

6

It's Only Entertainment; Sex, That Is

“Good evening. Last time, we examined what human sexuality must have been like for American society in a Victorian straight-jacket. This evening we’ll turn our attention to what our society is like today, under what many call the Sexual Revolution.

“Victorians believed, as we heard last week, that sex had no place in the public eye. Sex reformers thought differently, arguing that society would be morally and emotionally healthier, mentally as well as physically, without censorship of any kind. By mid twentieth century, the courts already had decreed that the advantages society could accrue from unrestricted freedom of speech in this area would outweigh the negative aspects it could bring about. This is the topic we’ll explore this evening.

“I’ll start by asking, when we talk about sex, what do we mean? Is sex simply an instinct that we share with animals or is it more than that? Can human sexuality be guided, or is it somewhat of a loose cannon? Is sex a pleasurable and caring experience, or an evil and a harmful impulse? Yes, Ms. Bynum.”

“I think that human sexuality is all of that. It’s like an urge, an itch, a desire that is instinctively acquired; I think it’s built into our systems.”

“Instinctively acquired. Why don’t we check the dictionary to see what the term *instinct* means,” I offered. “It says, it’s *an irreversible tendency on the part of the human body to bypass reason while responding to stimuli.*¹”

“True, but I would add that sex is an instinct only up to the point when the initial urge appears,” argued Mr. Brandon. “Immediately thereafter, we most certainly can control the instinct.”

“Can you be a bit more specific?” I asked.

“Well, it means that even when the urge appears, I still have the ability to sit tight and not go after any gorgeous babe I see at a party. I’d even add that human sexuality can not only be restrained, but it can be sublimated, repressed, educated, and even guided.”

“Very good, Mr. Brandon,” I said, “What else can you tell us about the sexual drive? How does it surface in us?”

“Well, I think sex can be activated or provoked within each of us by outside factors, and it most certainly can be stirred within us. Can it also become a loose cannon to the point of becoming something dangerous? If left to its own insatiable appetite, I guess that sex can become a loose cannon and lead to unpleasant consequences such as rape, teenage pregnancy, depression, emotional abuse.”

“Agreed,” I said. “What about comparing sexuality to something else, say to meanness or cruelty? Is cruelty also instinctive in human beings? Mr. Brandon.”

“I think so. It has the same characteristics as sex. You can repress cruelty; you certainly can restrain it; it can be controlled or even sublimated, too, through education and counseling.”

“Right,” I said. “And, like our sex drive, cruelty also can be activated or provoked by outside elements, correct? Being the opposite of kindness, however, cruelty is certainly not conducive to caring. And, I dare say that most human beings regard cruelty as evil.

“What about cruelty being pleasurable?”

“I guess that in an aberrant sort of way, it can be pleasurable among a few people,” replied Mr. Edson. “However, may I ask why would you start talking about cruelty when the topic is sex?”

“Odd, isn’t?” I answered. “Then, maybe not. I had the opportunity to listen to an interesting commentary in National Public Radio that can help us understand what I’m talking about. In the program, psychotherapist Jeffrey Harper was trying to explain how it was possible for some of our soldiers to abuse and humiliate Iraqi prisoners the way they did at Abu Ghraib while enjoying it.

“He said that *receiving pleasure from inflicting cruelty is a vestige of our earliest fundamental self. [It] is a long recognized aspect of human nature.*

“Harper pointed out that in 1972 a Stanford professor conducted an experiment in which he asked several randomly selected young men to play the role of jail guardians. Within a matter of days, many of these individuals had become brutal and sadistic, inflicting physical and psychological pain on the prisoners to the point that the experiment had to be brought to a halt days before it was scheduled to end. Harper commented that *psychologists were shocked that so-called normal people could become agents of cruelty and humiliation simply because of the role they were assigned.*

“Another experiment, he said, showed that most of those involved *would administer severe and excruciating levels of electrical shock to a person simply because they were told to. All it took was a man in a white coat to do it.* Other experiments were conducted around the world and the results, said Harper, again demonstrated how easy it was *to get ordinary people to inflict extraordi-*

nary pain on innocent persons.”

“Still, why bring up the issue of cruelty?” Mr. Edson insisted.

