

# In the age of science, why be shamed by sex?



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*Carnal  
Knowledge*

I confess I don't always understand the readers who call from what must be the other side of our country's culture war. Here's a rough transcript of something an anonymous woman recently shouted into my voice mail:

"I'm so disgusted by the filth ... the filth you provide this paper! It's no wonder it's going down the drain. This is a disgrace. Shame on you! SHAME ON YOU!!"

The call followed a column I wrote on the seemingly innocuous topic of vibrators. The way I see it, the only shameful thing you can do with a vibrator is throw the used batteries into your trash, which allows cadmi-

um, mercury and other toxic metals to leach into the soil.

That is a filthy thing to do. But consensual sex? Homosexuality? Masturbation? Where's the harm?

Luckily, I had saved an e-mail from Sylvia Soble, 84, who had written to tell me of her son, a philosopher of sex at the University of New Orleans.

I called Soble at his office and found he was born in Philadelphia and that he turned to philosophy of love and sex partly because he loves sex but also because philosophers have neglected sex for 2,000 years. The philosophy of the field hit a peak with Plato, Soble says, with his

division of love into *eros*, *philia* and the selfless *agape*.

Soble, 59, has written an impressive series of books, including, most recently, *Sex from Plato to Paglia: Philosophical Encyclopedia*, the Paglia being Camille Paglia, a professor at the University of the Arts.

But the book he recommended for me was called *Sexual Investigations*. It covers such meaty topics as masturbation, pornography, health, beauty and the definition of sex. Most importantly, it devotes a long chapter to the ethics of sex.

"It's a very intractable problem," says Soble.

See **PHILOSOPHY** on E2



# What a shame to blame sex when real sins abound

**PHILOSOPHY** from E1

I told Soble that I was brought up to believe what matters is that you treat people kindly and avoid doing physical or emotional harm. Surely sex can be wrong if it involves force, manipulation, lying or cheating, but sex itself seems innocent enough.

Soble told me my view is typical of liberal secular humanism — a worldview that emphasizes avoiding harm and securing consent. “The liberal picture of sex is that it really isn’t that much different from anything else — it’s all a question of consent,” he says. More religious people don’t like lumping tennis and sex and movies together as similar in significance.

“They see sex as something special because it’s connected to procreation — be-

cause it does have that potential,” says Soble. The idea, he says, is that nonprocreative sex trivializes a sacred gift from God.

**Sex is sacred, not to be misused, some say. Others see its morality primarily in consent.**

In *Sexual Investigations*, Soble explains the decision Thomas Aquinas made to decree masturbation a worse sin than rape. Aquinas lumps masturbation in with bestiality and oral and anal sex as “the gravest of sins,” Soble writes, because they are “an affront to God,” subverting his procreative intention. For Aquinas, an affront to God falls into a more serious category of sin than an affront to other human beings.

And here may lie the heart of the culture war. If you believe God created sex, and created it for one purpose only, your moral compass will point in one direction.

It will point another way if you favor the

scientific argument that sex emerged by accident several billion years ago and became widespread because it bestowed an evolutionary advantage on certain organisms.

The scientific view doesn’t necessarily rule out a higher power — many scientists do believe in one. But under such a view God would have less reason to be so sensitive about the sex lives of human beings.

I may be no more capable of understanding conservative sexual shame than religious conservatives could fathom my lack of it. It’s not that I never feel shame and guilt, but these feelings tend to pop up when I forget to bring my own bag to the supermarket and then ask for a plastic one.

Plastic bags — there’s a product that should make us feel dirty.

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