Introduction

THE CULTURE WARS

Contemporary politics in America—or, perhaps more accurately, the relatively small political class in America—is seemingly wracked by an ongoing culture war.

Of course, if we are talking about the vast majority of citizens in the liberal democracies, the culture war is a phony war. The vast majority of our citizens have not lined up on one side or another of a great cultural divide. And, while occasionally culture war issues like abortion or gay rights will play an important role in determining the outcome of a single election, our election results are not fundamentally determined by which one of the two large camps in the culture war have temporarily overrun Washington.[1]

But among the political activists, the culture war is quite real. Indeed, the culture war sometimes reminds me of a public service television commercial from my childhood. In it, the middle-aged, balding political leaders of two countries are shown going to war. But, in the age-old dream of the common citizen, the war consists in these leaders themselves taking off their suit jackets and coming to blows. With a few exceptions, the culture war has been fought almost entirely in Washington and in print or, quite often, on the radio. Whether we are liberals or conservatives, all that the rest of us do, in so far as national politics is concerned, is grumble at our opponents, call them names, and, every once in a while, buy a book or go listen to and applaud one of our field generals. We are not burning the books or buildings of those who disagree with us. We are not rallying in front of their churches or tar and feathering their preachers. And we are not engaging them in battle. The greatest weapon in the culture war, the op-ed piece, goes the neutron bomb one better: it neither destroys buildings nor kills people.[2] Only trees suffer needlessly.

While it is easy to make fun of the culture war, it deals with very serious issues both for our political and personal lives. Though it is clearly mistaken to think that our nation is divided into two blocs that are moving steadily apart from one another, issues that are often framed in terms of a culture war—such as abortion and gay marriage—have been important in our national elections. And our discussions of the personal issues raised in terms of a culture war have some impact on how we live our daily lives.[3]

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[1] The notion that American citizens are divided into these two camps is decisively refuted through an analysis of voting results and survey research by Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (Longmans, 2005) and through in-depths interviews by Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All : What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left and Each Other* (Penguin, 1995). Fiorina does make the critically important point that how voters make up their minds depends a great deal on the choices offered to them. When candidates do not differ much on economic issues but do differ, if only slightly, on culture war issues, then they are more likely to make up their minds on those concerns. But it is only under those circumstances that sexual and lifestyle issues determine the results of elections even if the vast majority of voters are either a little to the left and a little to the right on those issues.

[2] This weapon does, however, ruin the minds of those who take claims of a culture war seriously.

[3] And, a few years ago, we had a long political debate about the impeachment of the President. Part of that debate involved a dispute about whether sexuality was really central to the issue or not. It seems to me that those who say the issue was perjury rather than sexuality lack any of understanding of the centrality of the sexual content

Sexual matters are at the center of the culture war. The debates of activists and ideologues concerning abortion, gay rights, feminism and the role of women, sex education, child care and a host of other issues are shaped in no small part by different and competing conceptions of the place of sexual desire in our lives. Indeed, in the absence of any substantive political discussion about political economy, sexuality has practically become the sole topic of political debate in the United States today. Political scientists politely call non-economic political issues the "social issues" or the "moral issues."[4] But, except for the death penalty and racial issues, most of the so-called social issues would be better called sexual issues—or maybe the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll issues. (And even our debates about the death penalty and race concerns are sometimes overlaid with sexual concerns.)

Sexuality is critical to the divisions in the political class of our country. And yet, here is, surprisingly little theoretical discussion of the conceptions of human nature and sexuality that underlie left wing or right wing views on these matters. Most of what passes for reasoned discussion of these issues consists of reports of moral conclusions that are taken to be self-evident. On the right, some people tell us what they take God to require of us in sexual matters. And others go further and say that government should enforce the rules that God has given us. On the left, some people tell us that that no religious or moral dogma can legitimately influence public policy—or even our personal choices—with regard to our sexual lives, broadly understood. And others go further and say that it is critical to our fulfillment that we transgress whatever rules that governed human sexuality in the past. At first glance, there seems to be no way beyond this impasse. Yet standing behind the seemingly revealed truths of left and right are the shards of a number of deeper conceptions of the nature of our sexual desires and the place of those desires in a good human life. These views make claims about the kinds of creatures we are. Thus, it would seem that, if we could only unearth and piece together these shards of argument, we might subject them to some kind of rational examination. We might, even, appeal to some kind of evidence about what sorts of beings we are, what kinds of desires we all have, if any, and how best to express these desires in our personal and political lives.

