Ethics and sexual desire

In this paper I am going to consider whether a person might have racist motivations, on which they act, but on which morality is silent. Although, for convenience, I shall use the example of racism, my argument is not essentially connected to that particular ethical flaw: there are some other flaws that would have served just as well. I shall get to this discussion through an extended preamble, which gives some background to this attempt to find a limit to morality.

Morality, narrowly characterised, centres around a nest of related concepts: responsibility, blame and obligation. Immoral actions for which we are responsible are actions for which we can be blamed and are actions from which we are obliged to desist. This applies to actions we perform as citizens and as private individuals. Consider Fred, who has strong racist beliefs. If he works in Human Resources and constantly undermines black employees' chances of promotion, this is something for which he is responsible, for which he can be blamed and which he is under an obligation not to do. The same is true if, outside work, he shouts racist abuse at someone he sees at the bus-stop. We might debate with the liberal as to whether this second action ought to be in the province of law (the first action certainly ought to be), but, whatever we decide about that, all will agree it falls within the province of morality. Even if we concede that the person at the bus-stop is not harmed, and therefore the abuse ought not to be the business of the state, it falls within those actions for which Mill claimed that ‘there are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise’ (Mill 1972: 73) These two are the sorts of action on which the standard moral theories (by which I mean the various forms of consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics) have plenty to say.

Let us move to a territory in which the boundaries are less sharp. What if Fred does not invite Susan (someone he knows through work) to his birthday party because she is black? It is not clear how this stands to the nest of responsibility, blame and obligation. On the one hand, one might think that Fred is not obliged to invite black people into his home. On the other hand, one might think that Fred is violating certain rather general obligations such as an obligation to treat people fairly. This would be strengthened if it turned out that Fred has some well-articulated grounds for his aversion to black people: say he believes that they will steal the teaspoons. This seems a case of treating people unfairly, in that Fred’s actions are governed by a groundless belief, and the claim that we have a general obligation not to treat people unfairly seems even stronger than the claim that we have an obligation to treat them fairly. The same considerations apply to Fred having no black friends. Let us assume that his work
and social life often brings him into contact with black people, so it is not a matter of not having the opportunity. Once again, Fred has no obligation to have black friends, yet, if this came about because of a set of racist beliefs that would not stand scrutiny, then the nest of responsibility, blame and obligation would seem to be able to get a grip.

What, however, if Fred does not have any well-articulated false beliefs about the character of black people. He does not really think about the colour of peoples’ skin much, it is just that, although he has many friends, none of them are black. This could just be a coincidence, of course, but let us assume that Fred’s preferences are governed by racist motivations that are part of his mental economy, but which are inaccessible by consciousness. I do not mean anything particularly outlandish or unusual; one of the depressing results thrown up by the Harvard Implicit Attitude tests is that most Americans (and I would suspect most Europeans) implicitly prefer whites to blacks.¹ Let us assume, though, that Fred has this more markedly than many of the rest of us.

How does this stand to morality (narrowly construed)? One could take an heroic line, and claim that Fred is responsible for having these attitudes, can be blamed for them and is obliged to rid himself of them. After all, socio-economic facts strongly suggest that racism is prevalent in most American and European societies, and, knowing this, Fred and those like Fred are obliged to monitor themselves carefully so as not to contribute to the general immorality. Fred should notice that he has these motivations, and endeavour to do something to correct them, or at least mitigate their effects. This is particularly plausible if Fred is acting within an institutional role (as, for example, a juror). The effects of unconscious prejudice in public decision-making can be quite marked. There is a remarkable piece of research that has been carried out by Jennifer Eberhardt and her colleagues.⁴ They considered 44 murder trials in the Philadelphia where the defendant was black, the victim was white, and in which the death sentence was an option. They obtained photographs of the defendants, and arranged for some ‘naïve raters’ (who did not know the photographs depicted convicted murderers) to rank them from least stereotypically black in appearance to most stereotypically black. Accounting for covariants, they discovered that 24.4% of those defendants who fell in the ‘less stereotypically black’ half of the distribution received the death penalty, compared to 57.5% in the other half. When they repeated their investigation in cases in which the victims were black, they found no difference between the two halves of the ranking (Eberhardt, Davies et al. 2006). This research strongly suggests that a grave injustice is being done, and thus that those who find themselves in positions in which they have to take such decisions are obliged to monitor themselves, so that irrelevant considerations (such as appearance) do not influence
their judgement. They are responsible for making a fair decision, and can be blamed if they do not.