“Because, Mr. Edson, if something so heinous as cruelty can be externally triggered without much difficulty, how much easier is it for our sexual drive to be socially activated, given that sex is more pleasurable than inflicting cruelty upon others? And if, indeed, sex can be so easily triggered, what happens when the sexual drive is left to roam without limitations?”

“When we become incapable of applying social brakes to our sexuality, as you had recalled, what happens to our children, teenagers, young adults, to our society? Well, what happens is a Sexual Revolution, a phenomenon that for the past forty-five years or so has been taking place in our society to the point where many of us have taken it for granted.

“Ours is not the only country where this is happening, but we shall only be concerned with the way it has affected our society. I call it a *revolution* because this phenomenon has been a fast-paced occurrence, already in full swing in less than twenty years, and one that shows no sign of slowing down.

“If my hypothesis holds correct, the *sexing* of American culture during the last forty-something years must have affected social behavior dramatically. This is what we intend to find out throughout this and our next meeting: whether an overly sexualized entertainment, media-driven culture has triggered our sexual instincts; to what extent; and what has been the social outcome in terms of teenage and young adult sexual activity, sexual transmissible diseases, pregnancies, non-marital childbirths, cohabitation, abortion, and rape.

“So, why don’t we go ahead and start. I believe Mr. Dickerson will make the first presentation.”

“Yes, we all agreed that I’m old enough to remember what it was like as a kid in the sixties,” said Mr. Dickerson, “so I will make the initial presentation. From my research and personal knowledge, I view this Sexual Revolution as having started in the early 1960s. In my mind, it coincided with the Beatles’ arrival to this country in 1964, although I’m not suggesting that the Beatles were responsible for it, of course. Initially, the Beatles were well behaved and better dressed than many of today’s rock bands. However, there was something different in them; something so trivial, yet to me it seemed like the spark that lead many young people to start questioning their values and mores: the Beatle haircut. You might remember seeing pictures of the Beatles’ slightly long hair dropping over their foreheads, unlike the Elvis look, the crew cut, or the Brylcreem generation of the 1950s.

“How offensive could that have been? I was told that my uncle had been expelled from high school because he was sporting a Beatle cut and was told not to come back until he had his hair cut.

“After the slightly long hair came longer hair, then the shabby, un-kept look that characterized the peaceniks during the Vietnam War, the hippy

movement, the drug culture, and other anti-establishment expressions reflected in the *make love and not war* posters and tee shirts.

“Amidst all this very sincere hoopla, public manifestations of sexual behavior began to take place; think Woodstock. And, in a rather progressive manner, and with little if any political, legal, religious, or cultural deterrents, the Sexual Revolution got underway.

“You might be wondering what the elements of this revolution are. “Let me start with movies. Back in the 1960s, to see nudity in a movie you had to go to the X-rated theatres in the shady part of town only to be shown women and some men casually parading in nudist camps or burlesque stars showing their breasts, most of the time with little plastic stars covering their most pointed parts.

“It was almost unimaginable for movies during the early 1960s to contain foul language, depictions of vulgarity, and with the exception of a European film now and then, sexual scenes were few and so discreetly filmed they would have been PG-13 rated by today’s standards.

“Today, movies are characterized by the explicitness and suggestiveness of their sexual and violent content, even at the PG-13 level. Obscenity and vulgar behavior are standard. And, we don’t necessarily have to go to adult video theatres to watch soft porn movies anymore; sexual scenes are depicted everyday in films performed by many of Hollywood’s most famous stars.

“I want to share something I found on the Internet,” he said, holding up a computer printout of *Sexual or Erotic Films*. “This provides a longitudinal view of how sex in the United States has evolved throughout the last decades. Here’s what it says. [B]etween the 1930s and 1960s, the “Hays Code” had been established to regulate films that were deemed to contain adult-oriented material. However, since the abandonment of the Hays Code in the late 60s, the study points out,

*sexual or erotic films with even small amounts of nudity have become more abundant along with frank adult content, violence and explicit language, or just suggestions of eroticism and sensuality. Teen sex comedies, erotic dramas or thrillers, exploitation films, and other films dealing with sexual content are included in this wide-ranging category.*²

“These observations are supported by findings in a 2004 study by the Harvard School of Public Health. The study found that a decade of ‘ratings creep’ has allowed more violent and sexually explicit content into films, suggesting that movie raters have grown more lenient in their standards.³

“Nowadays a PG-13 rating allows for casual and uncommitted sex by young people, obscene language, and lewd and indecent behavior, which, I repeat, was unheard of and unseen in the early 1960s.