The central aim of this book is to begin this process of rational debate and evaluation. I try to meet this goal, in part, by sketching some of the leading contemporary ideas about our erotic and sexual lives and then contrasting contemporary ideas with those presented by Plato in the *Republic* and the *Symposium.*

WHY PLATO?

I focus on Plato in large part because this is the best way to understand what is distinctive—and, to my mind, what is wrong—with our contemporary ways of thinking about sexuality. Despite their differences, I believe that all sides in the culture war share certain notions about the nature of human desire generally, and sexual desires specifically. These notions are profoundly called into question by a close reading of parts of *The Republic* and *The Symposium*.

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of Clinton's lies to the political appeal of impeaching him. Moreover, they fail to grasp the way in which eros and deceit so often intertwine. As Plato's account of Socrates' eroticism or lack thereof in the *Symposium* demonstrates, dissimulation of one sort or another is even more central to our erotic lives than it is to our political lives.

[4] As if economic matters do not involve moral questions.

The key way in which they are called into question is that Plato argues that our sexual desires—and, indeed, most of our other desires as well—are in some ways expressions of a deeper desire, universal, desire he calls eros. I believe that Plato is, in broad outline, right about this. To understand how and why he is right, we will have to spend some time looking at what eros in the broadest sense is, why erotic desires are not, as we commonly think today, purely sexual in nature and how our the general and universal desire he calls eros is expressed in the particular desires we have including our sexual desires.

While I spend much time discussing Plato in this book, except in the essay *The Symposium*, my central aim is not to interpret his work. I spend much more time applying my interpretation of Plato then defending it. This will be problematic for some readers because my interpretation of Plato is by no means the standard one. Indeed, on many interpretations, Plato is the source of the view of our sexual desires that I criticize in this book. That my interpretation of Plato is different from the standard one is connected to a central thesis of the book as a whole. For it seems to me that standard contemporary reading of Plato draws on neo-Platonic and Christian interpretations of Plato. And these interpretations are not only one of the sources of the dominant view of sexuality I want to overturn, they also distort the Platonic teaching about eros and sexuality. As a result, the subtleties and ambiguities of what Plato has to say directly and indirectly about eros and sexuality are hidden from view. And that is to say that to recover these Platonic subtleties is, at the very same time, to grasp an alternative to the dominant view of eros and sexuality found on both sides of the culture war today.

I won't however be defending in any detail my notion that neo-Platonic and Christian notions distort the common readings of Plato today. Nor shall I attempt to defend my own readings of Plato in any detail. For those who find my interpretation of Plato problematic, I suggest that you simply disregard my attempt to find support in Plato for the views I attribute to him, and take those views and evaluate them as my own. Ultimately, I study Plato's views on eros and sex because I wanted to discover the truth about the nature of eros and sexuality, not because I want to find the truth about what Plato thought about these desires. Reading Plato has, I believe, more than anything else, helped me do that. But you don't have to agree with my reading to agree with the account of eros and sexuality I present here. I would imagine that Plato would agree that it is far more important that we understand eros and sexuality right than that we understand Plato right and I have no strong desire to engage in academic disputes about the proper interpretation of Plato.

A PREVIEW

This book consists of four and a half essays that were written at different times and places and for different occasions. But they were all written with the same themes and with the overall argument of the book in mind. I had once thought of revising all of these essays to create one long argument, but recently changed my mind. Each of these essays has a slightly different focus and works at a slightly different level of analysis. They all have an integrity of their own. And while there is some minimal repetition between them, in every case that repetition would be necessary anyway as I rehearse some arguments prior to deepening them.

Most importantly, given the complicated nature of erotic desire and the very different ways in which erotic desire can be expressed in our lives, it seems to me helpful to approach this subject in a variety of ways. And, the essay form has one last virtue—it makes clear the open-

ended nature of my inquiry. It is enormously difficult to write insightfully, clearly, and honestly about that which is closest to us. The best I can do to make an attempt to do this, and hope that I inspire others to carry on with this work, if only to show where I go wrong.

The essays need not be read from first to last. To give you a sense of my overall argument, and to help you see the connections between the different essays, here is a preview of each one.

Civilization and Its Contents

The first and title essay of this book contains the heart of my argument. My aim is to present a rather different view of eros and sexuality than is found on all sides of the culture war. For, as I shall argue, the dominant modern traditions of political and moral thought, on left and right, all take more or less the same view of sex.

Now, to make my argument convincing, I have to start by making it clear to you how I intend to use certain terms and where I see the center of controversy about the nature of our erotic and / or sexual desires.