The influence of such unconscious dispositions on private behaviour seems a different matter. Let us consider a case in which people do, generally, think about what might attract them to a person and what might be an inhibitor to attraction: cases of sexual desire. Note here that I am talking about sexual desire, rather than more complicated, cognitively mediated desires for other forms of intimacy. People often have an idea of a ‘type’ to which they are attracted, whether blonde or brunette, tall or short, stocky or slim. What should we say of cases in which someone finds being dark-skinned is an inhibitor of sexual desire? The first thing to note is that the relation between a racist disposition and sexual desire is going to be complicated. As sexual desire is bound up with a tangled nest of other mental states including domination and submission, it would be foolish to think that a racist disposition will simply translate into race being an inhibitor of sexual desire. However, for ease of argument, I am going to assume this is the case.

Our first thought might be to go along with Hume that these are ‘original existences’: ‘Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chuses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it’ (Hume 1978: II, III, 416). Let us suppose that Fred, to stay with our example, has no false beliefs about black people, he simply finds dark skin an inhibitor for sexual desire. Following Hume, we might argue that sexual preferences are unreasoned brute existences, for which we cannot be blamed. After all, the notion of blaming someone for other sexual preferences, such as preferring blonde hair to dark hair, or preferring stocky men to slim men seems absurd. Why, then, should the blame enter into a preference for light over dark skin? These things are simply brute; they are givens.

There are two replies we could make to this. The first would be to point out that we would not accept this reply for all sexual preferences. Some sexual preferences are morally loaded. Until fairly recently, having a preference for people of the same sex was a moral issue. The same is true (and still true) of a sexual preference for children. So it is not the case that we regard all sexual preferences as simply brute: some, at least, are up for moral assessment.

There are, in turn, two replies to this reply. The first would be to distinguish preferences that are manifest only in sexual attraction (paedophilia) and preferences that are part of a broader disposition (a preference for people with light skin). The problem with this is that it seems to get things the wrong way around. For the preference that is part of a broader disposition looks
to be a candidate for moral assessment: we can look at the relation between the disposition and the broader social world. In short, the sexual preference can be assessed as part of a pattern of racial preferences. The preference that is not part of the broader disposition (paedophilia) looks more like a Humean ‘brute existence’. For the reply to work, it would have to be the case that it was the paedophilia came out as up for moral assessment, and the preference on the basis of skin colour not.

The second reply is, I think, stronger. That is to deny that sexual preferences such as paedophilia are up for moral assessment. That is, to maintain the point that these preferences are ‘original existences’. This is part of a well-worn strategy by the Church for coping with homosexuality: that is, it is not the preference that is wrong, but the exercise of the preference. One can maintain this consistently provided one does not account for the wrongness of the exercise in terms of the wrongness of the preference. Instead one can, for example, invoke the bad consequences of the exercise of the preference. That is, in the main, it does undoubted harm to exercise a sexual preference for children. If one simply has the preference, then no harm is done.

Let us explore this a little more. Let us assume (a safe assumption, I think) that whether or not people are paedophiles is not under their voluntary control. Given the tight links between voluntariness and blame explored earlier, there is a pressure on us not to blame a person for having this sexual preference (although we might, as indicated above, blame them for exercising that preference). One gets one’s sexual preferences in part as a result of the natural lottery, and in part the lottery of what happens to a person as they are growing up. So we can maintain that a person who is a paedophile is very unlucky. Given that a satisfactory sex life is part of human well-being, such people are condemned to lives that lack something. Indeed, as the tortured writing of deeply Christian homosexuals testifies, having desires on which one is forbidden to act can ruin any chance of happiness. This line of thought seems compelling to me; it does not make sense to me to blame someone for the hand life has dealt them, whether that is blaming them for being physically handicapped, or blaming them for having a sexual preference for children. If this is so, then we can return to the Humean thought that sexual preferences are not up for moral assessment, on the grounds that they are ‘original existences’.

