

Kant and Sex

The sort of question you might get in an exam could ask you to 'apply Kant's ethical theory' or ask you to give a 'Kantian response' to an issue. You may be asked specifically to apply the Categorical Imperative, in which case you would come up with a maxim, universalise it and see whether it was a self-contradiction or contradiction of the will. You might ask "Could I will that it be a universal law of nature that all men masturbate?" or "Is casual sex using myself or others merely as a means to an end?"

This is very different from asking what Kant himself actually said about sex. Don't confuse the two - it would be like rejecting the teachings of Jesus because you met a Christian who was a bigot. Kant's answers may be very different from those of modern Kantians.

Here's what he said:

Legislation cannot remove the disgrace of an illegitimate birth. . . . A child that comes into the world apart from marriage is born outside the law . . . and therefore outside the protection of the law. It has, as it were, stolen into the commonwealth (like contraband merchandise), so that the commonwealth can ignore its existence (since it was not right that it should have come to exist this way), and can therefore also ignore its annihilation.

If, for instance, a woman cannot preserve her life any longer except by surrendering her person to the will of another, she is bound to give up her life rather than dishonour humanity in her own person, which is what she would be doing in giving herself up as a thing to the will of another.⁴

Neither can we without destroying our person [our humanity] abandon ourselves to others in order to satisfy their desires, even though it be done to save parents and friends from death.

Lust [the "impetus" to sexual "pleasure"] is called *unnatural* if one is aroused to it not by a real object but by his imagining it, so that he himself creates one, contrary to [natural] purpose; for in this way imagination brings forth a desire contrary to nature's end. . . .

Just as love of life is destined by nature to preserve the person, so sexual love is destined by it to preserve the species; in other words, each of these is a *natural end*.

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, **whether in your own person** or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.

Coitus in these situations might be contrary to nature's end and for that reason alone would violate a duty-to-self.

Sex engaged in apart from procreation is likely to be sex engaged in primarily to satisfy inclination, and that is morally dubious... **We can see how Kant reached this conclusion based on his second formulation: it treats the self or other as mere means to the subjective end of satisfying sexual inclination. This also holds for heterosexual promiscuity, prostitution, concubinage, and adultery. Each of these heterosexual practices can be consistent with nature, but are "contrary to sound reason".**

Masturbation and homosexuality are among "the most abominable conduct of which man can be guilty"

Sexuality is not an inclination which one human being has for another as such, but is an inclination for the sex of another. . . . [O]nly her sex is the object of his desires. . . . [A]ll men and women do their best to make not their human nature but their sex more alluring.

A man wishes to satisfy his desire, and a woman hers, they stimulate each other's desire; their inclinations meet, but their object is not human nature but sex, and each of them dishonours the human nature of the other. They make of humanity an instrument for the satisfaction of their lusts and inclinations, and dishonour it by placing it on a level with animal nature.

[I]t is not easy to produce a rational proof that unnatural, and even merely unpurposive, use of one's sexual attribute is inadmissible as being a violation of duty to oneself (and indeed, as far as its unnatural use is concerned, a violation in the highest degree).--The *ground of proof* is . . . that by it man surrenders his personality (throwing it away), since he uses himself as a means to satisfy an animal impulse.

The irony is that Kant had earlier said that "the natural use that one sex makes of the other's sexual organs is *enjoyment*."

The Vatican's position that infertile married couples may marry and engage in sex also comes close to condoning homosexual marriage.