There are a wide range of desires that have been labeled erotic. Erotic desire sometimes is taken to be a desire for the physical pleasure of sex and sometimes is thought to be a desire for romantic love. And, in the hands of theorists such as Plato and Freud, eros refers to a very broad desire that leads to much human action and emotion. For Plato it is the desire to possess the good forever. For Freud it is the desire to join with something larger than ourselves, from our family, to our community, to a profession, to a nation, and ultimately to the universe as a whole. (We shall see some connection between Plato and Freud later one.)

Different theorists who discuss eros and sexuality typically see the various desires that are labeled erotic as somehow connected with one another. But they differ about two critical issues. The first issue is what is the nerve or center of erotic desire. What, among these various desires that are called erotic, is the fundamental desire that is then expressed in a variety of other ways? The dominant view today, and perhaps for most of the Western history since the rise of Christianity, is that the center or nerve of erotic desire is the desire for sexual pleasure. On the most common view today, sexual pleasure is the fundamental erotic goal of human beings. But the search for sexual pleasure can be transformed, perhaps by repressing or twisting it in some way, into other desires such as for romantic love, love of one's family, or love of the members of one's smaller or larger community and so forth.

The alternative view, found in Plato and late Freud, is that eros is fundamentally a broad desire that is not so much for physical pleasure as for a kind of pleasure that only comes from living a life in which we attain some broad psychological or even spiritual goal or goals. This broad desire can, in turn be expressed in many ways, only one of which is the desire for sexual pleasure.

The second critical issue has to do with the power of sexual desire understood as the desire for physical pleasure. The dominant contemporary view holds that is an immensely powerful, potentially anarchic, and often dangerous force that always strains against the control of reason.

Both leftists and rightists today accept what I have called the dominant contemporary view of eros, they reach different conclusions about how we should respond to the power of sexual desire in all its varieties. Those on the right—those I call the Augustinians—believe that our sexual lives must be severely restrained if we are to avoid personal and political disaster. This is why they oppose contraception, abortion, pre-marital sex, homosexuality and other practices that they see as the product of or the stimulus to the sexual revolution. Those on the left—those I call liberationists—believe that we should in so far as possible remove any restraints, including restraints of judgment, on our sexual life. Only in this way, they argue, can we attain real fulfillment.

The Platonic view challenges what left and right have in common. It holds that sexual desire by itself is not that powerful. The desire for sexual pleasure only becomes powerful and possibly difficult to control when it becomes the prime way in which we satisfy our broader erotic desire.

On this view, the power of our sexual desires can change a great deal depending upon how we express eros. Sexual desire, on this view, is more powerful and insistent only when our deeper erotic desire is expressed directly in the pursuit of sexual pleasure or indirectly in the pursuit of other aims—such as romantic love—that is then expressed in sexuality.

Plato teaches us, first, that our bodily desires are not as powerful as we usually think. Indeed, what gives sexual desire its power and direction is usually other desires beyond the desire for physical pleasure. And, second, Plato suggests that these various other desires are all different ways of expressing a more general erotic desire, the desire to possess the good forever. Sexual desire, in other words, is, by itself, much less powerful and anarchic and much more under our control than we usually think. It gets its power and direction from being connected to other erotic desires. And, since we have a choice how to express our erotic desire, the desire for sex is much more under our control than is thought to be the case by the dominant contemporary views of sexuality.

The essay continues by arguing that the Platonic view is certainly correct on the first point and quite plausible on the second. The arguments Plato puts forward for these views, taken together with the arguments we can develop under his guidance, and some contemporary evidence, gives strong support to his views.

And, finally, I argue that if we accept the Platonic view, we will find both sides in the contemporary culture war wanting. Neither left nor right have a plausible understanding of where things have gone wrong in either our erotic lives or our political community today. In fact the claims of both sides are seriously mistaken. Contrary to the right, I argue that the sexual revolution and the acceptance of a variety of expressions of sexual desire are no threats to our political and moral lives. Contrary to the left, I argue that we should not accept the notion that, in our sexual lives, anything goes. And we certainly should not accept the post-modern view that sexual freedom and human happiness require us to "transgress" against any and all moral restraints on sexual expression. There are, contrary to some libertarians, tensions between the pursuit of sexual pleasure and the pursuit of other goods, as well as tension between the expression of our sexual desires and decent behavior to other human beings. In saying that there are these tensions, I don't mean that our sexual desires have to be repressed in order to pursue other goods or to treat other people well. (This claim is not a backhand way of endorsing Augustinianism) But our sexual desires have to be directed to good ends if we are to lives that

are fulfilling for ourselves or respectful of others. Or, to put the point another way, the liberationists are wrong if they deny that there are better and worse ways of living out our sexual lives.