“Why should all this concern us? Perhaps, because of the impact the visual

has on the senses. Further, because the screen accords social approval to behavior that tends to be entertaining, pleasant, enjoyable, or appealing, and does so in a way no other medium can do.

“The impact of these films, I offer, operate in the form of an ascending spiral movement that continuously feeds itself on fantasy and concrete behavior. Sometimes the sexual image leads the way and real behavior follows—the copying element—at other times behavior precedes the image while the latter reinforces the former through movies.”

Mr. Radusky interrupted at this point, “I have a question. The movie industry is supposed to police itself. Are you suggesting that it isn’t doing an adequate job through its ratings?”

“You tell me,” said Mr. Dickerson. I just cited two studies about the direction the movie industry has taken in recent decades. Let me give you an indication of how the spiral movement works. *The New York Times* article on the Harvard study quoted a spokesman from the Motion Picture Association of America explaining why there is more sex and violence in movies today. He indicated that *the standards for judging acceptable depictions of sex and violence in American society were constantly changing and that it would not be surprising if that changed the movie ratings as well.*

“According to the study, the standards of acceptability have been changing toward more sex and more violence. Is Hollywood, by any chance, going against those standards? Not so, according to the study; it’s following them. So there you have it, fantasy and reality, image and behavior feeding each other into a spiral.

“Now I’ll discuss another component of the Sexual Revolution: magazines. With the exception of a very modest *Playboy* publication appearing throughout the sixties—modest by today’s standards, that is—there were simply no mainstream girlie publications available in ordinary newsstands.

“Today, *Playboy* no longer enjoys a monopoly. Not only that. *Playboy* had to spice its content and become more revealing in order to keep up with the competition. And, since we live in an era of equality in which women demand the same privileges, there are now sexy magazines for women, too.

“Moreover, the Sexual Revolution has given us a host of mainstream publications, like *Cosmopolitan* or *Maxim*, in which sex has become an essential component of their approach. And, what about those supposedly inoffensive magazines, the ones we see next to the cash register at the local drug and grocery stores?

“The other day, I caught a glimpse of an edition of *Glamour*, a traditional magazine by most standards. One of the articles on the cover, was, ‘Your Most Intimate Sex Questions.’ And, in *Men’s Health*, another over the counter publication, one of the headline titles at the public’s eye level was ‘Sex so good, she’ll beg you for more.’

“Another element of the Sexual Revolution is the explosion of strip bars.

Back in the sixties there were strip joints, for sure, but they were mostly located in the red light district. Today, these joints have proliferated in major cities and small towns, and thanks in part to HBO that glamorizes these establishments, they're making inroads into mainstream culture where businessmen no longer mind being seen there.

"And, in an interesting twist adding to the Sexual Revolution, now we have strip bars where one may witness well-dressed, hysterically-loud females—it seems that men are more subdued on this matter—feeding their fantasies as well-built guys strip down.

"Advertising is yet another venue for the Sexual Revolution's expansion. Back in the sixties, sexuality in America was no longer Victorian by any stretch of the imagination. Nonetheless, sexuality was not shoved unto people's faces. Social boundaries were observed and respected. Today, ads in magazines, billboards, department stores, buses, radio, and television spew sexuality all around us.

"In the 60s, the object of the game was for women to look pretty, teenage girls to look cute, and men to exhibit the clean-cut look. Today, the name of the game is to look sexy. Merchants and media owners have discovered that sex sells well."

"Interesting that you mention advertising, Mr. Dickerson," said Ms. Williamson. "Advertising helps you to sell your product, and of course, when you advertise using sex, you promote not only your product, you promote sex as well. Take, for example, mainstream teenage department stores exploiting sexuality through advertising.

