Is it possible to give a philosophical definition of sexual desire?
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Introduction

In this paper, I explore whether it is possible to give a successful definition of sexual desire. By ‘definition’ of sexual desire, I mean something that tells us what it is to have a sexual desire. By ‘successful’ definition of sexual desire, I mean one that meets three conditions: 1) makes reference to the desire for bodily pleasures, 2) is able to cover all instances of sexual desire and 3) is informative enough to usefully explain what all instances of sexual desire have in common. I argue that there is a problem with forming definitions of sexual desire generally: they either offer an explanation that tells us something informative about sexual desire, but fail to capture all of its instances (therefore failing to meet condition two), or they manage to capture all its instances but fail to tell us anything useful about what all its instances have in common (therefore failing to meet condition three). I argue that this is a consequence of the complex nature of sexual desire, and that formulating a successful definition of sexual desire is potentially impossible.

I think it is obvious that a successful definition of sexual desire would have to meet conditions two and three. Suppose one was to form a definition of ‘tree’, but this definition left out objects we consider to be trees such as willow trees. This would clearly be an insufficient definition. Furthermore, such a definition would be insufficient if it told us nothing useful about what all trees have in common, if for example it simply said that all trees are ‘tree-like’. A little more explanation is however needed for why it would have to meet condition one. Whilst I do not have an argument for why a successful definition would have to meet this condition, I believe this is a sensible assumption. It is difficult to think of an example of a sexual desire that does not involve a desire for physical sensation of some sort. The desire to listen to music can be of a sexual nature, but it seems that this is only insofar as it involves the desire for the pleasure caused by physical sensation. As Seiriol Morgan argues, a definition of sexual desire that makes no reference to the desire for physical pleasure is in danger of losing the ‘sexual’ part in ‘sexual desire’ altogether.1

In section 1, I explain that existing definitions of sexual desire tend to be of two types: reductionist and intentionalist definitions of sexual desire.2 I explain what these different types of definition are, giving examples of each, but argue that both reductionist and intentionalist

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1 Morgan uses these terms, in his paper ‘Sex in The Head’ (Morgan, 2003, p11)

2 (Morgan, 2003, pp2-3)
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definitions are problematic. More specifically, I put forward Morgan’s argument for why both types of definition do not take into account the complex nature of sexual desire, and because of this, why they fail to satisfy condition two. Additionally, I argue that intentionalist definitions are also in danger of not meeting condition three. In section 2, I explain how the problems with reductionist and intentionalist definitions show the difficulty in formulating a successful definition of sexual desire. In section 3, I put forward a definition of sexual desire by Jonathan Webber which tries to respect the complexity of sexual desire. I however argue that in trying to do this, whilst his definition satisfies condition two, it is much too vague, and therefore fails to satisfy condition three. In section 4, I argue that the failure of Webber’s definition demonstrates that forming an informative and therefore successful definition of sexual desire is potentially impossible. I do this by applying Mari Mikkola’s analysis of the concept ‘Woman’ to ‘sexual desire’. I then pose an objection to my argument, and respond to it.

Section 1a - Reductionist definitions of sexual desire

Reductionist definitions of sexual desire claim that sexual desire is rooted in the desire for physical, bodily sensations. Morgan calls these definitions ‘reductionist’ because they identify a fundamental feature common to all individual sexual desires - if all the other features involved in sexual desire were removed, one would be left with the desire for physical sensations. These other features may include the love that one has for one’s partner, or procreation. Reductionists argue that these features do not have to figure in sexual desire. Reductionist do not deny that these other features are often involved in sexual desire and that these are pleasurable. They grant that one’s love and commitment to their partner may often be a reason for one engaging in sex with their partner, and that sex with these features may enhance the enjoyment of sex. Reductionists would however argue that the desire for such pleasure is not the desire for sexual pleasure, but pleasure of another sort. In other words, desire for such pleasure is not desire for pleasure of a sexual nature, but it can accompany the desire for pleasure of a sexual nature.

