

Alan Soble

Pornography, sex, and feminism

NEW YORK: PROMETHEUS BOOKS, 2002

Reviewed by Linda L. Williams

ISBN: 1573929441

Quote: Degrading, humiliating, and demeaning human beings seems to be impossible, according to Soble. If humans are no more than animals, then what sense are we to make of the concept of “dehumanization,” much less “harmless dehumanization”?

Alan Soble’s book, *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism*, should come with the subtitle: *Or why no God-damned feminist is going to stop me from enjoying pornography in any or all of its forms*. Basically, it is a diatribe against attempts by some feminists, most notably Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, to prohibit or at least control pornographic material. Soble’s main thesis makes two interrelated points. The first is that pornography is not inherently offensive. Soble appeals to the notion of polysemicity, which is the assertion that any text or visual image is, in actuality, devoid of any one meaning, to support his point. Meaning is supplied by the reader or viewer, and because of this, the text or picture can have various meanings—as many meanings as beholders. When feminists declare pornographic material offensive, they mistakenly imply that there is only one meaning of the text or pictures. According to Soble, they are merely reflecting their own tastes and values. In other words, the text and pictures are inherently meaningless; offense is generated in the beholder and directed to the material, not the other way around. Something cannot offend me if I refuse to take offense.

The second point of Soble’s thesis is that humans, as well, have no inherent meaning or value. Unlike Kant, who viewed rational beings as priceless and inherently dignified, Soble sees humans as simply animals; anything more smacks of speciesism. As animals, our sexual impulses, instincts, and desires are a natural part of us. Pornography chooses to focus on this part, and so what if it does? What’s wrong with objectification of people? He resists any answer from a Kantian perspective. For Kant, rational beings are priceless. As ends-in-themselves they have dignity and, therefore, cannot be treated as objects, things, to be used solely as a means. For Soble, human beings have no inherent dignity simply by being human. Kant’s quaint notion that rational beings have inherent value is an illusion, perhaps understandable in the late eighteenth century but certainly out of place in the post-modern twenty-first. Today we know we are simply animals no more lofty than fish, so the concept of “dehumanizing” is empty. “A little otherwise harmless dehumanization every once in a while benefits the character; it is a useful, humbling reminder of our true corrupt natures as mackerel or herring.”(60) Soble sees no inherent value in human beings, despite our best efforts to provide and justify that value. He asks, “How many people, really, are good for *anything*? (Leonardo da Vinci once pointed out, cynically but probably correctly, that for most people their only useful contribution to society is to their local cesspit.)” (62). [Yes, folks, this is the feel-good book of the year!] In fact, Soble turns to Kant to justify pornography. He sees the move to eliminate or at least regulate pornography as a paternalistic move, one that would be condemned by Kant. “Kantian respect for the other as a

person has always seemed to me to exclude paternalism: Treating an adult person as a child is to lessen that person's dignity, is not to recognize it and act accordingly" (58).

I'm not so sure I want to give up the notion of human dignity quite yet, even if I may agree with Soble that humans have no inherent dignity. I find frightful images lurking at the end of his intellectual path. Soble never discusses child pornography, but if one takes his arguments to their logical conclusion, there are no reasons to restrict it in any way. Soble ridicules attempts by anti-pornographers to criticize bestiality based on the "consent" rule: animals cannot consent to having sex with humans. His reasons against consent would apply to children as well. After all, Soble reduces us all to animals anyway.

Degrading, humiliating, and demeaning human beings seems to be impossible, according to Soble. If humans are no more than animals, then what sense are we to make of the concept of "dehumanization," much less "harmless dehumanization"? This term is usually contrasted with reducing humans to the status of animals. Since we are already there, according to Soble, this concept is eviscerated. Likewise, notions of degrading or humiliating humans are meaningless as well.

However, I would argue that just because we are animals doesn't mean there aren't differences between *Homo sapiens* and other critters. So what if we're not inherently dignified? We can bestow it upon ourselves. Soble believes this is pure sentimentality. I want to claim that this ability to create values is exactly what differentiates us from other animals: we can bestow value upon ourselves. As I see it, our mistake is not to bestow more dignity on other living things rather than, as Soble would have it, we strip all living things, including ourselves, of dignity. I see feminist moves, such as the distinction between pornography and erotica, as feminists trying to argue for some category of "dignified" pornography. It can be seen as a way to focus on human sexuality, as pornography does, without eliminating human dignity. This attempt, of course, is ridiculed by Soble. The erotica/pornography distinction may not work, according to Soble's slippery slope, but one can understand why it came about.

Bestowing dignity on ourselves doesn't seem like such an illusionary art, any more illusory than any of the values we bestow in the world. While Soble accuses Kantian ethics as "one big exercise in the erection of illusions," (67) he doesn't seem concerned that his valuation of pornography is no less an illusion. It's not clear that our society could operate without some of these illusions of human value and dignity. We bestow legal rights upon ourselves—even the right to free speech to which many defenders of pornography appeal. America's founding fathers surely believed in natural rights, but in our post-modern world, these have been nullified. From where can we derive rights now? The only other suggestion is that we deem humans valuable, and as such, we accord them certain freedoms, rights, and responsibilities. If humans are valuable, then harming them is wrong; the harm principle itself makes no sense unless humans have value and dignity. Soble must also think harming humans is morally wrong because he claims that harmless dehumanization is beneficial, thus implying that harmful dehumanization is not.

So we are all in agreement that harming humans is immoral; however, we seem to disagree about what constitutes harm. Feminists claim pornography harms women and Soble denies such harm.

He defends this stance with the polysemicity of pornographic material. But polysemicity allows for pornography to also be interpreted as harmful. So Soble retracts to the position: if it can't be shown that pornography is inherently harmful rather than just potentially harmful, then there should be no restrictions on it. Feminists argue that it is actually harmful but not in a direct causal sense but in the indirect way of maintaining oppressive sexist attitudes toward women. Soble counters with that fact that in today's politically correct pornography, every race, ethnicity, and gender is portrayed, so no one group can be discriminated as being especially demeaned, dehumanized or objectified. Pornography is simply a matter of taste; if you don't like it, don't look at it, but don't try to stop him from enjoying it if he wants to.

My reply is: Pornography may be "just a matter of taste," but so is eating corpses, according to Soble's "no dignity" argument. That doesn't mean that we can't decide which tastes to condemn or promote. With all the correlations that have been established between pornography and sex crimes, obsessions, and other negative social ramifications, I think there is still reason to talk of setting boundaries and putting some constraints upon it. Soble's move is to argue that pornography is not immoral because, basically, by denying human worth, there is no morality. I don't want to agree to that. Soble should be glad condemners of pornography still exist, since he admits that the naughtiness and shame connected with pornography makes the experience of it that much more arousing for many who view it. I guess Soble will lump me with all the other second wave feminists in his book as unenlightened and insufferable because I dare to question the morality of pornography. For some reason, I think I'd feel worse if I didn't question it.

Linda L. Williams is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Kent State University. She is the author of *Nietzsche's Mirror: The World as Will to Power*, published by Rowman and Littlefield.