"Last Spring, for example, I remembered taking my daughter to Tysons Corner Mall in Northern Virginia. She wanted to browse, so we went into Abercrombie & Fitch. And, while she was browsing, so was I . . . at the enormous photos on the walls of young kids. They looked to be somewhere between sixteen and twenty years old. They were frolicking innocently, huddled together, leaning against each other . . . naked. At least that is what the photos suggested. And I said to myself, if this store is in the business of selling clothes, how come the kids in the photos are not wearing any? What in heaven are they advertising?

"Were these store executives so mindless as not to realize the subliminal impact of their advertising on children? Or was it that they were quite mindful of that reality, and they were trying to make a buck or two by doing so?"

"That was a good example, thanks," he said as he flipped back to his notes. "Now I'll turn from one age group to another. Of course, with so much sex in the air, how long could it have been before the "I-can't-do-it-anymore generation" would start to exhibit symptoms of frustration and depression? Medical science's answer to geriatric sex is the *get-it-up* pill phenomenon. Ads on TV now tell us that sex is for everyone. So, drug companies began to actively promote sex on TV by suggesting that they can get a middle-age man's penis

erected for hours to a captive family audience watching the World Series or the Super Bowl.

“I believe that this is evidence that in a capitalist society, Wall Street exerts more influence than good taste and public decorum. It wouldn’t surprise me if these *conservative*, grey-suited executives were advancing the cynical proposition that they’re actively promoting *family values* by inserting some pep into marriage.

“Television. Call it square, conservative, wholesome, or whatever else you wish, but TV programming in the 1950s and the 1960s, for the most part was not tasteless, was not coarse. It was rather, innocent. What about today?

“Since the 1970s, sex in TV has increased progressively, directly or indirectly, through comedy and drama alike, in order to market advertising products to the young and the restless X Generation. In 2005, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation undertook a rather comprehensive study on sex and TV, concluding that *there is increasing evidence that television plays a meaningful role in the sexual socialization [of youth]*.⁴

“I’ll briefly outline the study’s major findings for you.

- The number of programs with sexual content rose from 56 percent of all shows in the 1997/98 TV season to 70 percent in the 2005 season. Sexual content became even more prominent on primetime network programs, accounting for 77 percent in 2005.
- Among the top 20 most-watched shows by teens, 70 percent include some kind of sexual content, and nearly half include sexual behavior.
- Among shows in 2005 with sexual content, the number of sex-related scenes per hour continued to increase, from 3.2 scenes per hour to 5.0. In prime time, the rate in top teen shows was 6.7. Altogether, the study points out that the total number of sexual scenes in the program sample nearly doubled since 1998, from 1,930 to 3,783 scenes.
- The percentage of sexual-related material in movies went up from 89 in its previous study released in 2001 to 92 percent in the 2005 study; from 84 to 87 percent in sitcoms; and from 80 to 85 percent in soap operas.
- Casual sex is implied in fifteen percent of all scenes with intercourse, up from seven percent in 2002.⁵

“Bear in mind that sexuality in TV is not a twenty-first century phenomenon. A study on TV programming during the late 1980s and mid 1990s by Professor Arland Thornton, highlighted these startling conclusions:

- The frequency and explicitness of sexual content in the movies and

on musical TV had increased considerably.

- The overwhelming majority of sexual experience in the media occurred among people who are not married to each other.
- Sex portrayed in the media rarely occurred in a warm or committed relationship, almost never involved effort to prevent pregnancy or disease, and hardly ever led to pregnancy or the contraction of a sexually transmissible disease.⁶

“Enough?” he asked, as the class absorbed the information. “Okay, let’s go on to Radio. In the sixties, and I would dare say in the early seventies, too, radio was thought to be a safe medium when it came to keeping suggestive sexuality, obscenity or vulgar language from being aired; but not anymore. For the past twenty or so years, some radio shows have sought to emulate the movie industry.

“It remains to be seen, however, if recent rulings and increased penalties by the Federal Communications Commission can stem the tide of raunchy and vulgar radio programming.

“But the problems with radio don’t compare to what we find at video stores. If the content of sexual-related matters in filmmaking has increased to such dramatic levels in the last forty years, multiply its effect by, say, three, four times, and you might get an idea of the impact of family video stores in our culture.

