

Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects

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Both academic and activist feminists frequently lament the fact that women are too often viewed as sexual objects. The problem is found with viewing women primarily or, in some cases, exclusively as sex objects and thus as valuable only or primarily insofar as they are considered sexy. Sexual objectification, in a male-dominated and heteronormative society, reduces women to objects to be used at the discretion of men. Women are socialized to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons. But sexiness is not something a woman can secure for herself; to be sexy, in the ordinary sense, is to satisfy a set of standards for appearance and behavior that are the outgrowth of a very specific, societally shaped heterosexual male gaze. It may be impossible for a given woman to satisfy these standards; and even if it would be possible, she may not wish to shape herself in the required ways. This notion of sexiness makes little room for the woman's sexual agency.

For this reason, some feminists have been tempted to give up on sexiness as an inherently bankrupt notion. However, we think this is a mistake: feminists should, instead, reclaim the domain of sexiness. As Ann Cahill points out,

Because sexuality necessarily entails intersubjectivity, and because sexuality is a crucial element of selfhood, to be on the receiving end of a sexualizing gaze can enhance one's sense of self. To have that gaze skip over you, to be rendered sexually invisible by society at large, is to have your full personhood denied. (Cahill 2011, p. 84)

In this spirit, we will put forward a revisionist notion of sexiness that treats people not as sex objects, but as sexual subjects. To be clear, we are not trying to describe what people typically mean when they make attributions of sexiness: we agree with the feminist critique that there is very often something ethically corrupt at work in such attributions. Instead, we argue for a normatively infused conception that does a better job securing respect for persons while also remaining in touch with the core connection of sexiness to the idea of sexual presence linked to desire.

We understand sexiness as an aesthetic notion with necessary connections to ethics. We argue that there is an ethical imperative to shape one's aesthetic judgments regarding the sexiness of others so as to respect their subjectivity, rather than just assessing their appeal as objects for sexual use.

Before developing our own conception, we will introduce two other conceptions of sexiness that are in common usage: the biological or reproductive sense, and the prurient or instrumental sense. The biological/reproductive sense of sexiness links the attribution of sexiness to the ability to reproduce. This is the sense that one

would expect to hear espoused by evolutionary psychologists. Their analysis relies on speculation (sometimes on rather dubious grounds) about how our aesthetic standards and related attitudes and behavior have been shaped by evolution. This notion of sexiness is implicit in many attempts to explain our sexual attraction to certain individuals. In *Survival of the Prettiest*, Nancy Etcoff explores the evolutionary roots of human attractiveness:

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that men are automatically excited by signs of a woman who is fertile, healthy, and hasn't been pregnant before.... A man may have no interest in getting a woman pregnant, he may take elaborate precautions not to, but his mate detectors are still firing, and he is still inexplicably turned on by the woman who flashes abundant evidence of her fertility. And women are still imitating the appearance of this visually preferred age group, even if they never want to be pregnant at all. (Etcoff, 72, 74)

Considering sexiness as tied to reproductive health helps to explain why youthfulness is such a seemingly attractive trait. Women are youthful in appearance during their most fertile years. Moreover, it also explains why pregnant, elderly and disabled women are left out of the class of sexiness. A woman who is obviously pregnant cannot be impregnated again. For the time being at least, she is unavailable for that purpose. Elderly women are likely to be past their fertile years and thus unable to become pregnant. And a disability may raise questions about the reproductive health of the woman, whether such concerns are justified or not. If such women are ever rightly considered sexy, the biological/reproductive sense of sexiness does not explain when or why. It leaves them out completely.

Other problems confront the biological/reproductive conception of sexiness. Insofar as it ties the judgment of sexiness to a desire, albeit possibly unconscious, to reproduce, this notion of sexiness seems to render same-sex attribution of sexiness disordered. Furthermore, it cannot explain the sexiness that, in our culture, is often attributed to extremely thin women. The emaciated supermodels whose images perpetuate the ideal of the impossibly thin female body are likely to be unable to conceive a child. Infertility is one of the earliest and most typical outcomes of eating disorders and excessive diet and exercise.