Dominator Sex and The Origin of the Augustinianism

The second essay is a short piece that presents an hypothesis about the origins of the Augustinian view of sexuality. Ever since I started teaching the New Testament about ten years ago, I have been puzzled about Jesus' teachings about sexuality and their transformation by the Church Fathers and, especially, St. Augustine. Three things puzzled me about the seemingly urgent effort to present sexual pleasure as problematic and dangerous in the Gospels and the Church Fathers. First, I found it hard to understand where these views came from as they did not seem at all continuous with what I knew of Biblical and Jewish views of sexuality. Second, I had trouble understanding how such views—which sought to limit one of the great sources of pleasure in human life—could become so popular. I knew and understood that the Jews—and Greeks—had recognized potential problems in an over-indulgence in sexuality or in the wrong kind of sexuality. But the powerful critique of sexuality that one sees in the New Testament and that is reinforced by the Church Fathers seemed to be coming from a wholly different place. And, third, I found it strange that these same ideas are held by so many right wing Christians today, in a culture that has, however, more or less abandoned them in practice.

The task of intellectual historians is to understand how seemingly ideas that strike one as utterly implausible could make sense in a certain time and place. In this little essay I make a suggestion about why proto-Christian and Christian views of sexuality made sense to certain people in the few hundred years before and after Jesus. My suggestion is that two ideas common in Greek understandings of sexuality lead to the Christian revulsion against sexual desire. The first notion, which is found in early Greek writers like Homer and Hesiod as well as in Pythagoreans and Late Stoics is that sexual desire is fundamentally uncontrollable by and leads to act contrary to reason. The second notion is what is often called the dominator view of sexuality found in Hellenistic culture. The dominator view of sexuality sees sex as both an expression of and a privilege of power. It is a view that legitimizes powerful men in their exploitation of both women and weak men in both sexually and non-sexual ways. It holds that the pursuit of sexual pleasure always involves the exercise of power over the body of someone else. Sexual pleasure is, in other words, always taken from someone less powerful than oneself.

Greek thought about sexuality is quite diverse and many Greek thinkers reject these two ideas. And, the dominator view of sexuality rejects the notion that sex is necessarily an anarchic force since it assumes that a powerful man is capable of keeping his sexual desires under control as he takes sexual pleasure from others. But these two views were quite commonly found, among others, in Greek, Hellenistic and Roman times. And both of them are, in different ways, contrary to Jewish teachings. The dominator model of sexuality is entirely contrary to mainstream Jewish moral teachings and especially to the Jewish understanding of the family. Even though Jewish thought is highly patriarchal, it sees sexual pleasure as something to be mutually shared by a man and a woman in marriage. And, while one can find passages in the Hebew Bible that see sexual desire as a powerful and irrational force, other traditions can be found in Jewish thought, especially in the Rabbinic period.

Many political communities understand sexuality as an irrational and difficult-to-control force and / or as something that is always expressed in a relationship of dominance and submission. I have argued that in our own time the common view is that sexuality is an irrational and powerful force. And, even in our own egalitarian times, the dominator view of sexuality is quite common. But it was far more common in Greek, Hellenistic and Roman culture than in Jewish culture. And when Jewish and Hellenistic culture meet, those steeped in Jewish culture are likely to feel revulsion, certainly against the dominator view sexuality and quite likely against the view that sexuality is a uncontrollable and irrational force. That conflict can be resolved in two ways. Jews can reject uphold their own view of sexuality against the dominator view and condemn sexual practices that violate their own precepts. Or they can accept the dominator view of sexuality and condemn sexuality itself. Either option is possible. The second one is likely to be more plausible the more one lives in a world in which dominator forms of sexual behavior are constantly before one's eyes. And it is, of course, also more likely when one is a woman or a powerless man who is likely to be an object of some dominant man's sexual desires. That Jesus reached out to the downtrodden and oppressed is evident in the gospels and that most scholars hold that early Christianity appealed particularly to less powerful men and to women. So it should not surprise us that those Jews and pagans who became Christians were inclined to take the second option and see sexuality itself as a dangerous and far too powerful force, one that leads people to reject the moral teachings of God and perhaps God himself.

The point of this essay, then, is to help us understand the origin of the Augustinian view of sexuality. And, of course, my hope is that in understanding the origin of this view we can help us overcome its power over us a power that influences both Augustinians and Liberationists today.

