

Sexual Ethics: The Meaning and Foundations of Sexual Morality

By Aurel Kolnai

Translated and edited by Francis Dunlop

With a Preface by Roger Scruton

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Aurel Kolnai was born in Budapest in 1900, the son of a banker called Stein, and died in England in 1973. Professor Dunlop reports that he changed his surname to Kolnai while a teenager. In his memoirs,¹ which contain several sweet and gentle jokes, Kolnai describes his physique as “thin and wiry” and his ideas as “eccentric”. He converted to Catholicism in 1924.

During his student days in Europe he heard lectures about the works of Husserl and Heidegger whose phenomenological philosophy attracted him because of its neo-realism. Later he decided phenomenology is essentially Catholic in spirit and indeed superior to the version of Thomism taught in certain Catholic colleges.

Sexual Ethics was published in German in 1930. Professor Dunlop says he has pruned the work a little but it is still quite long. However Kolnai’s manner of writing is not repetitive, it is discursive. For example when discussing prostitution² he mentions many criticisms of the practice and its providers and customers, then criticizes the criticisms, then criticizes the criticisms of the criticisms - and so on. His discursive diversions, however, do not ramble, they are quite highly organised.

In some ways this book reminds me of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*.³ Both authors are very forceful and very convincing and each is rather less than 100% logical. They share a subject matter but take up opposing positions on just about every aspect of that topic. Greer has directly influenced several generations of adult readers and - I would guess - many schoolchildren indirectly; Kolnai’s books, on the other hand, will surely offend lots of people. His detestation of Nazism and Stalinism is shared by politically correct (PC) people, but his dislike of all forms of socialism verges on the non-PC and his attack on democracy is astronomically non-PC. In his *Memoirs* he advocates government by strong Monarchs, strong Nobles and a strong Civil Service. Only the

¹ Aurel Kolnai *Political Memoirs* (edited by Francesca Murphy), (Lexington Books USA, 1999).

² pp. 155f.

³ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (McGibbon and Kee, London, 1970).

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existence of an inherited Nobility, he says, can give value to the natural nobility of artists and intellectuals. In the absence of hereditary nobles artists and intellectuals are degraded, or degrade themselves, into judging their work by what it earns in dollars. He is right about the degradation but his cure might be worse than the disease.

Sexual Ethics has four sections:

Part I: The Justification of Sexual Ethics

Part II: Sexual Ethics in General

Part III: Detailed Problems of Sexual Ethics, and

Part IV: Sexual Morality and Society.

In the earlier chapters Kolnai also sets out to rebut the idea, familiar to us today but evidently also common in the 1920s, namely, that sexuality is a value-free zone. He produces several considerations to rebut the thesis:

1. People habitually make moral judgments about sexual conduct in others;
2. The category of “dirt” when applied to human conduct attaches only to sexual activity;
3. The term “indecent” applies mainly to certain types of sexual behaviour;
4. No human society has been able to live without *any* moral rules concerning sex;
5. The sexual impulse has earth-shattering power and tragic depth;
6. Sexual immorality is a powerful symbol of moral evil in general;
7. Disapprobation of sexual immorality has an importance and absoluteness which has no parallel;
8. People fear the depersonalising power of sexuality and its “ethical precariousness”;
9. Human sexual relations are, in some way, the business of the social world that surrounds them, the business of those not involved;
10. Human sexual behaviour which has become visible has elements of grotesqueness, provocation, repulsiveness – which explains why those engaging in sexual activity often withdraw from the public view (modesty).

Kolnai also attacks relativism *per se* and immoralism as such. He argues that relativists greatly exaggerate the significance of social and historical differences in codes of conduct whereas the truth is

that fundamental moral evaluations occur, and are effective, and have the same kind of significance, in very different kinds of community. He says that relativists confuse facts about tolerance, behaviour, vogue, popularity and permissibility with ethical value-stances. He remarks that when single men are allowed more sexual freedom than single women it does not follow that a man's exploits are approved; men who boast of "conquests" do not attack chastity as such but rather give moral weight to other virtues: gallantry, manliness, strength. (However this view of the double standard is effectively retracted in Part IV - see below.) He notes that immoralists are much given to outbursts of moralism, for example the irritable assertion that the moralistic opponent is no better than immoralist philosophers; such an opponent, they claim, is actually *worse* because he is a hypocrite.

Kolnai agrees that difference societies have different ideas about chastity (here he contrasts Arab peoples with the West in such matters as polygamy and so on) but insists that all known societies have a concept of chastity. Yet polygamy, he adds, is inferior to monogamy because "it has no place for love or eternity" since only physical qualities are required in the wives. He pours scorn on the contradictory character of the amoralists' advice to embrace new *mores* while going back to nature. Nietzsche's amorality he describes as "pretentious, aggressive and condescending". He draws precise distinctions between on the one hand amorality versus rule-defying, and on the other hand the difference between "ordinary" philosophical amorality and those who say "Evil be thou my good".