There is, however, one more twist to go through. Even if blame does not get a foothold, the paedophile might be up for moral assessment in different terms. That is, we could find them (or their desires) disgusting. What sort of judgement is this? This is a complicated issue that is worth some brief exploration. There are some philosophers who think that the extension of
disgusting things can be given in terms that do not mention the affective reaction: that is, ‘disgusting’ has a descriptive correlate. This seems to me unlikely: rather, one will end up with an indefinitely long disjunction of conjunctions, with only some idea of what future disjuncts will look like. However, there seems to be a strong thread running through those things that we find disgusting: something to do with a mixing up of those things that should not be mixed up. Some of these things are clearly not within the province of morality (eating a worm sandwich), some are (revulsion at cruelty), and with others, it is just not clear: what do we say, for example, about the man who buys a chicken from the shop, and has sex with it before cooking it and eating it? Let us assume that, as a matter of psychological fact, paedophilia inspires revulsion in us. That is not enough, as we have seen, to make the judgement that the paedophile is disgusting a moral judgement. What then would make it a moral judgement instead of – if we want to classify things this way – an aesthetic one?

There is much that could be said here, but, painting in bold strokes, the issue seems to be this. Our moral beliefs form part of a larger set of beliefs (including prudential beliefs) about what it is for a life to go well. Some of these will be cognitive in character (solutions to co-ordination problems) and some will, for psychological reasons, become deeply internalised and manifest themselves in the form of feelings of moral necessity with attendant affective reactions. The paedophile violates several of these deeply held norms: harming the defenceless and the innocent, violating autonomy, all at a considerable cost to the victim all for the sake of pursuing their private satisfaction.

The reply, then, is that some sexual preferences – paedophilia – are moral issues because they provoke disgust, and this disgust is part of a reaction that fits into our moral framework. In itself, a sexual preference for light over dark skin does not provoke disgust, and only violates such norms as treating everybody equally. However, there are many contexts in which it is perfectly alright not to treat people equally and, otherwise we would not need to do all this thinking, sexual preference might be one of them. So there does seem to be a clear difference between paedophilia and black skin being a sexual inhibitor, such that we can count the first as moral while the jury still be out about the second.

Let us try another line of thought altogether. It is true that sexual preferences are original existences in the sense that they are not held for a reason. However, such preferences have causal histories: they are rooted (let us assume) in our social and cultural milieu. We could subscribe to the following principle:
P: Any preference that is caused by, and is consonant with, a systematic social injustice is immoral.

I think this captures some of our intuitions. If Fred was brought up in apartheid South Africa, and finds that, as an adult, he finds black skin a sexual inhibitor, then we feel that preference inherits the immorality of the situation that was its cause. As the acquisition of this preference was not voluntary, and thus Fred is not blameworthy, it might still be up for moral assessment and might be something Fred has an obligation to do something about.

I say this captures some of our intuitions, but, looked at from the other side, it might look as if morality is being overly imperialistic. After all, nobody is obliged to have a black partner. It is plainly ridiculous to maintain that people ought to practice equal opportunities in all areas of life. However, we have to be careful here. The claim is not that Fred, as he is now, should choose a partner against his brute inclinations on the grounds of fairness (that would be ridiculous) but rather that Fred might consider ways in which he might change his character so that his choice of partner would not be influenced by an immoral disposition.

However, there are still reasons for thinking we are drawing the boundary of morality too widely. First, what we ought to do should not move too far from what it is possible for us to do, and it might simply be impossible for us to change dispositions as deeply embedded in us as our sexual preferences. This is an empirical matter – although arguably moral philosophy should pay more attention to such matters. The second is not an empirical matter, and is very difficult to state precisely. Contrast the case we are considering with other attempts at self improvement. In his Confessions, St. Augustine tells of his Mother (Monica) who ‘fell into the custom of greedily gulping cups almost full of wine.’ When mocked by a serving girl ‘she saw her foulness, condemned it immediately and cast it off’ (Augustine 1983: IX, VIII, 224). Monica sees her fondness for wine as something undesirable about herself that is no part of, even contrary to, her sense of her own identity. With enviable self-possession, she is able to ‘cast it off’. What relation does Fred stand to his sexual preferences? Are they simply accidents of his personality, or do they play a more constitutive role?