Victorian and Romantic Liberalism

In the third essay, *Victorian and Romantic Liberalism,* I turn from psychological concerns to political and social ones. In the first essay I argue that Augustinians and Liberationists reach different conclusions on the basis of the same fundamental conception of the nature of sexual desire. In this third essay I try to show how liberal thought—that is the broad set of ideas about politics that includes both contemporary liberals and conservatives—has, at different times, encompassed both Augustinian ideas and Liberationist ideas. And I explain some of the political and social circumstances that lead people to become Augustinians or liberationists.

I also try to show why modern political communities tend to oscillate from what I call Victorian moods to Romantic moods and back. That is, I try to explain why we have periodic outbreaks of what I call moral crisis (the 1820s, the 1980s) in which Victorian solutions to our problems are proposed and also periodic outbreaks of romantic rebellion against those solutions (the 1920s, 1960s). The Victorian mood is, of course, based upon Augustinian ideas while the Romantic mood is based on liberationist ideas. But the shift from one to another—and the continued appeal of both perspectives—is rooted not just in ideas but in the political and social circumstances that make these ideas appealing to different groups of people at different times.

The conclusion of *Victorian and Romantic Liberalism* connects with the conclusion to the first essay. In the first essay I argue that there are always going to be some tensions between what, on the traditional view is thought of our lower desires—sexual desires or bodily desires

more generally—and what are traditionally called the higher desires to take part in what I call practices of excellence, that is those artistic and aesthetic, intellectual and scientific, and political and practical activities that involve one in a form of life defined by certain ideal aspirations. And I suggest that, while the Augustinian perspective encourages much more and more severe restraint of our bodily desires than is necessary or good, we do need to learn to direct and in some ways limit our sexual desires if we are to take part in these practices of excellence. Learning to do this would not be as difficult as it sometimes is today if we lived in a political community that encourages and supports practices of excellence. In *Victorian and Romantic Liberalism* I argue that one reason we oscillate from romantic to Victorian moods is precisely that our liberal thought and institutions undermine these practices of excellence by putting the extrinsic goods of accumulating money and power above the intrinsic goods found in, say, making a painting and writing a good novel or by serving one's community. In other words, it is the corruption of so many of our institutions by the pursuit of power and money that makes it difficult for many young people to learn to restrain their sexual desires for the sake of other goods and that encourages other young people to restrain their sexual desires too far. Or, to put the point in a still different way, if we want to people to avoid the excesses of Augustinian and Liberationist ideas and practices, we need to challenge not just contemporary ideas but our contemporary forms of politico-economic life.

Is Socrates a Model for the Rest of Us

The fourth essay is the only one that focuses entirely on a Platonic text, the *Symposium*. But its theme, that there are no entirely satisfactory paths that satisfy the erotic desire Plato attributes to us—to possess the good forever—is closely connected with the other essays in this book. In the first essay I briefly point to some of the tensions between our lower desires for bodily goods and most importantly sex, and our higher desires for political and social achievement and philosophy. This essay explores that tension in detail.

Plato is typically interpreted as suggesting that, in so far as possible, we should rise above our lower desires, for these desires typically cause us problems. To satisfy our bodily desires, we must accumulate money and power. And doing that is never wholly in our control, so we become dependent on others and on luck. Even more, whether we can satisfy our desire for sex and romantic love depends upon our finding the one person who suits us—what Plato has Aristophanes call our other half. But that is often a quixotic search. And even if we find our other half, romantic love makes us incredibly dependent on that person who must survive and continue to love us if we are to be fulfilled. So, according to the usual interpretation, Plato recommends that the best path to pursue if we wish to be happy—if we wish to satisfy the erotic longing to pursue the good forever—is the philosophic life. A life devoted to the pursuit of knowledge is likely to be pleasant. And, while philosophers can use colleagues and friends with whom to argue, they can also go it alone if they have to. So the philosophic life is one that makes us maximally independent of good or bad luck.

In this essay I show that while Plato does have Socrates present and, indeed, model this view for us, he also very much calls into question. For two reasons, Socrates is shown to be a bad role model for the rest of us. On the one hand, he seems to be lacking in the bodily desires that make us vulnerable. So he is not really a model of someone rising above his lower desires. And, on the other hand, and more importantly, we see that Socrates has to pretend to have sexual

desires for his friends in order to take part in their lives. And the reason, the text suggests, is that coming to know human phenomena and, most importantly, ourselves is impossible with out close, and most likely, romantic and sexual relationships with others. People who truly share in some activity—from forming a family to taking part in politics to pursuing lives devoted to art and philosophy—are best off if they have what an erotic relationship with those with whom they engage in that activity. And while that love may take the non-sexual form that today we today call Platonic love, in some cases it might be, or even might better be, a form of love that includes sex.