“The low cost of renting movies, the lack of parental and store supervision, and the technology to copy movies, provide easy access to depictions of sexual behavior, foul language, and drug usage that were unimaginable in the early sixties.

“Add to this phenomenon the propagation of adult video stores and the explosion of adult videos that can be rented or sold in separate sections of otherwise wholesome family video stores, and you may get an idea of what I’m talking about.

“And what about music? The type of music we listen makes a statement regarding who we are and what we value. Nonetheless, music can have an undermining tendency. Music seduces our inner being; it predisposes behavior, precisely because it entertains us. A soft melody makes us feel romantic. Vibrant rock’n roll excites us. Blues sedates our soul when, well, when we feel blue. A classical piece can uplift the spirit.

“In music, the melody serves as the medium, but when it comes to rap and some R&B music, the message is found in the lyrics. And since freedom of speech is protected by the constitution, we now have the freedom to express depravity and rage in ways unheard of in the history of American popular music.

“Being easily disseminated nowadays, and because of its seductive and appealing characteristics, this type of music is increasingly accepted among teenagers and young adults. One possible outcome has been that the

language we hear on these songs has become standard terminology in street and school talk. The behavior and values this music evokes are emulated in our schools, our public places, and in the home.

Ms. Williamson interrupted. "Yes, I can relate to that! Rappers are applauded for humiliating and degrading women; sex is extolled as a tool of aggression; and yet, these individuals receive artistic recognition through music awards. All these are indications of social acceptance of this type of behavior."

"So, in view of this social phenomenon," Mr. Dickerson continued, "we may ask ourselves, how do we think pattern contributes to respect between the sexes, to more loving and caring relationships, to more civilized public language and behavior?"

"And then, there's another tool with a double edge, the Internet. The Internet is a wonderful tool of communication and diffusion of information. It's also the latest and perhaps most unsafe element of the Sexual Revolution. Imagine having cheap, easy, and private access to pornography, to sex chatting, even sex dating."

Here, a few members of the class chuckled. "Yes, I understand the laughter, but you must realize that just about *everyone* now has this access, not just adults. Personally, after my research, the Internet concerns me even more than the existence of adult video stores.

Going into the Internet is like going into an adult video store from the privacy of your home. The fact that children may not have credit cards at their disposal may limit their purchasing power but not access to the sites, where just browsing will provide them with hardcore sex *education*.

"Then you have content. I will guarantee you that the Internet is much more hardcore than adult video stores, or your money back. There are images and movies on the Internet that you don't find in adult video stores.

"Although rape is illegal, vicious and degrading, on the Internet rape is a stimulating motif; so, too, is incest. And, if you're interested in sex education with animals, the Internet offers quite illustrative movies about sex with most of our favorite pets in the animal kingdom." The class groaned in unison as he continued.

"Another disturbing aspect, pictures and movies of very young teenagers. So young, in fact, that I don't even know if they understand, much less feel, their own sexuality, which makes the exploitation much worse. In all, one would think that the extraordinary number of different faces that are willing to expose themselves and be exploited should, at the very least, raise questions regarding what the future holds for many of these young girls as well as for their impact on social institutions and sexual ethos."

"But you have to want to go to the Internet to watch pornography," said Mr. Edson.

"True," I replied. "Imagine if people desiring cocaine could go to their

nearest drive-in to get their fix, for free. What effect would it have on the social fabric and our institutions?"

"Are you referring to the imitation effect?" asked Ms. Bynum.

"The imitation effect, the desensitizing effect, the validation effect, all of these," I replied.

"But why isn't the government doing anything about this?" cried out Ms. Williamson.

"I think that politicians realize that their biggest obstacle lie with the courts," I said. It seems as if anything they do would be a waste of time, so they don't do anything; not even speak about the issue. Sadly, they have given up."

"If I may go on, sir," said Mr. Dickerson. "Let me point to the latest craze in the Sexual Revolution: sex video games. According to an article in *The Washington Post*, several mainstream game publishers are releasing bawdy games containing nudity and explicit sexual content, and they are targeting men and women between 18 to 29 years old.⁷ "By far, the best assessment of where our society is heading comes from the president of the Entertainment Software Association, Douglas Lowenstein, who said, *it would be naïve to think, given the market, that forevermore video gaming would be a completely pure and chaste field*. These games, mind you, give a new meaning to sexual entertainment. There is one game in which the contestant *builds up the relationship with a complete stranger*, and if you are skillful enough, you *score*, not points though.

