tolerant age, but this majority of women should feel free to try to protect their interests. Women who participate in casual sex impose external costs on the majority who would prefer a dating culture to a hookup one.

The majority are free to choose their friends from among their peers who do not impose costs on them. They should not feel guilty about protecting their interests, even if the women participating in serial hookups are making themselves happy (which seems unlikely given what I present above).

Groups that try to combat the hookup culture and create a more female friendly dating culture already exist on many campuses. I'm thinking of the Network of Enlightened Women (NeW) and the Love and Fidelity network. NeW, for example, tries to encourage the better side of men by sponsoring a Gentlemen's Showcase, in which chapters nominate and campaign for their nominees to become the national network's outstanding gentleman of the year. The Love and Fidelity Network sponsors national and regional conferences where speakers and students discuss the benefits of love and fidelity.

These sorts of groups could do more. For example, during orientation week they could sponsor forums where upper class women explain the hookup culture to entering freshmen females. They could also approach women's centers in a friendly way, presenting the evidence about the effects of casual sex on young women. If women's centers refuse to take the issue seriously, the groups could picket the centers and take their concerns to the media or state legislatures.

Sexual mores are a "big deal." As Regnerus argues, the current ones lead to late marriages in which women cannot have as many healthy children as they would prefer. And, they also lead to too many children raised without the benefits of stable marriages of parents biologically connected to them.

STEVEN E. RHOADS is a Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia. His publications include the books *Taking Sex Seriously* and *The Economist's View of the World*.



Raja Halwani



Casual Sex

Casual sex is often characterized as sex for the sake of sexual pleasure itself, rather than, say, for procreation, and is often contrasted with sex that expresses love or is done in a loving context. It involves **sexual desire** alone rather than sexual desire *and* love. Men, generally, engage in casual sex, or would like to, more than women—excluding female sex workers (for an evolutionary account of this difference, see Buss). When gay men engage in it, they often keep it impersonal, especially when otherwise involved in (nonmonogamous) relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 295–97). Types of casual sex include one-night stands, orgiastic and “swinging” sex, anonymous encounters in bathhouses and the backrooms of bars (usually between gay men), encounters in Internet chat rooms (**cybersex**), and **prostitution**. Casual sex admits of both conceptual and normative questions. I start with the conceptual. It might seem easy to define “casual sex,” but it is not. This, however, does not mean that “there is no such thing as a casual . . . sexual act” (Anscombe, 24).

No definition that relies only on behavioral criteria will work. Such a definition might capture some sexual acts that are casual, such as orgies, sex with animals (**bestiality**), and sex with human corpses (necrophilia), but it would not capture the difference between two couples, one that engages in oral sex casually and the other noncasually. There might be no behavioral differences between them. Beliefs or other mental states must figure in the definition.

One might define “casual sex” as “sexual activity for the sake of sexual pleasure only.” It is not sex intended for procreation or the communication of love but solely for pleasure, as in recreational sex. This will not do. We can describe sex for pleasure as recreational if it occurs between two people in a loving relationship, but here it is not casual. Anthony Ellis defines “casual sex” as sex between partners who have no deep or substantial relationship (157). This definition does not specify the type of prior relationship that exists between the parties: that they are strangers, acquaintances, or friends. This is good because not only strangers engage in casual sex. Acquaintances sometimes do, and friends. But the definition fails. Suppose both parties believe that their sex will lead to a committed relationship. Even in the presence of these beliefs, the sexual act, on Ellis’s definition, would still be casual. But it is plausible that the presence of these beliefs renders their sex not

(fully) casual. It is likely a mark of casual sex that it be done without any beliefs that it be anything more than a sexual encounter.

Let us try this definition: “Casual sex is sexual activity engaged in with the understanding or belief that it will not lead to emotional commitments.” One good thing about this definition is that it includes only “negative” mental states as necessary for sex to be casual. The inclusion of “positive” states leads to counterintuitive results. For example, suppose the positive intention “for the sake of sexual pleasure” is necessary. This yields the result that **sexual activity** between a prostitute and her client is not casual, because prostitutes typically are not motivated to engage in sex for their own pleasure. Thus, the motives and intentions of the parties must be left open: We should stipulate only that the parties understand that there is no future commitment.