Even more problematic are the broader moral implications of this sense of sexiness. It ties a woman's sexiness to her perceived ability to serve a particular function. We do not know whether the evolutionary psychologist is correct about the roots of sexual attraction, but we are not overly concerned about those roots. The fact that certain behaviors and attitudes were perpetuated in our past hardly justifies continuing them today. Etcoff points out that the "medical science of fertility and reproduction now makes it possible for women to have babies into their sixties." She wonders if "these changes altered our tastes in beauty and made age and fertility cues in women obsolete". Her answer to this rhetorical question is unsatisfactory. She says,

In a world guided solely by thought, not instinct, the answer would be yes. But we are products of evolution and cannot change instincts as quickly as

we can change our tastes or update our information. The frenzy over beauty and the enormous business in mimicking youth show that we are still turned on by the usual suspects. (Etkoff, 74)

Though she is correct that this is not a world guided solely by thought, it is equally correct (and perhaps more important) to point out that this is not a world guided solely by instinct. Human beings are social, cultural and intelligent beings. Such factors do heavily influence what we find sexy. The appeal to evolutionary roots to explain our current tastes ignores the fact that there is no universal agreement about which women are considered sexy. Moreover, even where we find commonalities in taste in a variety of cultures, the reasons why each culture appears to have the preference in question can vary considerably (Hendricks et al, "Cultural Aspects of Physical Attraction").

Most to the point, there is good reason for feminists to resist this notion of sexiness precisely because of its emphasis on reproduction. The feminist movement is in part a movement to earn reproductive freedom – including freedom *from* reproduction – for women. It is perfectly reasonable, then, for women to resist being considered sexy in this manner since such consideration is based on, and perhaps even reduces women to, their reproductive fitness. Women are more than reproduction machines, even when considered as sexual beings. We have worked hard to divorce sex from reproduction. Why should we accept a notion of sexiness that, when applied to us, makes that connection explicitly?

The second notion of sexiness in common currency is the prurient/instrumental sense. Sexiness in this sense has to do with sexual pleasure and satisfaction rather than with reproduction: it appeals immediately to our prurient interests and thus stokes a desire for a sexual encounter.

We do not think that feminists should reject this sense altogether: as Martha Nussbaum points out, in such matters, context is everything. For a woman to be presented to the general public as an object to stoke prurient interests is objectionable, but it may be perfectly appropriate for such interests to be stoked in the context of a loving relationship. Also, the current standards for sexiness in the prurient sense are unduly narrow, excluding many – and perhaps most – women. Pregnant, disabled and elderly women are often viewed as asexual and thus not even as candidates for being accurately described as 'sexy'. Ignoring the sexuality of an individual is in some contexts due to a failure to recognize the intrinsic worth, adult rationality and full-fledged humanity of that person. And, as Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman argues in "The Political Power of Sexual Preference," such failures can reinforce race-based stigmas that diminish people's self-worth and reinforce their subordinate social position. As he says,

[O]ne's capacity as a sexual being for affirming the sexual attractiveness of another sexual being is, in the hands of a member of some social group that is dominant in society, not merely a personal privilege, but a significant

political power. It is significant because it can contribute to ending a trend of social stigmatization in that society.¹ (Unpublished, pp. 102)

For these reasons, another notion of sexiness is needed, one that is not morally suspect in the ways that the other two senses are. To this end, we suggest a conception of sexiness that emphasizes the agent's intrinsic value and subjectivity while treating her with the respect due to all persons. This intrinsic/respectful notion of sexiness merges a concern for the subjective life of the individual with an assessment of the person's body as a sexualized one. To find a person sexy in this sense is to see her body as infused with expression of self, and to find this embodied personhood sexually appealing. She is seen not as a sex object but as a sexual subject: a human being who is a sexual agent. When she is seen as sexy in this sense, her sexuality appears independent of her fertility (or, if these are intertwined, it is by her choice) and independent, as well, of the prurient interests of another (or, again, if these are intertwined, it is by her choice).