Whether these preferences play a constitutive role is a matter of Fred’s sense of his own identity. This sense of ‘identity’ has do with those properties that that give us our conception of ourselves. These often change over a lifetime; recall the quip about not being a radical at University on the grounds that one does not want to be a Republican in middle-age. Probably our only access to these properties is thinking, at a particular time, that they are the properties that were we to lose them we would, from the perspective of ourselves at that time, be a
different person. However, it is difficult to see what would make this conditional true. Consider a case in which I do lose one of these properties (I shift from being a vegetarian to being a meat-eater). I now judge that, although I would have regarded myself as a different person from the perspective of my vegetarian self, I would have been wrong to do so. The judgement from my meat-eating self is that my vegetarian self massively overrated the importance of diet. Because the change in property brings a change in perspective, there is room for disagreement between the perspectives as to whether there has been a change in identity. Hence, from the first-personal point of view, the difference between properties that are accidental to, and properties that are constitutive of, our identity cannot be made out. We could try shifting to another point of view (would other people say we were a different person?) However, in general we seem to know ourselves better than do other people, so we would be unlikely to allow the view from their perspective to override our own.

We can still ask ourselves, however, from the perspective before the change whether altering our sexual preferences would bring about a change in identity. This would not in itself fix whether the change would be desirable or undesirable, except with the assumption (which I shall assume) that we do not want to change our identity. It seems that there are sexual preferences the content of which may well be part of a person’s identity: being heterosexual, homosexual, or even a sado-masochist may be dispositions which a person thinks is what they bring to morality, rather than that dispositions they are morally obliged to change. However, to think that a change in the role of skin colour in sexual desires were part of a person’s identity would suggest that skin colour had the wrong kind of importance in that person’s life anyway. Desires that are this particular do not play a constitutive role in identity that allows them to escape moral assessment.

A third possible reason for rejecting P is that it would make almost everything in this area suspect. There is a large body of literature that argues that the way females need to appear to be sexually attractive is socially constructed, and that this construct is linked to systematic injustice (Wolf 1990). If this were so, then, put together with P, we would need to conclude that it is immoral to be sexually attracted to females generally considered sexually attractive. There does not seem to be a consensus on what aspects of sexual attractiveness are natural, and what part socially constructed. To indulge in some armchair psychologising, it seems unlikely that the heterosexual male fetish with breasts is wholly socially constructed yet, on the other hand, what counts (or not) as attractive breasts seems likely to be socially mediated. As an aside, there are many women who have used breast augmentation surgery to give them breasts that are biologically implausible (the British glamour model, Jordan, has had three sets of breast augmentation surgery, to take her breasts from a size 32A to a size 34FF). The form
of this argument is that there is something wrong with P, as P would entail many of our sexual preferences are morally doubtful. The danger with the argument is obvious: it might be that we should stick with P and conclude that, indeed, many of our preferences are ones that we would be morally better off without.

We could try to refine P to be less inclusive by putting conditions on the relevant property of the object of the preference.

P*: Any preference based on a property, where (i) that preference is caused by, and is consonant with, a systematic social injustice and (ii) that property is harmful to the possessor, is immoral.

This gets some things right, rending immoral a preference for victims of female genital mutilation, and (arguably) women with surgically enhanced breasts (although not women with naturally large breasts) and women who wear high heels. It does not rule out a preference for women who are conventionally attractive as being so does them no harm (Chambers 2004). However, it has nothing to say on the case in hand: a preference for light skin over dark, as clearly having light skin is not harmful to the possessor.

Rather than trying for refinement, we might attempt to undermine the claim that conventional attractiveness is part of a systematic social injustice. Naomi Wolf may be right that women are systematically persuaded to worry about their weight and their looks generally, but it does not follow that there is no such thing as being overweight, or that one is participating in oppressive practices if one brushes one’s hair in the morning. On this point, Bernard Williams quotes Sheridan’s Jack Absolute (Williams 1985: 216):

I own I should rather choose a wife of mine to have the usual number of limbs and a limited quantity of back: and though one eye may be very agreeable, yet as the prejudice has always run in favour of two, I would not wish to affect a singularity in that article (The Rivals, III, I)

If one is to be a sexual being at all, then, putting the point at its weakest, there need to be some properties that one does not find to be sexual inhibitors. Which properties? One could try to identify those properties that people would find attractive in a world without oppression, and cultivate a disposition to be attracted to those. Doing so would presuppose a space outside of acculturation in which we could think and, even if we could occupy it, it is difficult to know what we would think about. Rather, we should do as Williams suggests, and be guided by biology: prejudice does not go all the way down. (This is to some extent borne out by the findings in Nancy Etcoff’s book, Survival of the Prettiest; however, I am not sure of what to make of her claims without looking at the original research (Etcoff 2000: 109-15)).
This is not, however, a message of complacency. Even if we cannot identify a morally sound collection of dispositions to find certain qualities sexually attractive, it does not follow that we cannot identify dispositions that are morally unsound. If we accept P, these will be dispositions we are obliged to do something about.