An example of a reductionist definition of sexual desire is Primoratz’ ‘Plainer sex’ definition. He argues that sexual desire is “the desire for certain bodily pleasure, period”. More specifically, this desire must in some way be linked to the sexual parts of the body. The desire to hold hands for example would count as sexual if it was also in some way a desire for genital stimulation and arousal.
Reductionist definitions of sexual desire therefore meet the first and third conditions required for a successful definition of sexual desire. They satisfy the first condition because they fundamentally claim that sexual desire is the desire for bodily sensations. They satisfy the third condition because they tell us something informative about sexual desire - they are explicit about all instances of sexual desire being desires for bodily sensations.

Reductionist definitions of sexual desire are however problematic. Whilst they have rightly identified an essential ingredient involved in sexual desire, Morgan argues that they assume a uniformity of sexual desire from particular instances. Put differently, reductionist definitions generalise from instances of sexual desires that do simply involve the desire for bodily pleasures, and assume that all instances of sexual desire fundamentally involve this desire. Morgan argues that whilst the desire for physical sensations is both necessary and sufficient for a desire to be sexual, in other words, the desire for bodily sensation is all that is needed for a desire to be a sexual desire, sexual desire is often much more complex than this. He argues that sexual desire often involves the desire for pleasures that are not reductionist. Furthermore, these non-reductionist desires often play a more central role in instances of sexual desire than the desire for bodily pleasures do. Suppose for example that Joe and Simon could give Sarah identical sexual physical sensations. Since the physical sensations caused by each person would be equally pleasurable to Sarah, reductionists could not explain why she would prefer to have sex with Joe, rather than Simon. It is clear that in these instances, the desire for bodily contact plays a less central role, or a minimal role in the desire compared to more complex physical desires such as to have sex with a particular person. There are a number of other more complicated examples that demonstrate this. It is difficult to see for example how the reductionist could explain a man having a complex sexual desire to be tied up, blind folded and beaten up by a women wearing nothing but a police officers hat. This is because it is clear that much more is going on in this desire than a desire for pleasurable bodily sensations. The man’s sexual arousal in this instance is predominantly a complex desire to be dominated by both a woman, a desire most likely motivated by the current power dynamics in society, and a police officer, a figure who holds power in society. This desire goes far beyond a simple desire to have pleasurable bodily sensations.

It is clear from the discussion above that sexual desire can simply involve a simple desire for bodily sensations, and that the reductionist has identified a common feature involved in all instances of sexual desire, but it is often much more complicated than this, varying from individual to individual and often being dependent on emotional, and social features (such as the role that someone has in society, seen with the my last example). Morgan therefore argues that sexual desires are on a continuum. What he means is that sexual desires at the most basic level are simple desires for bodily sensation, but they can also have different levels of

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8 (Morgan, 2003, p4)

9 Morgan uses a similar example to this (Morgan, 2003, p9)

10 (Morgan, 2003, p8)
complexity, the most complex level being desires for a particular person, or situation and so on.\textsuperscript{11}

Morgan therefore shows us that reductionist definitions of sexual desire cannot account for the complex nature of sexual desire, and therefore do not satisfy condition two. This is because the features that give some desires (such as the desire to have sex with a particular person) their sexual element are not always predominantly the desire for physical sensations. These are therefore desires that a reductionist definition would not consider to be sexual. Reductionist definitions therefore fail to capture all instances of sexual desire.