To see someone as a sex subject is to see her appeal as defined by standards that are proper to her, not externally imposed (especially by oppressive social forces). And this means that, to make appropriate judgments of sexiness, we must work to expand the kinds of bodies we find appealing. It is important to be clear about what kind of expansion is relevant: it is not just starting from the "center" of conventionally attractive bodies and moving outward in concentric circles to detect the appeal of bodies that resemble these along various dimensions. The idea is, rather, to distance ourselves from the very standards that define some bodies as conventionally attractive; to jettison those standards and seek, instead, the magnificence² that is manifest here and now. Ann Cahill expresses the idea as follows:

[O]ne must look with wonder. One must take bodies on their own terms, without imposing a pre-existing standard upon them. The ethical sexual gaze hungrily seeks out the particular, the surprising, the nowhere-else-but-here-ness that marks each incarnation of the sexed human. (Cahill 2011, p. 103)

So, one thing we should do, if we are concerned to make ethically sound attributions of sexiness, is attempt aesthetic appreciation of the sexual particularity of a wide

¹ Coleman argues, for this reason, that white men have a duty to divest themselves of sexual aversions to black women. He does not, however, argue for a duty to cultivate sexual attraction toward them. We, on the other hand, do argue for a duty to cultivate sexual attraction when sexiness and sexual attraction are properly understood in an intrinsic/respectful sense.

² We draw this term from Mia Mingus, who sees the magnificent as more closely aligned with the "ugly" than with the conventionally beautiful. See Mia Mingus (2011), "Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability," keynote speech for the Femmes of Color Symposium, Oakland, CA, August 22, 2011.

<http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/>. Accessed August 25, 2011.

variety of bodies. Another is to ensure that our sexualized awareness is directed not to bodies as objects, but to embodied subjects. To find someone sexy, in the intrinsic/respectful sense, is to be attracted to the sexualized complex of a body and the subjectivity that infuses it.

We have spoken of the requirement to expand what we find physically attractive. But when it comes to subjectivity, what should we be striving for? Is there a certain model of subjectivity that we should be drawn to? Should we aim to expand the kind of subject we are attracted to, and if so, in what direction?

What we are trying to support, in adopting the revisionist notion of sexiness, is space for people to be valued as they are rather than by virtue of conformity to narrow external notions. In this context, it makes sense to cultivate attraction to people whose way of being is existentially authentic: people who are expressing, or at least working to express, their true selves, sexually and otherwise. Of course, there are limits here: some true selves, such as that of the pedophile, must be partly repressed rather than authentically expressed. But, in general, ways of being in which the subject has achieved a degree of self-understanding, and infuses her activity with the energy and flavor of the self she has uncovered, are sexy.

We are arguing for an ethical imperative to shape what we find sexy. This involves both expanding which bodies we find attractive and incorporating the person's subjectivity within what we are assessing when we find her sexy. But one might wonder whether this is really possible. Can we come to *experience* as attractive kinds of bodies that we haven't experienced in this way previously? Can we, if it is not our current tendency, learn to *experience* as sexy not bodies, but embodied persons?

There may be limits on our ability to shape what we experience as sexy; and the limits probably differ from person to person. But there is every reason to believe that people can take an active role in shaping the direction of their desires rather than just passively acquiescing in desire as it presents itself. Which bodies we find attractive is influenced by society, and can change over time for a variety of reasons. As we age we may naturally come to find older people sexy. We can come to find someone sexually attractive after initially being drawn to her personality and only then turning our attentive and receptive gaze upon her body. We may have a casual sexual encounter with someone we did not find especially attractive, but find the sex so satisfying and pleasurable that this body now presents itself to us as highly desirable. The fact that these changes happen suggests that there are levers for the shaping of sexual desire, and once this is admitted there is no reason to think that we cannot work to manipulate some of those levers ourselves.³

³ As Coleman (unpublished, pp. 15-16) argues, societal support may be helpful or even necessary as we attempt to manipulate these levers.