Although I have not found any reason for rejecting P, there does not seem conclusive reason for accepting it either. Ought our sexual preferences to fall under the domain of morality? There does not seem much point in appealing to intuitions to settle this question as our intuitions on the question seem mixed. The other place we might hope to find guidance is moral theory. However – and this will be my final point – contemporary moral theory does not seem to be of much help.

The fundamental point in consequentialism is to maximise the good. However, our problem does not seem to have much to do with maximisation: altering Fred’s sexual preferences so as to remove skin colour from his list of sexual inhibitors would seem to be neutral as to the balance of good states of affairs over bad ones. This is because the problem, if there is a problem, is in the realm of fairness or equal regard, which are not linked directly to maximisation. Being a more complicated moral theory, it is more difficult to work out whether anything can be gleaned from Kantianism. It is not clear that any of the formulae for the categorical imperative apply for two reasons. First, as Fred’s motivations are unconscious, he is not acting on a maxim – what he is doing is not the product of his conscious will. Hence, his maxim cannot be tested by the universalising formulae for the categorical imperative. The second formulae does not mention maxims: ‘[A rational being] should treat himself and all others, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself’ (Kant 1948: 95). This rules out some behaviour: it would be wrong to cultivate someone simply for the purposes of having sex with them. Indeed, Kant thought that sexual attraction itself drove us to consider people as means rather than as ends, and thus took a rather dim view of it (Kant 1963: 163-64). However, that is tangential to our concern. If the colour of someone’s skin is a sexual inhibitor to Fred, that does not make it any more the case that he is treating the person as a means rather than an end. Indeed, we seem to be thrown back on our question: some property of the person will be sexually attractive, some sexually neutral and some sexual inhibitor. Does the heading under which we place skin colour matter? This does not seem to have anything to do with treating someone as a means or an end. It is also difficult to see why it has anything to do with treating them with more or less respect; at least, it is not clear why such issues would apply to skin colour rather than to any other property that had.
Even if sexual preferences fall outside duties and the evaluation of consequences, they are part of a person’s character. Hence, virtue ethics, which ‘specifies what is moral in relation to such inner factors as character and motive…’ might offer us a better alternative (Slote 2000: 325).vi There does seem something to the thought that finding black skin a sexual inhibitor is not an admirable trait; not the kind of trait a fully virtuous agent would have. On the other hand, even the virtuous agent needs to be turned on by something, and we find ourselves back in the debate as to whether skin colour is problematic in a way that preferences about hair colour, breast size or the shape of the eyes is not. It is difficult to see why, in itself, a preference about skin colour should be picked out as especially un-virtuous. Perhaps the initial thought that it was is because there seems something less than morally ideal about any property being picked out as being sexually exiting or sexually inhibiting. However, that is something wrong with us rather than something right with the theory.

It seems Fred should be worried about his preferences, but only because we should all be worried about whether we harbour racist, sexist or other morally undesirable attitudes. However, if he can be sure in his own mind that his sexual preferences do not infect his behaviour more generally, I do not think he has anything, morally, to worry about. However, I am also not sure that he could ever be sure.vii


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i See [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/measurementyourattitudes.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/measurementyourattitudes.html)

ii I would like to thank Jesse Prinz for bringing this to my attention.
iii Rosalind Hursthouse has pointed out to me that it is likely that such preferences come as part of morally dubious packages.

iv Although, for a contrary view, see Anita Loos’ 1963 introduction to Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.

v This was an example used in a survey to assess what people thought was, and was not, a moral issue. The results divided along socio-economic lines (Haidt, Koller et al. 1993).

vi It might be thought that rule-consequentialism is in a better position, at least in as much as it concerns dispositions of which we are not necessarily conscious. However, it still concerns maximisation hence the point still applies.

vii Of course, there are other forms of virtue ethics. However, Slote’s ‘agent-based’ account is the one most likely to help us here.

viii My thoughts on this have been clarified by conversations with Peter Goldie, James Harold, Jesse Prinz, and my colleagues at The Open University. I have also benefited from work by Clare Chambers.