Section 1b - Intentionalist definitions of sexual desire

The issues raised by Morgan motivate intentionalist definitions of sexual desire. These claim that sexual desire is not rooted in the desire for pleasurable bodily sensations, but the desire for certain experiences that have significance for particular individuals.\textsuperscript{12} Intentional states are mental states about the world. Pain for example is not an intentional state because pain cannot be about anything. Pain is simply a bodily sensation. Love on the other hand is an intentional state because a person cannot simply, love. Love must be for or about something or someone.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, if A loves C whilst B does not love C, this is because the mental state ‘love’ has some significance for A about C, a significance that is absent between B and C. Intentional pleasures are not therefore pleasurable because of the way they feel to individuals (‘feel’ being used here to refer to bodily stimulation), but are pleasurable because of the significance they have to individuals who have them. Scruton for example argues that the individuality of a partner is important to sexual arousal.\textsuperscript{14} What he means is that in sexual desire, one desires to have sex with a particular person, possibly someone we are in a committed relationship with as opposed to another person who could give us just as much bodily pleasure. Solomon on the other hand argues that one desires, and is aroused by complex interpersonal attitudes that one’s partner aims to communicate in sexual acts, and of the arousal of one’s partner at the message that oneself aims to communicate.\textsuperscript{15} One may for example be aroused by their sexual partner expressing their love for them, and be aroused by the love that they express to their sexual partner.

There are two main problems with intentionalist definitions. Firstly, they focus too heavily on mental factors and not the desire for bodily sensations. As said in the introduction, intentionalists definitions are in danger of losing the ‘sexual’ element of ‘sexual desire’

\textsuperscript{11} (Morgan, 2003, p6)

\textsuperscript{12} (Morgan, R, 2015, Lectures on the nature of sex)

\textsuperscript{13} (Morgan, 2003, p13)

\textsuperscript{14} (Morgan, 2003, p2)

\textsuperscript{15} (Solomon, 1974, p338)
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Solomon for example argues that sexual desire is the desire to communicate interpersonal attitudes between partners, but it is difficult to see how this alone could be sexual without a desire for bodily sensations. His definition therefore seems to miss something central to all instances of sexual desire - the desire for bodily sensations. Intentionalist definitions are therefore in danger of not meeting condition one. Secondly by not referring to the importance of the desire of bodily pleasures involved in sexual desire, intentionalist definitions are also in danger of not meeting criteria two - capturing all instances of sexual desire. Solomon's definition would not recognise the simple desire for bodily pleasure, a desire empty of any desire to communicate interpersonal attitudes towards partners, as sexual. A simple desire for bodily sensation is however sufficient for a desire to count as sexual. One can for example desire to have sex with someone who they know nothing about and care little for, and would desire to have sex with anyone else physically similar or who could give them similar bodily pleasures. A good example of this is the desire to have sex with a prostitute. In this case, there seems to be little, or no intentionalist desires present, but only reductionist desires for pleasurable sensations. Sexual desire is often as simple and basic as reductionist definitions suggest.

Section 2 - The difficulty of forming a successful definition of sexual desire.

Both intentionalist and reductionist definitions of sexual desire are therefore problematic, and the problems with both types of definitions show the advantages of their opposing views. Reductionist definitions over-simplify the nature of sexual desire, believing it to always simply involve a basic desire for bodily contact. Since they deem desires sexual only when they are the desire for bodily contact, they cannot call desires for a particular person or situation sexual, desires that intentionalist seem to rightly identify as sexual. The main problem facing intentionalist definitions is that they do not see the importance of the desire for physical contact in sexual desire, a desire that seems present in all instances of sexual desire, and a desire that reductionist definitions rightly identify. Furthermore, intentionalist definitions would not classify a simple desire for bodily pleasure without any intentional desires as sexual. Both definitions therefore seem to miss important features involved in sexual desire. A successful definition of sexual desire would have to be sensitive to these worries.