So this essay, ultimately qualifies the Platonic tension between lower desires of the body and higher desires of the soul. We do, as I suggest in the first essay, have to direct our sexual desires in order to pursue higher goods. But those higher goods are more likely to be attained by people who express rather than restrain their lower, sexual desires. Indeed, the very distinction between high and low goods or desires becomes questionable when we recognize that sex and love can be part of the practices of excellence that lead us to pursue other, so-called, higher goods.

At the same time, I show that there are potential tensions between the pursuit of sexual pleasure and the pursuit of higher goods. And, even more, I suggest that there are even greater tensions between a life lead in pursuit of what today we call romantic love and a life lead in pursuit of political or philosophic / aesthetic achievement. *The Symposium* gives us a hint of an ideal life in which personal love and either politics and philosophy can be attained together. And it also shows why it is so difficult to attain this ideal expression of eros.

Why I Don't Cheat on My Wife

I wrote the final essay, "Why I Don't Cheat on My Wife," in order to criticize the sociobiological theory that purports to explains male infidelity. I include it here because this sociobiological theory is, actually, one more variant on the conception of sexual desire that underlies both Augustinian and liberationist theories. It holds that we all have an extremely powerful desire for the physical pleasures of sex and that the sexual desires of men, in particular, have evolved to be insistent, anarchic, and thus unlikely to be restrained by the pledge to forsake all others. My strategy in this paper is to show why a man might want to be faithful to his wife even if he is sexually attracted to other women. Showing this allows me to point, first, to some important features of sexual desire, including the possibility that the pursuit of sexual pleasure can itself almost be a practice of excellence. That is, sexual pleasure is something that we can get much better at giving and receiving. And even the desire for the physical pleasures of sex is something we can cultivate and encourage. Sexual desire is not so strong apart from this kind of cultivation and encouragement. And that is one reason why the pursuit of sexual pleasure is most often best satisfied when we have sex with someone with whom we have had long experience, for example, our spouse. Second, I reinforce the point of the first essay, by showing that the strength and direction of our sexual desires is a product of other desires, and especially the desire for romantic love and, what is not quite the same thing, marriage. Of course the broader point of these claims is that the sociobiological theory of infidelity, like the Augustinian and liberationists views, misunderstands sexual desire by holding that it is fundamentally and powerfully directed towards physical pleasure and that alone.

The original essay stopped at this point but for this book I have added a last section on why men sometimes do cheat on their wives. It occurred to me that exploring this question also helps to undermine the sociobiological theory of infidelity since, with a little thought, it will be obvious that men cheat on their wives for a wide range of reasons, and the pursuit of sexual pleasure in itself is only one, and probably one of the least important, of them. Again, what gives sexual desire its power is its connection to other desires, desires that, from a Platonic point of view, are other expressions of eros.

How and Why To Think About Human Nature

This book is written for educated men and women, not for academics. I have thus put some qualifications and extensions to my argument, and some more detailed discussions of the Platonic texts, in footnotes. I have also given summarized the Platonic works I discuss in the text. And I have avoided long discussions of other works on sexuality including the very influential works of Foucault on sexuality—which I have to say, I read many years ago and put aside as not speaking to the issues that most concerned me.

However there is one philosophical objection to this whole book that I think I should answer, largely because the philosophical ideas contained in that objection have become popular ideas today. The objection is that my whole enterprise is flawed because there is as is often said, "no such thing as human nature" or "no trans-historical common desires found in all human beings."

These ideas are part of the historicist notion that there are no human desires or ideals or moral stands that are common to human beings. Rather, our desires, ideals, and moral stands are in fact the product of a particular time and place.

If historicism is true, then I am wasting my time talking about the nature of eros and sexuality. For they have no nature but change from one time and place to another.

I don't doubt that sexuality changes from one time and place to another—indeed I point to many of these changes in this book and am calling us to change the way we think about and practice our sexual lives. But I do think that we might be able to discover a human nature that transcends any one time or place. And I suggest that Plato helps us do that.

For many contemporary intellectuals, and many educated men and women who have been influenced by them, my whole enterprise is questionably because they are sure that, for deep philosophic reasons, there can be no such thing as a trans-historic human nature. I can't address all these purported deep philosophic reasons in this book—I hope to finish a long manuscript that does just that soon. But I can give a sketch of how we might think about the relationship between some universal human ends and those particular ends that are constructed by men and women in every time and place. That is what I do in this last essay.