"We may want to ask ourselves, which social values are being fostered by these games? Let's see, casual and unprotected sex, women as sexual objects to be hunted, immaturity. The story ended, not with a denunciation but a question as to which one of the three big software carriers, Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo, would decide to transport these games in their systems.

"Okay, these are the major elements of the Sexual Revolution, as I see them," said Mr. Dickerson, finishing his presentation

"Thank you, Mr. Dickerson" I said. "That was a scathing critique of how sex is being projected in our society today. I presume that you're against it. But, in the end, we have to balance this condition with its counterparts, one being freedom of speech and the other one being the usefulness of this . . . may we call it *information*? Eventually, we may want to ask the social question: Is there a detrimental social cost to the *public sexualization* of America?"

"In the past, *Playboy* magazine prided itself in contributing to the sexual liberation of our society, contrasting modest sex modalities in the fifties to those practiced in the seventies and the eighties, concluding that, having been sexually liberated, somehow, we are better off today than in the past. I don't believe that anyone has come out with a sound rationale as well as empirical evidence to support this conclusion. All we seem to be able to say is that freedom of speech ought to prevail. Nonetheless, it would be prudent to explore the other side of the coin to

see what it tells us. I thought that it would be interesting to hear a presentation in the form of a vignette about what is being regarded as entertainment today, bearing in mind the *imitation effect* that comes with the tacit social approval of certain type of behavior once it appears on the screen. Ms. Williamson, would you like to take the stage at this time?"

She walked to the front of the classroom with a series of cardboards, some of them with photographs, and a laptop for a PowerPoint presentation. "What I would like to do is to provide a passing view of how main-stream America is being entertained nowadays through films," she said. "Mind you, I will not be talking about pornography, at least according to the movie ratings definition of the term. The movies I picked show the thin line that exists between how sexuality is being portrayed today and pornography. These movies, by the way, are easily accessed at your local video store.

"We have, for example, a typical PG-13 rated film, *Down to You*, a romantic comedy supposedly about love between two young college students. There is this scene here, almost at the beginning, in which a co-ed is seen instructing a friend on how to introduce the finger up a guy's anus. Then, we move to this scene in which a student mentions that his favorite song is, *You Can Be My Bitch*, which I suppose is regarded by young women as being quite inspirational and dignifying of their gender. And, let me cut to this part when two female students are piercing a male friend's nipple.

"To begin their relationship, the two main characters have sex over and over again. After they decided that they have perfected the act, they move in together. Then, one day at a party they have a fight. She gets mad at him and decides to spite him by having casual sex with another guy. He's troubled by the incident, so he starts drinking, seeking to forget her. He can't, so he attempts to poison himself."

"What was your biggest concern about this film, Ms. Williamson?" I asked.

"I believe that nowadays, it is well accepted that early teenage years are crucial in the child's emotional development. That's when limits are set and rights and wrongs are established in the child's life. So, I asked myself, what values did this film convey to my thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen year old? The only conclusion would be that casual sex involves no social cost. That playing at being married at an early age has no emotional or social repercussions. That vulgarity is part of a college education. That suicide is a positive outlet for frustration and disappointments. And, by the way, this movie was a romantic comedy, not drama.

"Going on to the next film, another PG-13 rated movie, *Chasing Liberty*, a cute comedy about the President of the United States' eighteen-year-old daughter who seeks to escape parental supervision in order to experience freedom. And, her first wish to sense freedom comes when she's visiting a foreign capital and suddenly feels the urge to get completely naked and go for a swim before the astonished eyes of people dining at a restaurant nearby,

totally oblivious to personal or family consequences. Kind of a female counterpart to Prince Harry.

“Pretending to be married to her Secret Service agent, the almost adult young woman undresses casually and offers her body to him, believing that he likes her, and dares him to overcome his shyness by undressing. Frankly, not that I’m that prudish myself, but somehow I cannot imagine teaching my sixteen-year old daughter such behavior in which sexuality is depicted as fun and inconsequential.