One may argue that forming such a definition is simple: A successful definition of sexual desire would simply be a combination of reductionist and intentionalist definitions. One may argue that a successful definition would have to be fundamentally reductionist, considering all sexual desires involve a desire for bodily pleasures, but it would also have to be intentionalist, considering that sexual desire is often more complex than the desire for bodily pleasures. Whilst this is in some sense right, forming a successful definition is more complicated than this. Whilst one would be correct that the definition would have to in some sense be both

16 (Morgan, 2003, p11)
17 (Morgan, 2003, p15)
18 (Morgan, 2003, p2)
intentionalist and reductionist, this is not quite right, considering that reductionist desires are often both necessary and sufficient for a desire to be sexual. In other words, intentionalist desires do not have to figure in all instances of sexual desire. A definition that is a combination of reductionist and intentionalist definitions would therefore be in danger of failing to classify basic bodily desires as sexual, since they lack any sort of intentional desires. A successful definition would therefore have to take into account the fact that intentionalist desires *often do* figure in all instances of sexual desire, but *do not have to* figure in instances of sexual desire. Furthermore, there are potentially infinite different intentional desires involved in sexual desire depending on the individual. For example, the individuality of the partners may be arousing for one person, but another person may find the fungibility of sexual partners arousing (being able to swap one sexual partner for another). Similarly, communicating interpersonal attitudes may be important in a particular instance of sexual desire, but it may be the lack of communication between partners that someone finds arousing in another instance. A successful definition of sexual desire would therefore have to be such that it includes all these different types of intentional desires. Forming a successful definition of sexual desire is therefore not as simple as merely combining reductionist and intentionalist definitions. The task is therefore to find a definition of sexual desire that tells us what all the very different instances of sexual desires have in common (therefore satisfying condition one and two), but in a helpful or non-trivial way (satisfying condition three). It would for example not be helpful to say that all sexual desires have a ‘sexual quality’ in common. This is trivially true.

Section 3 - Webber’s ‘phenomenal quality’ definition of sexual desire

Jonathan Webber has tried to develop such a definition. Webber argues that to have a sexual desire is to have a certain *phenomenal quality*. He claims that “The sexual domain is unified only by the phenomenal quality”. In other words, this phenomenal quality is the common ingredient in all sexual activity, and a desire counts as sexual when this quality is present and is non-sexual if it is absent. Webber does not specify what he means by ‘phenomenal quality’, but what I think he has in mind is some sort of feeling that takes place in all instances of sexual desire. By ‘feeling’ I mean something broader than physical sensation or stimulation. I mean it in a way that captures this type of feeling, but also ‘feeling’ in the sense that someone can feel anxious or happy. Feeling happy is a state of mind independent of physical sensation, and whilst having pleasurable sensations can lead to one feeling happy, this is not necessary.

Webber’s definition is a good attempt at forming a successful definition of sexual desire. Importantly, Webber’s definition seems to capture all instances of sexual desire since this phenomenal quality could be realised in different ways. This can be seen by considering the desires of different complexity on Morgan’s continuum of sexual desire: At the start of the

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19 (Webber, 2009, p233)

20 (Webber, 2009, p249)
scale, a sexual desire is simply a basic desire for bodily pleasures. As one moves up the scale, one will find more complex desires such as the desire to perform a sexual act with a particular person. Further up still, we have even more complex desires which involve in some sense a desire for bodily pleasures, but more importantly involve complex intentional pleasures such as communicating interpersonal attitudes between partners. Whilst these desires seem very different, we can say that they are united by having the same phenomenal quality. We can also for example say the desire to hold hands with someone counts as sexual if this phenomenal quality is present.\(^2\) The point is that Webber’s definition identifies a quality that all instances of sexual desire have in common, but in a way that respects variety in instances of sexual desire. It therefore satisfies condition two. Furthermore, his account satisfies condition one. This is because it is consistent to hold that whenever this phenomenal quality is present, there is also a desire for bodily pleasures of some sort present, even if this is not central to the sexual desire.