I include the essay here not just to answer the philosophic objections to my enterprise but also because the first five essays in the book implicitly rely on what philosophers call a a philosophical psychology—an account of what a human desire or want might be and how we come to understand the wants and desires we have. My philosophical psychology proposes that there is an important distinction between two kinds of human ends, the particular desires that are the product of our culture and our own choices and the universal wants that are found in all men

and women. And it shows how those two kinds of ends come together to make us the createres we are.

I can't give a complete defense of this way of thinking about human ends and action. But I can in a short space give my views some initial plausibility while at the same time showing how this philosophical psychology helps us understand certain peculiarities of eros and sexuality.

TWO PERSONAL NOTES

Despite its title, "Why I Don't Cheat on my Wife" is much more a philosophical essay than a personal confession—if one can confess to innocence of a crime. But here, and in other parts of the book, I do make some remarks about my own sexual and romantic life. And, it should be obvious that most of the philosophical work in writing this book consisted in trying to think clearly about my own experience of erotic desire. Some of these experiences I report on directly. More often I give a theoretical account of some phenomena that is meant to explain experiences that I take to be fairly common. A combination of theoretical reflection and personal narrative strike me as the best way to deal with the questions I discuss in this book and I should acknowledge the example my good friend Isaac Balbus has given me of this approach in his moving and powerful book *Emotional Rescue*. I have titled more towards theoretical analysis and less toward personal revelation for a few reasons. I think that reticence in erotic matters helps preserve the power of eros. And, frankly, even if I were inclined to do so, I am too lacking in the skill of narrative writing to effectively write about my own erotic odyssey. I have to say that, all things considered, it might have been best if a good philosophical novelist had written this work for it would be both more revealing—in, of course, a hidden way—and would also show more and tell less. But, until that novelist comes along, I hope this book will do.

Of course, I am acutely aware that the perspective on erotic desire in this book cannot but reflect my own character and experiences. And, whether it is useful to base a book on erotic desire on my own erotic life presupposes that my own experiences are not all that unusual. Of course, your reaction to that perspective cannot but be deeply personal as well.

Given the personal nature of my argument and the evidence I advance in favor of it, I am afraid that there is one objection to this book it that I am going to have to address , however obliquely, at the outset.

As you have seen, central to my argument is the notion that Plato is correct and that sexual desire understood as simply the desire for physical pleasure is both less powerful and much easier to satisfy than is commonly held. One can't make such a claim today without being thought lacking in sexual ardor. And one can't answer (or really make) such a charge without seeming to boast.

This situation is not unlike that I found myself many years ago when I lived in Fairbanks, Alaska while my fiancé lived in Philadelphia. One of my colleagues, a former Texas motorcycle cop turned criminal justice professor already had doubts about me because I was a Harvard educated, eastern, liberal, Jew who, to his surprise and revulsion, ordered shrimp rather than steak in a restaurant. One afternoon at lunch he observed that I did not, as he said, "chase women" during the four months I was apart from my fiancé. He then pointedly remarked that he could not have done the same. I could not quite see how to respond given that I did not want to legitimate the entire topic of his conversation, did not want to condone chasing women as he understood it, and most certainly did not see any way to reassure him about my sensibility

without giving him even more reason to have doubts about me. I didn't think he could have understood just how vital my relationship to—and four conversations a day with—my fiancé was to surviving in circumstances, both professional and personal, that were very difficult. I didn't think he would have found much plausible in an observation that his own sense of what it means to be a man would make these four months so much more difficult for him than it was for me. I certainly didn't want to describe our phone conversations in detail. And somehow I didn't think he would buy a story about frequent cold showers and long treks into the Alaskan wilderness.

I do not want to answer the charge that my theoretical account of sexual desire results solely from deficiencies in my own sexual desires by boasting, either about heroic restraint or equally heroic indulgence. So let me just remind the reader of a central aspect of the argument I am presenting here. To deny that the desire for physical sexual pleasure is all that powerful or difficult to satisfy *by itself*, apart from romantic love or other desires that are, in Plato's broad sense, erotic, is not to say that the desire to have sex is weak. And it is certainly not to deny that the physical pleasures of sex are splendid and among the best parts of life. To argue, as I do below, that we can get tremendous pleasure from sex without first being—there is no elegant way to put this—extremely horny, is precisely to say that we can have a strong desire to have sex regardless of whether we find ourselves plagued to such an extent by sexual desires as to see them, in the words of Sophocles quoted early in the *Republic* as mad masters that we are better off without. We can pursue sexual pleasure without being sexually aroused (and potentially frustrated) all the time. Indeed, as I will point out, someone older than say forty who has sex a great deal is not likely to be terribly horny very often and that will not diminish his or her pleasure in sex at all. And, further, it is to say that whether we have sex a great deal—and also whether we are horny all the time—is in important ways up to us. We have some freedom to choose to make the pursuit of sexual pleasure central to our lives or not by choosing to satisfy our most general erotic desires in one way or another.