“Understanding” is important. Suppose Monica has sex with Bill, hoping or desiring that it will lead to a love relationship. However, Monica understands that Bill has no such hope and that he does not desire to be in a relationship with her. Thus, Monica realizes that Bill is about to engage in casual sex, yet nevertheless hopes, against the odds, that it will lead somewhere. Despite her hopes, the sex between them is casual, for both realize that it is engaged in only for the sake of sex. Thus, while mental states are crucial for defining casual sex, we must carefully choose which ones to include. Certain hopes and desires should not factor into the definition.

This definition faces problems. First, must both parties involved have the above understanding? What if one person understands that the sexual encounter will not lead to a future commitment, while the other does not, or believes the opposite? Indeed, how would we describe a sexual encounter in which the parties, or at least one, have no beliefs one way or the other? Should we require that the parties *have* the belief that their sex will not lead to any commitment or that the parties have *no* belief that there will be a commitment? If the former, how strong must the belief be? Should the parties believe that their sex *will not*, or *probably* will not, lead to a commitment? Further, must these beliefs be genuine or veridical, or could they be self-deceptive or false? And how should we describe sex occurring between a person and an entity that cannot have beliefs: an animal, an inflated doll, a cadaver? Perhaps these sexual acts are not casual; at least the latter two are cases of **masturbation**, and masturbation might

not be casual sex, due to the absence of a partner. But sex with an animal could not be dismissed so easily.

Second, the definition does not reflect the understanding of most people that casual sex involves one important positive motive, the desire for sexual pleasure. The definition does not mention this motive. However, there are many motives for casual sex, and thus most people’s understanding might be mistaken. Third, the definition applies to a sexual act, **rape**, that might be, strictly speaking, casual, yet is not the first case that comes to mind when we think of casual sex. Marital and **date rape** (perhaps) aside, the rapist does not think of himself as forcing sex on a person while believing that this will lead to a committed relationship. Even if rape is casual sex because of this fact, this is not the way we usually think of rape or of casual sex. Fourth, it is worthwhile to reconsider whether it is necessary that a definition of “casual sex” refers to mental states. If the parties to a casual encounter do believe it will lead to an emotional commitment, but it does not, that failure would seem to be sufficient to describe their sex as casual.

Thus, the above definition does not capture *exactly* what we mean by “casual sex.” Perhaps “casual sex” is too vague for precise analysis, and pinning down a definition might come at the cost of jettisoning some of our intuitions about it. There is, of course, the danger of confusing the concept of casual sex with promiscuity. Any definition of promiscuity must assert that it is sexual activity with different partners over time (Frederick Elliston [1944–1987], 225–26). Because casual sex does not entail multiple partners (a single one-night stand in a person’s life might be casual), it is not the same as promiscuity. It might even be that promiscuity does not entail casual sex. Suppose one has sex with many partners while believing that this is the best way to secure a committed relationship. This person’s sexual behavior is promiscuous, but because of the intention we would not necessarily describe it as casual. (Benatar [193–94] equates promiscuity and casual sex, but this is because he defines promiscuity as sex lacking romantic or emotional significance instead of in terms of sex with multiple partners.)

I turn, now, to normative issues. These can arise along three logically different axes: the moral versus the immoral, the sexually pleasurable versus the not pleasurable, and the normal versus the perverted.

