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Comments on A. W. Eaton's "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism"

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I wear sensible shoes. I eat a sensible diet. I drive a sensible car. Yet I find the approach to pornography in this paper not at all sensible, in the sense that it is what an informed, reasonable, and cautious feminist should adopt.

There are several reasons that sensible feminists should not accept Eaton's reconstructed antiporn feminism (APF). First, Eaton wrongly conjectures that APF has lost ground because its central ideas have been misunderstood. Second, Eaton's reconstruction of APF's central ideas rests on equating exposure to a chemical or physical agent with "exposure" to the content or meaning of a representation. Third, Eaton's approach fails to adequately theorize the processes by which "the formation and reinforcement of dimensions of sexist

psychology" (Eaton 2007, 707) could cause legally actionable harmful behaviors.

I will elaborate these three reasons in reverse order. Eaton writes, "If pornography has a tendency to make coercive sex attractive to its audience, as some studies show, this will not necessarily translate into conduct, since the effect might be counterbalanced or outweighed by the consumer's other attitudes and commitments, thereby inhibiting the expression of any such desire" (Eaton 2007, 708). Legal systems in liberal democracies are intentionally designed to avoid punishing people for bad beliefs, temperaments, or inclinations. As Eaton rightly suggests in this passage, our legal system is concerned with harmful conduct. The claim that porn makes coercive sex attractive is far from being convincingly established. But even if this claim had better support, it would not be sufficient to justify legal restrictions on porn. The standards for imposing limits on speech are much higher than simply showing a connection between the advocacy of an idea and an idea's perniciousness. If we didn't have such high standards, it's very likely liberal societies would punish people for all sorts of dangerous ideas, which is counter to the basic values upon which liberal societies are founded.

Does Eaton believe that the demonstrable causal connection between pornographic materials and harmful conduct might someday meet the standards for taking legal action against the writers and distributors of porn? In several places in her article, Eaton suggests that the causal connection science may eventually discover will not likely support either censorship or civil lawsuits. So why resurrect APF, if not to justify some kind of societal response to the generation and dissemination of porn? Eaton does not spend much time discussing what she thinks would be the appropriate response to porn given the nature of the potential injuries. She mentions regulation (of the production and sale) and moral condemnation, but

does not indicate whether and how either should be done. Eaton evidently believes researchers should invest in studying the potential harms of porn, but does not explain what the payoff of making this investment might be.

There are two causal hypotheses that would need to be demonstrated before any action against porn would be warranted. The first is that some porn fosters and reinforces ideas that are genuinely offensive—e.g., that coercive sex is enjoyable (for men or women). The second is that people who subscribe to this offensive idea have a greater likelihood of engaging in coercive sexual behaviors. If both of these hypotheses can be supported to some degree, then we might inquire about the mechanisms that should be developed to make people unsubscribe to the idea that coercive sex is enjoyable. The appropriate mechanisms for getting people to unsubscribe to the idea that coercive sex is enjoyable are education about the consequences of coercive sex and the attractive presentation of alternative ideas about enjoyable sex. Some inappropriate mechanisms would be threatening people with fines or imprisonment for their ideas, or forced exposure to feminist ideas. I don't think we need more studies of the causal properties of porn to begin employing the appropriate responses. The use of such mechanisms can be justified simply on the basis of the offensiveness of the content of some porn, and the likelihood that there are some complex, but not well understood, relationships between heinous beliefs and injurious individual or collective actions. These relationships are not well understood because, at present, we have no way scientifically to track and measure such mind/body interactions and the influence of mental entities on physical ones. Yet, we can (and perhaps should) deploy the appropriate mechanisms in response to sexist porn (and sexist non-erotic materials) in order to warn others about the possibility that some of their beliefs might contribute, consciously or unconsciously, to behaviors that are unacceptable in a fair and just society, and to encourage

people to check or critically reexamine their beliefs before they lead to genuine harm.

Given that we can already justify some employment of the appropriate responses to porn, or to any form of hate speech and the dissemination of offensive ideas, Eaton's resurrection of APF appears to be aimed at motivating research that may yield results justifying the inappropriate responses—civil lawsuits, censorship, draconian restrictions on the creation or sale of porn, public humiliation of porn consumers, and so on. Moreover, in reconstructing the basic claims of APF, she repeatedly compares the causal properties of the content of porn with the causal properties of material substances, such as tobacco, in ways that suggest we might some day have the evidence to justify severe restrictions on porn, just as we now have the studies that justify civil lawsuits against tobacco companies and draconian restrictions on marketing this product. So let me now turn to Eaton's failure to distinguish the effects of "exposure" to physical agents and to non-physical or mental agents.