And if you still have some doubts about me, just read the essay about my relationship with my wife.

The second personal note has to do with the origin of this book. I have been thinking about these issues for many years, at least since my first or second year in college. It was my effort to think about these issues that set me off on an effort to understand the nature of human ends and action generally. And that lead to a very long intellectual journey that lead me to develop the new account of the nature of all human ends and how we understand them found in the last essay. That view is, you shall see, radically different from that held by most psychologists, philosophers, or political and social scientists.

I am publishing this work now in part because I have enough confidence in the larger theoretical project of which it is a part—and which I hope will be publish in a few volumes in the next few years—and in part because I believe my ideas about erotic desire are timely in that they can help us think seriously about the culture war that racks out political life.

But, while this is an intervention in the current culture war, and one that on a practical level sides with the liberal or progressive views, I want to emphasize here that I do see my view as transcending, at least at the theoretical level, the contemporary dispute, not taking sides in it. I do think that contemporary right wing views in the culture war should be rejected. I do not think that pre-marital sex, contraception, abortion (at least in most cases), and homosexuality are wrong and I certainly favor granting members of the LGBT community the right to marry. But,

having said that, I also want to emphasize that I am as opposed to the liberationist view as to the Augustinian view. I do think there are better and worse ways of living our sexual and romantic lives and I do think there is more to sexual morality than the requirement that adults consent to all sexual activity. Adults can consent to do things that harm themselves and others, that undermine their chance for a fulfilling life, and that treat other human beings—or themselves—as means rather than ends in themselves. And while I would not put adults who consent to those kinds of sexual behavior in jail, I think we all have a responsibility to condemn and hold them to a higher standard.

To make my point clearer, let me point out that the genesis of this work rests not so much in my revulsion against the right wing Augustinians today but in my revulsion against the liberationists whose ideas were dominant in the late seventies when I was in college. In college I saw that ideas of sexual liberation could be used to manipulate people—mostly but not only women—into taking part in sexual behavior that were not best for them and that they would have rejected if they only knew how and why to do so. In particular, like many feminists—and having been brought up by a strong and independent mother I was an instinctive feminist at a very early age—I found that the liberationist ideas could be all too easily allied with what I call in this book dominator forms of sexuality in which men abuse women, in no small part to keep them in their place.

So, to be brief, neither the sexual tyranny of the right, nor the philosophy of left—which in the seventies was put in simple terms with the phrase "Do it"—is my own. This book attempts to find a genuinely distinctive view of erotic desire that rejects, with reason, the extremes of both left and right.

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During the years I have been working on the theoretical issues about human desire and the issues about erotic desire discussed here, I have been fortunate to have many friends who wanted to talk with me about my work. That has been all to the good, since philosophical discussions about sex can rather quickly become ridiculous, in one of two ways. Some books on the subject get bogged down in philosophical minutiae and never get to sex. Others make claims that are so startlingly distant from the human experience of sex that only a philosopher could have written them. Most of my friends who have talked with me about the issues raised in this paper find philosophy interesting. But they find sex even more interesting. And they seem to know a lot about it. So, if I have avoided the usual mistakes, thanks are due to: Janet Brooks, Janet Dougherty, Henri Gillet, Gail Holmberg, Janet Hoskins, Laura Duhan Kaplan, Michael May, Peter Minowitz, Julia Nace, Beth Penney, Ted Perlmutter, Kennee Switzer, Kristin Tromba, Karen Williams, and Nicholas Ziegler.

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There is a saying—I don't know where it comes from and my wife thinks I made it up myself—that all good writing is a love letter to someone. That is certainly true of this work for it is a love letter to all the women I have loved and have loved me—in all senses of that protean word. I owe them most of what I know, in theory and practice, about eros and sex. I have always thought I have lived a charmed life, one that is far happier than I or anyone else deserves. And it is mostly knowing them that has made it so. Despite the importance of acknowledgements, it would be ungentlemanly for me to name them. They know who they are.

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