One might still wonder, though, about the morality of the work one must do to shape one's desires in the way we advocate. Presumably, this work will involve real and/or imaginative engagement with others: shaping what we experience as sexy seems to involve looking at and contemplating actual people with an aspiration to appreciate them as embodied sexual persons, and to experience desire. Is there something troubling, or even creepy, about this sort of sexualized attention? Does such a project inappropriately sexualize too many of our interactions? In directing "aspirational" attention toward people we don't yet find sexy, do we run the risk of wronging, offending or harming them, as they detect our awkwardness? Or is it just wrong to go around directing sexualized attention toward people regardless of whether they notice it or not?

These worries can be defused, we think, if the project of shaping what one finds sexy is undertaken, and understood, in the right ways. The fact is that we are public entities in a public world, and we do direct sexualized attention at each other. This attention is sometimes subtle and fleeting, other times overt and flirtatious. It is problematic when it comes in the form of an objectifying gaze, treating the individual as though her only value for us is in the sexual use we might make of her. But directing sexualized attention toward someone seen as a full, embodied person rather than a mere body, with an aim of respectfulness, is not, in general, a particularly problematic form of interpersonal engagement. To be seen as a sexualized being, as a candidate for sexiness, is part of being recognized as a full person, as disabled people and disability theorists have often pointed out. This doesn't mean that every moment, every person or every relationship is well suited to sexualized attention; there may be good ethical reasons not to direct sexualized attention toward one's employees, one's students, or children, for instance. But to think that there is something inherently troubling about even respectful sexualized attention, sensitively directed in appropriate contexts, is, it seems, to reject a fundamental ground of human sexual engagement.

One might wonder whether this project of reshaping sexiness is relevant for people who are stably monogamously partnered. Do they have any obligation to adopt and internalize this revisionist notion of sexiness, when they aren't in the market for sex partners? Do they, do to their commitment to another, have a moral obligation not to direct sexual attention toward others? Is it, perhaps, even misleading or cruel for them to direct sexual attention toward others whom they do not see as real candidates for sexual relationships? The latter worry, we think, is misplaced. Directing respectful sexual attention toward those whom we don't intend to form relationships with, for any number of reasons, can be playful and flirtatious. It can be pleasurable for the recipient of the attention and boost her self-esteem. Indeed, when such attention comes from a person known to be "off the market" it can be enjoyed without the pressures and uncertainties of sexualized attention that may lead somewhere. This mode of sexual interaction may, at times, be valuable precisely because the element of stress that comes with possibility is absent.

We also believe that even stably monogamously partnered persons have an obligation to cultivate the ability to experience others as sexy in the respectful sense. Most obviously, stable monogamous partnerships don't always last forever; it is not uncommon for one or both members of such a partnership eventually to become available for sexual relationships. Even leaving that aside, though, insofar as they participate in discourse about sex and attractiveness, they help to reinforce (or overturn) the prevalent notions.

We also have specific duties to our partners that may, somewhat surprisingly, help to generate a duty to expand and reshape our notion of sexiness. We are all aging, and our bodies may change as a result of pregnancy and childbirth, injuries, illnesses, or for other reasons. We all want to be known, loved and desired by our partners in our particularity, with all of our faults and blemishes, even as these evolve over time. We may have a duty to our partners not to cultivate sexual interest in others in the prurient sense, but the respectful sense, in which we take others (including our partner) seriously as persons, does not raise the same concerns.

Moreover, we send each other messages of sexual validation (or the contrary) all the time, even when we are not seeking out sexual partnerships or aiming to communicate sexual messages. Our attitudes toward people leak out around our overt words, gestures and actions, and this is a reason to cultivate respectful experiences of sexiness. Finally, as Laurence Thomas argues, our sexual attractions influence our overt behavior, with powerful consequences: if we are attracted to a job candidate, we are more likely to see her as the better hire independent of her qualifications or interview performance. We pay more attention to people we are attracted to and are more likely to notice their positive contributions. These are not benign effects; they influence people's concrete social and professional positions, as well as their earnings. They are, for example, a force through which racial injustice is reinscribed. For these reasons, the ethical imperative to cultivate respectful experiences of sexiness applies to everyone, not just to people who are actively seeking, or expect to be seeking, sexual partnerships.