Webber’s definition is however problematic because it is much too vague. In trying to find a common quality that respects the complex nature of sexual desire, he has in fact told us very little about what all instances of sexual desire have in common. He has told us that all instances of sexual desire have a common feature, and that this is a certain phenomenal quality, but this does not tell us anything very significant unless he also tells us the nature of this phenomenal quality. All he has really said is that instances of sexual desire have a feature in common, but this is trivially true. It is obvious that if there is such a concept as ‘sexual desire’, and there are particular instances of this concept, then there is something that these particular instances have in common. It is like saying that what all sports have in common is that they are experienced as having a ‘sport-like’ quality. This tells us nothing about what all sports actually have in common. We can grant Webber that what all instances of sexual desire have in common is a phenomenal quality.\(^2\) What we however really want to know is the nature of this phenomenal quality - what having this phenomenal quality amounts to. Webber’s definition does not allow one to understand the commonality between sexual desires that on the face of it seem drastically different, for example the commonality between a desire for bodily sensation, and the idiosyncratic desire to be whipped by someone wearing nothing but a dog collar. His definition therefore does not meet condition one.

Section 4a - What this problem with Webber’s definition shows us - The inability to form a successful definition of sexual desire

So far, I have argued that there are three conditions that a successful definition of sexual desire would have to meet. Summed up, they tell us that a successful definition would have to capture the very complex and idiosyncratic nature of sexual desire, but at the same time tell us something useful and informative about what individual instances of sexual desire have in

\(^2\) (Webber, 2009, p247)

\(^2\) This is a sensible suggestion. They must at least have a quality in common, and I will assume that he is correct in saying this.
common. Webber tries to form a definition of sexual desire that deals with these worries. I have argued that Webber’s definition is commendable because it tries to identify a common feature present in all individual instances of sexual desire. It therefore does not leave out desires that we would consider sexual. We have seen that this is a problem faced by intentionalist and reductionist definitions. Webber’s definition however fails precisely because it tries to avoid this problem. In trying to explain what all definitions of sexual desire have in common, Webber fails to tell us anything very significant about what they all have in common.

I believe that Webber’s inability to explain the nature of this phenomenal quality is due to the fact that giving a useful explanation of this quality is potentially an impossible task. This is because, as Morgan shows us, individual instances of sexual desire can be so very different from one another, depending on the individual who has them. Variation in sexual desire is what makes sexual desire such a complex concept, and is why it is so difficult to find a quality that they both have in common as sexual desires. Trying to for example explain what the common sexual feature involved in, firstly, a basic desire for bodily sensations and secondly, a desire that more centrally involves the desire to communicate interpersonal attitudes or some other complex mental desire, just does not seem very feasible. This phenomenal quality seems similar to the feeling of pain. Whilst one knows when one is in pain, and can identify individual instances of pain, trying to say what being in pain amounts to, or give a description of what different feelings of pain have in common, seems impossible. It doesn’t seem that one could give a more informative explanation than ‘all feelings of pain are unpleasant and uncomfortable’. This is not a useful explanation. The same can be said about this phenomenal quality involved in sexual desire. Whilst one can identify different instances of sexual desire, trying to say what they all have in common as sexual desires, other than a ‘sexual quality’ seems impossible.

Section 4b - Mari Mikkola’s analysis of ‘Woman’ and how this can be applied to the ‘Sexual desire’

A useful analogy to show the impossibility of giving a successful definition of sexual desire, is Mari Mikkola’s analysis of the concept ‘woman’ from her paper ‘Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women’ (2006). In order to explain her analysis of ‘woman’, it is important to briefly explain her motivation for this analysis.