However, he does perpetrate a few blunders. Writing in phenomenological mode he says that sexual sin is not a sin *against* another but a sin *with* another. He has not forgotten about rape but thinks its badness is not *essentially* sexual, because it is possible to violate people in many other ways. Surely here he has confused badness that is unique to a certain sphere of action with badness that is essential to that sphere. One could equally well argue infer that the badness of robbery with violence is not essentially theft on the grounds that rape too is a violation. Secondly sinning *with* does not rule out sinning *against*; a man who persuades another to carry a bribe to a politician sins *against* that other as well as *with* him.

Kolnai wants to explain the "aspects of conditionality, intentionality, and goal-directedness" associated with sex. This is clearly in line with his phenomenological stance. Straightforward descriptions of phenomena are no doubt significant elements in the philosophy of phenomenology but they can be a trap when discussing human beings, especially when the philosopher, usually a male, tries to

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describe the opposite sex. “The other sex” is a puzzle to many people though some, including Kolnai, refuse to acknowledge any puzzlement and simply rush to judgment:

“... although it is the case that male and female both fully represent humanity, the former is a more approachable object of *logical comprehension* [his italics]. The human being as spiritual-bodily whole is easier to grasp in Adam than in Eve. I hope that this consideration may soften the intellectual shock of an exposition always inclining to the male side.”

Describing sexual phenomena and sexual psychology is a tricky business. Kolnai thought it easier to understand Adam than to understand Eve but quite understandably backs his account with a large number of footnotes citing many authors. On the other hand, he doesn't agree with all those “authorities”. Moreover after the passing of nearly 80 years their opinions have a faded air - who nowadays whole-heartedly accepts the authority of Havelock Ellis or Freud or Jung or Reich or Kraft-Ebbing?

The difficulty in achieving a “logical comprehension” of Eve and Eve's sexuality might have been removed or at least ameliorated if works by Mrs Ellis, Mrs Freud, Mrs Jung, Mrs Reich and Mrs Kraft-Ebbing had been consulted but alas and alack none of those persons wrote any books (as far as I know). Kolnai does indeed refer to nine or ten women authors but attacks all but one (Lou Andreas-Salome). The reason is that the others make outrageous demands, e.g., that family finances ought not be solely in the hands of the husbands and that married women should be allowed to work at tasks other than cleaning the house and cooking and so on. Kolnai objects to those ideas very strongly. He says that allowing women to have a say in financial matters is against the principle of marriage - but where does *that* idea come from? Surely it isn't part of Catholic doctrine? Kolnai also says that for women to work outside the home would be bad for their children. I agree that a pre-school child needs to be cared for by its mother, or by both parents; it is also my opinion that once the youngest child has gone to school there is no reason for the mother to stay at home all day. Nowadays it is not impossible for couples to juggle their jobs in such a way that their pre-school children can have the company first of one parent then the other (or both) for most of the time.

Part III of *Sexual Ethics* contains comprehensive accounts of fidelity and monogamy. Following Catholic teaching Kolnai argues that fidelity and monogamy are good states of affairs which could

in principle be achieved by everyone. He discusses pre-marital abstinence and says it too is achievable in principle.

Part III also discusses prostitution, solitary sex, deviant versions of heterosexual sex, homosexuality, and fetishism, all of which are condemned. Kolnai distinguishes the man who visits prostitutes from “a rich student who retains a girl and gives her presents”. The student is not acting very badly, only slightly badly.

Much of Part IV is taken up by a long discussion of the double standard, the idea that men should be allowed sexual freedom and women should not. Kolnai seems unable to decide whether the double standard is a good thing or a bad thing, indeed he appears to be quite confused about the matter. He does say in a footnote that Catholic teaching makes no mention of the double standard but one senses that he is reminding himself as well as us of that fact.

According to Ray Monk⁴ young Herr Wittgenstein admired Otto Weininger’s book *Sex and Character* and recommended it first to G.E. Moore and later to his own students.

Professor Dunlop reports that Kolnai’s 1922 memorial article described Weininger as “the greatest moral thinker of our age.” Dunlop himself says Weininger was a genius (page xi). On the other hand Roger Scruton, who is notoriously level-headed, writes in his Preface:

“Weininger’s . . . *Sex and Character* is one of the most repulsive books ever written, and the literary world must be ever grateful to its author, that he committed suicide before he could write another one.”

Kolnai tells us that the philosophers he admires most of all are Husserl and G.K. Chesterton. He says Husserl was the greatest philosopher since Aristotle. Well, that puts Aquinas in his place. Some might complain that Chesterton was not a philosopher. He wasn’t a philosophy don, of course, but the subject has always attracted gifted amateurs.

Kolnai admired Chesterton’s language as well as his ideas; thus in his memoirs he tells us that he spoke German and Magyar in childhood and was taught French by a tutor, adding:

“English I did not know at all and not till many years later was I to discover the transcendental loveliness of this incomparable language.”

⁴ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Duty of Genius*. (Cape, London, 1990).

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His own English in the *Memoirs* is quite elegant. His translator's English, on the other hand, is somewhat unidiomatic. I have not managed to find a copy of Kolnai's original German but I suspect Professor Dunlop sometimes translates word for word - and translating word for word from an inflected language into an uninflected one is dangerous. Dunlop's phrase "what is meant by sexual ethical intentions", for example, is pretty baffling.

Jenny Teichman