Sometimes casual sex is morally wrong for reasons having nothing to do with its being casual. If two married people engage in casual sex (with persons other than their spouses), each also commits **adultery**. Insofar as adultery is wrong, their casual sex is wrong as adultery. Casual sex might also be wrong because it involves deception or coercion. If Tom falsely promises Nicole **marriage** if Nicole were to have sex with him, Nicole’s **consent** is not genuine because it relies on false information. Tom has deceived her, and the ensuing sex would be morally wrong. If Sally tells the destitute Mark, who does not desire Sally, that she will not evict him and his children from their apartment

if he were to have sex with her, the ensuing sex would be coerced and hence wrong (see Mappes, 180–83). Again, it is not wrong just because it is casual. Casual sex might also be wrong due to a lack of adequate communication. Suppose Edna and Skinner are about to have sex. Edna does not desire that it be more than casual but is unsure of Skinner’s intentions. It might even be uncommon that the parties, excited by desire, know each other’s intentions. If there is a moral obligation to disclose one’s intentions, failure to do so would make casual sex wrong—although not because it is casual. Note that unclarity about intentions might be gendered; women, more than men, often use sexual encounters as preludes to relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz, 297).

Even if casual sex involves no deception or coercion, is not adulterous, and the parties clearly communicate their intentions, it still might be wrong in virtue of its consequences (an “external” reason for its wrongfulness), that is, harm to the parties involved and harm to other people. Two possible bad consequences of casual sex are contracting disease and unwanted pregnancy. These are consequences to the parties to the sexual act, but they might also affect other persons and society in general. Anthony Ellis claims that these effects are not morally relevant because they are “medical problems” (166). This is not exactly true. Some **sexually transmitted diseases** (e.g., HIV [human immunodeficiency virus]) present serious moral problems. Unwanted pregnancies also change one’s life drastically, as pregnant teenage girls know. The parties to the sexual act should, morally and pragmatically, take precautions against disease and pregnancy. But that casual sex that leads to unwanted pregnancy or disease might be morally wrong does not show that casual sex itself is wrong.

It is not obvious what other bad consequences casual sex has. One possibility is that insofar as society applies a double standard to men and women, women who accept casual sex are seen as cheap (“sluts”), while men are not (Blumstein and Schwartz, 297). Such negative views about women might be a form of harm (for example, a blow to their “reputation”). However, the double standard is only a contingent and perhaps disappearing feature of our society. This may be why casual sex does not always cause negative judgments. Many female college students who engage in casual sex are not viewed negatively and so escape the double standard. Further, whether some people’s judging a woman a “slut” harms her depends on how it affects her psychologically: Some woman can brush it off easily or even laugh at it. Moreover, the argument does not tell against casual sex between men.

Another possibility was suggested by G.E.M. Anscombe (1919–2001) in claiming that casual sex makes one “shallow” (24), perhaps by making practitioners incapable of forming meaningful, loving relationships (see Kristjansson). However, this argument applies primarily to promiscuous sex, not casual sex. It is difficult to see why a few casual sexual events in one’s life would make one incapable of forming loving relationships. Further, the argument depends on the assumption that love relationships are

crucial in a person's leading a good life. This might not be true. It seems that one can, logically and psychologically, lead a good life without such relationships (though perhaps not without **friendship**; Halwani, chaps. 2, 3). Indeed, **Albert Ellis** argues that "personality growth"—an increase in enlightened self-interest, self-acceptance, tolerance, flexibility, and acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty—is "abetted and enhanced by sexual adventuring" (95). Casual sex, as a form of "sexual adventuring," might have these benefits. However, whether healthy or successful sexual adventuring *presupposes* these admirable personality traits, instead of enhancing them, is unclear. Further, the list of traits praised by Ellis is obviously value-laden and might not be fully accepted by other psychologists.

Casual sex might also be morally wrong for "internal" reasons. Some motives could make a casual sex act morally wrong. Having a one-night stand with a monk to humiliate him afterward about his lax virtue is wrong, since it is done out of the vicious intention to demean. Having sex with a teenage girl or a married woman to blackmail her is also wrong. But such motives are not part of casual sex itself. Some motives are, of course, good. A nurse or a friend might masturbate a willing quadruple amputee to orgasm out of kindness. Most casual sex is not done from such motives. Typically, it is done for sexual pleasure. What needs to be shown, to make the moral case against casual sex, is that the motive to achieve sexual pleasure is morally bad. Perhaps this motive leads one to neglect the needs of one's partner. If this refers to the partner's needs outside the context of the sexual act, then further argument must be provided to explain why this is morally objectionable; for in most of our dealings with people, we do not consider all their other needs. If, however, the needs are sexual and pertain to the casual sex event itself, the argument is likely unsound. It involves misunderstanding what a person typically feels in casual sex. He or she does not usually want another to be a passive body but wants full sexual interaction with that person. This usually takes the form of tending to the partner's sexual needs, even if partly for one's own sake (Goldman, 268–71; Soble, "Sexual Use," 229–32). Prostitution might be an exception, casual sex in which the client does not typically go out of his way to please the prostitute.