In this paper Mari Mikkola defends a view called ‘Gender realism’. This is the view that there is something that all members of a gender have in common. There is for example something that women qua women have in common. In other words, there is such a concept as ‘Woman’. Gender realism has been criticised by philosophers because it is not at all clear that there is a feature or quality that all women have in common.23 Women seem to vary from culture to

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23 It is important to be aware of the difference between ‘Female’ and ‘Women’. ‘Female’ is a biological concept, referring to a person’s sex organs, whilst ‘Woman’ is a social concept. It is possible for someone to be biologically female, but identify themselves as being a man. (See Mikkola, 2006, p82)
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culture and from class to class, and what it is to be a woman in one culture or class is not what it is to be a woman in another culture or class. This has motivated a view called ‘Gender nominalism’, the view that there is no such concept as ‘woman’ or ‘man’. Elizabeth Spelman argues that there is no single quality that all instances of women partake in. Rather, there are simply different types of women. There are for example, White middle-class women, and black lower-class women, and their womanness is different in each case.25

Mikkola however argues that the inability to explain the common feature shared by all women does not mean that there is no such common feature. She argues that just because it is impossible to identify a common feature between particulars that fall under a universal, this does not mean that there is no common feature that these particulars have. Rather it is impossible to identify what these particulars have in common because the universal is too complex to analyse. She says that some things may have ‘numerous parts...[which means it is] extremely difficult - if not impossible- to analyse them, reductively by breaking them down into necessary and sufficient conditions’.26 Mikkola argues that we should apply this analysis of complex universals to the concept ‘Woman’. She argues that it is often possible to pick out instances of women. One can for example point at an object and say ‘that is a woman’, and point at another object and say ‘that is another woman’. One cannot however say what the common feature between all women is because the concept ‘woman’ has very many different instances that make this common feature too complex to analyse. She says that “Women may simply have an extremely complex, and, thus, unanalysable feature in common that makes them women.”27 It seems that all one could say is all instances of women share a ‘womanness’ quality. In short, and most importantly, the difficulty in giving a definition of what all women have in common stems from the fact that the concept ‘Woman’ can be realised in numerous different ways.

Mikkola’s analysis of ‘Woman’ is a good way of understanding sexual desire. Like the concept ‘Woman’, ‘sexual desire’, is incredibly complex since and can be realised in numerous, if not infinitely different ways, and having different layers of complexity. Because of its complexity, and its many different instances, it is therefore an impossible task to analyse it in simpler terms, and to shed light on the common quality shared by all instances of sexual desire. As with the concept ‘woman’, it is often easy to pick out instances of sexual desire, and to determine when something counts as sexual. One can identify a desire and say, ‘that is a sexual desire’, and identify a very different desire and say ‘that is another sexual desire’. Trying to shed light on their common quality, because of its many different instances and complexity, is however potentially impossible.

24 (Mikkola, 2006, p78)
25 (Mikkola, 2006, p82)
26 (Mikkola, 2006, p92)
27 (Mikkola, 2006, p92)
Maybe all that one can say about sexual desire is something along the lines of Webber’s definition - that all sexual desires have some sort of phenomenal quality in common. I have however argued that such a definition is unsuccessful because it fails to meet condition three - it fails to give an informative explanation of what all instances of sexual desire have in common. It follows then that since it is impossible to give an informative explanation of the quality that is common to instances of sexual desire, and that giving an informative explanation of such a quality is needed to form a successful definition of sexual desire, it may well be impossible to form a successful definition of sexual desire. It may be helpful to lay out my argument formally:

1) Things that have something in common have a common quality.
2) All instances of sexual desire have something in common.
3) So all instances of sexual desire have a common quality (a sexual quality)
4) Giving an informative explanation of the nature of the common quality in all instances of sexual desire is impossible.
5) A successful definition of sexual desire requires an informative explanation of the quality common to all instances of sexual desire.
6) It is therefore impossible to form a successful definition of sexual desire.