“We now turn to another movie, this one about baseball and two teenagers in love during a summer in Cape Cod. Can’t recall the title, but it was also PG-13. As we see in this scene, the young man is a handsome, clean cut, male-slut who meets a casual female-slut on the baseball field, and having nothing better to do, they decide to get naked and have sex right on the pitcher’s mound. Very instructive of baseball, I thought.”

“Forgive me, Ms. Williamson, but I don’t understand why you’re so bothered by these films,” Mr. Edson asked. “No one is forcing you or your children to see them.”

“Let me address that point of view. If only the answer were that simple. You have no idea of the pressure parents feel when they go to the video store and your sixteen year old tells you, ‘I’m sixteen, I most certainly *can* see this movie!’ Or when the kids decide to go to the theater to see a PG-13 rated film, you go into the internet to get information, and then find out that you don’t get the complete picture, pardon the pun.

“Mind you, I’m not talking about something that offends my sensibility. I’m instead referring to something that, as Dr. Planas said at the beginning, is the de facto guideline that operates in social communications today: once behavior is publicly displayed, such behavior is socially sanctioned by the media and then by society. It means that such behavior is likely to be emulated by others. One day, it could be *your* daughter on the pitcher’s mound having sex for kicks; or, perhaps, your *son*.

“What I’m trying to say is that today it is no longer possible to hide from the stimulatory effects of sexuality unless one decides to become a hermit.”

“If I may interrupt for just a second,” said Mr. Dickerson, “I recall that Gurstein made a point in her book that I think may help us understand how these mechanisms work. She argues that one motive for depicting virtuous deeds in literature or in the movies is to motivate the reader and the viewer into emulating such behavior. It’s a very compelling point if we apply it to sex. Given how easy it is for our sexuality to be stimulated, how can we think that people will not be influenced and conditioned to emulate behavior shown on the screen, heard on the radio, shown on ads, and so on, particularly when such reality is being imposed on our society day after day after day?”

“Oh, I agree wholeheartedly,” replied Ms. Williamson. “Let’s face it, nowadays a PG-13 rating stands for casual and uncommitted sex, vulgar language,

lewd and indecent behavior by young people. All this comes neatly wrapped in the label *PG-13* for some sexual content and language. However, suppose that as parents we conclude that the movies I described aren't for your thirteen-year old. Does that mean that they are okay for your fourteen, your fifteen, your sixteen, seven-teen, or eighteen-year old?

"I think you yourself, Mr. Edson, brought out the point, could there be a close correlation between vulgarity being heard in songs or in movies and the fact that the F—word has now become a favorite of ours? Don't these movies tolerate, sanction, stimulate such behavior in our children as well as in adults?"

Mr. Edson did not reply; he smiled, either in agreement or perhaps at having his comments reminded.

"Let me go on with the show, if I may. This next movie was a financial success, *American Pie*. This movie was advertised as a comedy, with supposedly hilarious scenes depicting four high school kids seeking to lose their virginity before the end of the summer. It was rated R for strong sexuality, crude sexual dialogue, language and drinking.

"This means that no one under seventeen years of age may see it at the movie theater without the presence of an adult. But then, I ask myself, if that is the case and I'm the parent, what could I possibly accomplish by watching the movie with my son or my daughter? And if I were the son, wouldn't I find it embarrassing to be seen at the theatre with my dad, or my mother?"

"I picked this movie because of the interesting relationship with the first movie I described. You see, *Down By You* is about college kids, but it's rated PG 13. This means that fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen year old high school kids could be allowed to get a glimpse of what college life is about. *American Pie*, on the other hand, is about life in high school; and yet it is aimed at the supposedly more *mature* eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-year-old college guys and gals.

"Now, I'm a bit dumbfounded. *American Pie* allows older kids to see what they were like when they were younger. Meanwhile, high school kids, who supposedly do the things that are depicted in the movie, are not allowed to see themselves being portrayed. Go figure.

"So what's in this movie? There's this scene in which a troubled young high school girl wants to have sex with her boyfriend and wants to make it very special, but doesn't know how to go about doing it. So, her female friend yells at her, *Hey, it's not a space launch! It is sex!* Kind of like, animals do it; it is not that difficult, so settle down.'