Having discussed some of the ethical implications, we now return to aesthetic questions. One might wonder whether sexiness, in the respectful sense we advocate, is really an aesthetic notion at all. Are we stripping away the aesthetic content by advocating the cultivation of attraction to types of bodies that do not satisfy conventional standards, and the incorporation of the person's subjectivity into the experience of sexiness? Does the fact that attributions of sexiness are tied up with sexual desire disqualify them from the aesthetic realm?

We begin with the second question. Traditional understandings of aesthetic judgment as involving disinterest and distance appear to rule out the idea that attributions of sexiness, interwoven as they are with sexual desire, could be aesthetic. But there has been a move over the last several decades to reject this restriction. We belong to the camp of those who think that the aesthetic is, or at least can be, a matter of engaged attraction and desire. Eddy Zemach tells us that

Aesthetic predicates ... describe the degree to which, and the manner in which, objects are good qua objects: what features make them perceptually salient (or non-salient) and to what degree they achieve that salience.... What makes an object perceptually salient? Obviously, the single most potent enhancer of salience of an object is relevance to us. We see things in terms of their significance to us, and that is why we perceive the situations we encounter as having some emotion-properties.... The same is true of things we perceive: an adorable thing is one that we see as justifying adoration, a delicate thing is a thing that we see as justifying care, a pitiful thing is a thing we see as justifying pity, and so on. (53, 54-5)

Zemach doesn't speak of sexy things, but one might be tempted to translate his views on aesthetic properties as they may relate to sexiness as follows: a sexy thing is one that we see as justifying one's (perhaps not the observer's) wishing to have or actually having a sexual encounter with that thing. [Note that this allows for calling both persons and things sexy, which we think is roughly correct]. Noticing that an object has a certain aesthetic property, according to Zemach, "displays it at the heart of our human sphere of interests and immediately invokes complex strategies and manners of appropriate behavior with respect to it" (55).

For Zemach, the connection with our interests is inevitable when we notice aesthetic properties. Furthermore, noticing aesthetic properties primes us to behave in an appropriate manner. That is, the property appears to justify certain, however complex, behavior. With this connection made plain it is evident that aesthetic properties have ethical implications.

It is for such ethical reasons that we advocate the cultivation of experiences and attributions of sexiness that differ from those that may "come naturally." This doesn't seem problematic from an aesthetic perspective: admonitions to cultivate one's taste are not uncommon in the traditional aesthetics literature. But, in addition, we advocate distancing oneself from conventional standards of sexiness, and we do not replace these with a new, improved set of standards. We are not arguing for a situation in which everyone's experiences and attributions of sexiness converge on some more appropriate set of objectively sexy persons; the ethically preferable situation, we think, is one in which people's experiences of sexiness branch out in many different directions.

Does the absence of objective standards undermine the status of the respectful notion of sexiness as aesthetic? To give a full answer to a question with deep meta-aesthetic underpinnings is beyond the scope of this paper. But we note, first, that it is not uncommon, in contemporary aesthetic thought, to celebrate aesthetic responses that reflect divergent individual sensibilities rather than widely shared tendencies or standards.⁴ And, second, there is an element of objectivity in our proposal. Attributions of sexiness, on our view, should be responsive to the person as she actually is. They should not ignore relevant aspects of her, like her

⁴ See, for example, Ted Cohen (1993) and Kevin Melchionne (1998).

subjectivity; and they should embrace and appreciate her in her actual, manifest richness rather than making her the object of projection and fantasy. Attributions of sexiness, then, can be either appropriate or inappropriate: they are appropriate when they emerge out of the appreciation of an embodied person in all her sexualized particularity, and they are inappropriate when they neglect her subjectivity and/or impose upon her oppressive societal standards of attractiveness. For this reason, attributions of sexiness to people who are existentially authentic, in the way discussed earlier, are more likely to be appropriate: it is easier to respond to an existentially authentic person as she truly is.

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