The crucial accusation on the grounds of base motives might be that sexual desire leads one to treat one's partner as less than fully human; desire focuses on one aspect of a person, his or her body, and on the sexual organs in particular. This is the accusation of **sexual objectification**. Note that to claim that casual sex is objectifyingly immoral need not turn on issues of motive. Casual sex might be objectifyingly immoral even if done out of non-lustful motives, as when a prostitute engages in sex with a client for the money. **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) claimed that whenever we sexually desire another, we do not desire the person as such but only his or her sexual parts (*Lectures*, 162–68). This leads to a problem: On this account of sexual desire, it is difficult for sexuality to satisfy Kant's Second

Formulation of the Categorical Imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (*Grounding*, Ak 4:429). Casual sex, from a Kantian perspective, involves one person's not only treating another as an object but also treating oneself the same way. Kant thought the only time that sexual activity was permissible, despite its objectification, was when it occurs within marriage.

In contemporary discussions of objectification (unlike Kant's), the focus is not on the agent's objectifying himself in the sexual act but on the agent's objectifying the other. Prostitution, **pornography**, and casual sex have been judged immoral because they involve objectification, that is, treating a person as an object. This is wrong because persons are not, or not *just*, objects. The main problem with objectification is that it reduces a person to the status of something less than human, like an animal or inanimate object. But we are not animals or objects, since we possess something special—rationality, inherent worth, dignity, autonomy, or an immaterial and eternal soul. But here we must be cautious. These attributions are not empirical in any straightforward way. For we find many humans to be irrational, lacking worth, or undignified. The claim that humans have a special ontological and hence moral status needs cogent defense. If it is false, casual sex would not be objectifying, because it could not reduce us to something we are not or fail to respect a status we do not have (see Soble, *Pornography*, chap. 2).

The second normative issue concerns the nonmoral goodness of casual sex. Is casual sex pleasurable? It might seem that a positive answer to this question is obvious, for people find a large, indefinite number of people desirable. Sexual activity is, under certain "normal" conditions, enjoyable. However, this does not mean that casual sex is always pleasurable. Just because the prospect of sex is exciting, it need not turn out satisfying and pleasurable. One might want to distinguish the pleasure that regular sexual partners experience and the pleasure that casual sex partners experience (see Moulton, 538–39; Soble, *Sexual Investigations*, 87–89). The sexuality of regular partners might be routine, but the parties know what to expect and can count on some satisfaction. Casual sex partners, however, do not know what to expect. While they might approach the encounter with anticipatory excitement (and indeed experience the pleasure of making contact with a new person), the ensuing sex might not be as satisfying as imagined: The partners do not know how to satisfy each other's particular needs or desires. Nevertheless, some types of casual sex might have higher probabilities of yielding satisfaction. Two examples are anonymous sex and sex within purely sexual relationships (say, between "fuck buddies")—the former because the expectations are minimal to begin with, the latter because the expectations are known. Note that **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) once speculated that both men (183) and women (186), for different psychological reasons, had some difficulty achieving full sexual

satisfaction with their spouses, someone they loved. Men, in particular, often find casual sexual encounters more satisfying than sexual activity with their beloved and loving wives. This division between the sexual and the affectionate psychological currents implies a sexual problem with or disadvantage of marriage and long-term relationships (which, of course, may still offer other benefits). What Kant thought was terribly morally suspicious about sexuality Freud identifies as an important factor in satisfaction.