Throughout her essay, Eaton calls up various analogies to clarify the kind of causal relationship between porn and harm that she feels may ultimately be supported in scientific manner with empirical evidence. For example, she mentions the currently acknowledged causal relationships between smoking and lung cancer, between diet, exercise, and heart disease, and between infection by a particular bacterium and tuberculosis. She rightly points out that, in these cases, the causal relationship is probabilistic rather than deterministic, the causal agent is often jointly and not solely responsible, and can occur in different doses, the effect is indirect, in that the agent may alter an intermediate substance in a probabilistic chain that leads to some negative end result, and that the effect is often cumulative, requiring repeated exposure. Such causal relationships can be tested to rule out accidental correlations between the alleged cause and effect, a

reversing of cause and effect, or the overlooking a more fundamental source of both the alleged cause and effect. In other words, our best science, which uses control groups, large populations, rate fluctuations when holding constant for different variables, etc., can tell us pretty reliably that smoking causes lung cancer.

But our best science today cannot reliably tell us that inequalitarian porn harms women any more than our best science can tell us that religious instruction produces well disciplined children, listening to classical music makes someone better at math, or reading communist propaganda will increase one's receptivity to Marxist ideas. Eaton's case against porn relies on suggestive analogies that all involve material agents acting upon and altering other material agents in a more or less comprehensible way. Although porn manifests itself in some material, it alters the human psyche not through some relatively comprehensible physical process, but through processes of comprehension, interpretation, belief formation, and then ultimately and allegedly these beliefs shape behavior toward women. Eaton appears to take seriously MacKinnon's Freudian speculations about the greater efficacy of porn over nonsexual sexist content, or the idea that porn is potent because it taps into unconscious libidinal pleasures and then redirects our sexual desires. Much of what MacKinnon says about porn suggests that it operates upon men at a subconscious, subliminal level, so that they absorb its meaning without much opportunity for reflection and critical thinking. MacKinnon, and perhaps Eaton, seem to believe that porn acts on men much like subliminal advertising manipulates unwary consumers. However, our best science has pretty much debunked theories about the potency of subliminal advertising, and I suspect our best science will eventually debunk theories about the greater potency of graphic sex on the criminal imagination and unconscious behaviors.

So while we have pretty good accounts of how first- and second-hand exposure to tobacco smoke damages our health, we don't have very good theoretical models of how the "exposure" to the sexist representational content in porn harms guilty first- or innocent third-parties. By using the idea of 'exposure' loosely to cover both physical and non-physical forms of causation, Eaton overestimates the extent to which science can now or in any near future underwrite highly restrictive societal responses to porn. Since we do not need to investigate the causal properties of porn in order to justify having more and better education about rape, or having reasonable restrictions on selling porn to minors, Eaton has given us little reason to get behind APF, whose aims may be other than these.

APF lost ground not because its central claims were misunderstood, contra Eaton, but because its central claims relied on problematic and crude theories about how representational content influences behavior, and because its central aims were illiberal. Eaton asks why APF has lost ground, but we should also ask why it ever gained so much ground. Why did academic feminists become so concerned about the impact of pornographic media at a particular moment in the 1970s and 80s? I think this has something to do with our becoming aware of how we are constantly "mediated" or bombarded by mass media, especially in the era of broadcast television, entertainment films, and now computers, cell phones, and other media delivery devices. While being aware of how we are shaped by the media is important, APF feminism appears to have lost sight of how women's lives are structured by access to good jobs, education, and political office, adequate health care, healthy food, and clean and safe environments. How did APF eclipse the less sexy goals of universal pre-school, health care, equal pay, living wages, and world peace? Is porn a significant obstacle to these goals?

For those who would like to avoid exposure to porn, we should promote the development of tools and technology that give people and parents more control over the devices that stream endless amounts of porn. And we should concern ourselves with potential harms to those who work in this industry, and empower these workers so that they have better contracts, safer working conditions, and access to health care. We can reconsider the minimum age for working in this industry; for example, whether an 18 year old has the maturity to understand how to protect herself against aggressive co-workers and greedy companies. We should also regulate better what porn producers need to do to demonstrate that they have obtained informed consent from the women whose bodies and sexuality they exploit. But once we've enacted some sensible regulations regarding porn, feminists should stop looking for libidinous ghosts in the path to full political and economic equality.

References:

Eaton, A. W. 2007. "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism." *Ethics* 117: 674-715.