Section 5- An objection - Sexual desire nominalism

One may object to premise two - that all definitions of sexual desire do have a common quality. One may argue that the discussion above shows that the reason it is so difficult to give a successful definition of sexual desire is not because the common quality involved in all instances of sexual desire is too complex to analyse, but because there is no such common quality. Using the analogy of the concept ‘woman’, one may argue that the differences in instances of women supports the conclusion that there is no common quality that all women have, only individual instances of women, and this is precisely the reason that it is so difficult to find a common quality. Similarly, one may argue that there is no common quality that all sexual desires have qua sexual desires. There are only different instances of sexual desire that are not united by a common quality. Such a position could be called sexual desire nominalism, as opposed to sexual desire realism - the view that there is something that all instances of sexual desire have in common. The sexual desire nominalist may argue that their position allows one to give a better explanation than the sexual desire realist as to why some sexual desires seem so different from one another. Instead of arguing as Webber does that different sexual desires have a common phenomenal quality, and that this quality can be realised in different ways, the sexual desire nominalist can simply say that different sexual desires do not share a common quality, and this is precisely why they appear so different. Whilst the gender nominalist cannot give a better definition of sexual desire than the gender realist, they however offer an alternative explanation as to why forming such a definition is so difficult.
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I however believe that sexual desire realism is a more plausible position than sexual desire nominalism. This is because the fact that one can often easily identify different desires as being sexual suggests that there is a common quality to all these desires, even if one cannot give a good explanation of this common quality. The fact that we group certain desires together as being sexual shows that we think about these desires in the same way. A plausible explanation for this is that they do have a quality in common that makes them sexual desires as opposed to desires that are non-sexual. Just as one can often identify instances of women even though these instances have differences, and that this suggests that there is something that all women have in common, the ability to recognise different desires as sexual suggests there is a common quality between them. Premise two is therefore plausible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have looked at whether it is possible to form a successful definition of sexual desire. I argued that there are three conditions that a successful definition of sexual desire would have to meet: 1) make reference to the desire for bodily pleasures, 2) be able to cover all instances of sexual desire and 3) be informative enough to usefully explain what all instances of sexual desire have in common. I looked at reductionist and intentionalist definitions sexual desire, and Morgan’s criticisms of them. His main criticism is that both definitions fail to capture the complex nature of sexual desire - sexual desire has to involve the desire for bodily sensation, and this is sufficient for a desire to count as sexual, but it is often more complex mental desires which are key to particular desires being sexual. Both types of definition therefore fail to meet condition two. Reductionist definitions fail to meet this condition since they would not deem more complex desires such as the desire to have sex with a particular person, as sexual. Intentionalist definitions on the other hand fail to meet this condition because they would not consider simple desires for bodily sensations without more complex attitudes, as being sexual. Furthermore, intentionalist definitions are in danger of failing to meet condition one. Webber’s ‘phenomenal quality’ definition tries to form a definition that satisfies all there of these conditions. I argued that whilst his definition satisfies the first two of these conditions, and is probably right that all instances of sexual desire have some sort of phenomenal quality in common, it fails to satisfy the third, since it fails to tell us anything about the nature of this phenomenal quality.

I however argued that the failure of Webber to explain the nature of this phenomenal quality is because such an explanation may be impossible - it does not seem possible to analyse the common quality shared by all instances of sexual desire. All one can really say is that they have a ‘sexual quality’ in common. I argued that Mikkola’s analysis of the inability to give an explanation of the common feature shared by all women should be applied to sexual desire. Like with the inability to explain what all instances of women have in common, the inability to explain what all instances of sexual desire have in common is due to the fact that sexual desire is a complex concept, having many different instances that seem drastically different to each other. The inability to give a successful definition of sexual desire therefore stems from it being too complex a concept, and a definition such as Webber’s might be the best that one can give. I posed the objection that I have wrongly assumed that all instances of sexual desire do have a
common quality, and that the difficulty in giving a definition of sexual desire is not because the common quality is too complex to analyse, but because there is no quality that all instances of sexual desire have qua sexual desires. I termed this position ‘sexual desire nominalism’. I however responded that the fact that it is often easy to pick out and recognise different desires as being sexual, suggests that there is a quality that they all have in common qua sexual desire, even though it is impossible to analyse this common quality.

References

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