The third normative issue about casual sex concerns psychological normality and **sexual perversion**. There are some types of casual sex that might qualify as also being perverted, just like some casual sex is adulterous, harmful, and so forth. If shoe or panty fetishism is perverted, then any coupled casual sex involving gratification with shoes or panties will be perverted, but not because it is casual. A more interesting question is whether casual sex might be psychologically abnormal, even when it is morally permissible or pleasurable (or even *because* it is pleasurable). If the natural or normal way that sexual desire and activity progress is by aiming at or culminating in love (see **Roger Scruton**, chaps. 4, 10), then casual sex, perhaps by definition, would not be normal. However, given that we very often experience sexual desire directed at various people without love entering the scene at all (not even unconsciously), it seems that the very common event of casual sex is perfectly within the bounds of the psychologically normal. It is implausible to analyze the sexually normal so that many people turn out to be abnormal or perverted. Perhaps the philosopher who argues that casual sex is abnormal is not, after all, offering a psychological thesis but is telling us how he or she would like things to be (Primoratz, chap. 3).

Casual sex is difficult to define. We know that it has much to do with the lack of an emotional or loving commitment and much to do with seeking pleasure for its own sake. Other than that, a plausible definition immune to counterexamples is elusive. Casual sex does not seem to be morally wrong as such. The one plausible case to be made revolves around objectification. But there is room for dissent, and if casual sex is faulted for being objectifying, much else in the sexual domain must also be faulted. It might even be that some casual sex is "an act of charity which proclaims the glory of God" (Williams, 81–82).

References

Anscombe, G.E.M. "Contraception and Chastity." *The Human World*, no. 7 (1972), 9–30; Benatar, David. "Two Views of Sexual Ethics: Promiscuity, Pedophilia, and

Rape." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 16:3 (2002), 191–201; Blumstein, Philip, and Pepper Schwartz. *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex*. New York: Morrow, 1983; Buss, David M. "Casual Sex." In *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. New York: Basic Books, 1994, 73–96; Ellis, Albert. "Sexual Adventuring and Personality Growth." In Herbert A. Otto, ed., *The New Sexuality*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1971, 94–109; Ellis, Anthony. "Casual Sex." *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 1:2 (1986), 157–69; Elliston, Frederick. "In Defense of Promiscuity." In Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston, eds., *Philosophy and Sex*, 1st ed. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1975, 223–43; Freud, Sigmund. (1912) "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love." In James Strachey, ed. and trans., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11. London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974, 177–90; Goldman, Alan. "Plain Sex." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6:3 (1977), 267–87; Halwani, Raja. *Virtuous Liaisons: Care, Love, Sex, and Virtue Ethics*. Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2003; Kant, Immanuel. (1785) *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. James Ellington. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1993; Kant, Immanuel. (ca. 1780) *Lectures on Ethics*. Trans. Louis Infield. New York: Harper and Row, 1963; Kristjansson, Kristjan. "Casual Sex Revisited." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29:2 (1998), 97–108; Mappes, Thomas A. "Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person." In Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty, eds., *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, 6th ed. Boston, Mass.: McGraw-Hill, 2002, 170–83; Moulton, Janice. "Sexual Behavior: Another Position." *Journal of Philosophy* 73:16 (1976), 537–46; Primoratz, Igor. *Ethics and Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1999; Scruton, Roger. *Sexual Desire: A Moral Philosophy of the Erotic*. New York: Free Press, 1986; Soble, Alan. *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2002; Soble, Alan. *Sexual Investigations*. New York: New York University Press, 1996; Soble, Alan. "Sexual Use and What to Do about It: Internalist and Externalist Sexual Ethics." In Alan Soble, ed., *The Philosophy of Sex*, 4th ed. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, 225–58; Williams, Harry Abbott. "Theology and Self-Awareness." In A. R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963, 67–101.

RAJA HALWANI is a Professor of Philosophy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His publications include the books *Philosophy of Love, Sex, and Marriage: An Introduction* and *Virtuous Liaisons: Care, Love, Sex, and Virtue Ethics*.