"In addition to obscenities running rampant, what I enjoyed the most was the portrayal of *family values*. There is this young couple who wants to have sex but feels that it is more important to respect their relationship, so they limit themselves to having oral sex! This blew my mind.

“And, oh yes, I loved this scene. It seems that even mothers are now game. In the movie, a high school kid decides to get back at one of his classmates who had played a prank on him, so he goes after the perpetrator’s mother and has sex with her, much to the amazement of his buddies who hold him in awe for his sexual prowess.

“This scene must have played well, for in a sequel, *American Wedding*, it is repeated again, merely irking the son who only says to his . . . still friend, *You got me, you’re really bad*. The ‘sex with your mom’s’ scene was so well accepted that it was reprised in a Spanish-Mexican comedy, *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother, Too*), about two young friends who get drunk and begin bragging about having had sex with each other’s girlfriends. One of them then raised the ante and shouted, *I even did it with your mother, too*, and both laughed incessantly afterwards.

“What else, oh yes, take a look a look at the scenes in this movie, *Thirteen*. It’s R-rated for self-destructive violence and sexuality. It’s about a thirteen year-old girl led astray by another youngster while the mother is in denial.

“Supposedly, youngsters seventeen and under cannot watch it. And yet, the two main actresses who portray the girls in the film were *themselves* between fifteen and sixteen years of age at the time when the movie was produced!

“In the film, the two girls play the role of being drugged while enjoying sadistic and masochistic behavior by hitting each other relentlessly. And, in a very graphic scene, in order to learn how to kiss boys, the two girls practice French- kissing with each other. Later, they engage in sex with two other boys their age. Both wear thongs on the screen and make use of the F—word as if there is no tomorrow. In another scene, one of the girls lifts up her skirt and flashes her friend’s younger brother, who, *by the way*, happened to be a young kid at the time.”

“Forgive me Ms. Williamson, but did you say the two girls in the film were under age?” asked Captain Francis.

“Yes.” she said.

“Hmm, I’m really just trying to understand the logic of asking a child to play such an emotional role. I don’t know if anyone here realizes the taxing elements that go into the psychology of acting. The little bit of drama I know I learned in high school, but I know enough to realize that in acting, you’re being asked to persuade yourself of what you’re doing. You have to feel and believe in your role, and I wonder if it’s fair or morally responsible for adults to engage children in this type of work? As a matter of fact, is it morally responsible for parents to allow their children to do this type of work? I know that if these scenes were to happen in real life, adults would get arrested for trafficking with minors.”

“You may have a point there, Captain,” I said. “I think it’s worth looking into.”

“After a while, I got tired of watching these R rated movies and decided to go for a PG movie,” continued Ms. Williamson. “I figured that I could not go wrong. I chose *The Prince and Me*, a seemingly innocuous romantic comedy about a young Danish playboy prince who, out of boredom, travels to Wisconsin to enroll at a university where he heard females lift their tops to show guys their breasts.

“To make it short, guy meets girl and falls for her, in part because she had refused to comply with his boob-watching desire. But then comes this one questionable scene, which in my mind would have been enough not to allow my daughter or my son to watch it, which they did, by the way, because it was a PG-rated movie.

“Well, in this scene, the young man and his by-now-girlfriend are in the library studying. He’s looking at her; she’s looking at him. In a rather tender manner they begin to hold hands, seemingly depicting nothing more than puppy love, when all of a sudden, a volcano of hormonal activity began to erupt out of nowhere. She asked him to follow her to an isolated part of the library where they begin to undress each other. It was then when, in order to keep the film PG-rated, the undressing did not show as the paparazzi following the couple surprised them both.

“Still, I’m thinking that twelve and thirteen years old may very well think that it is normal behavior to jump from holding hands to having sex behind the book stacks in a matter of seconds. In sexual baseball terminology, I guess that would be the equivalent of hitting a home run and not having to run through the bases!”

“Ms. Williamson, could I make a point about what you just said?” asked Mr. Brandon.

“Yes, of course, go right ahead.”

“If what you are telling us is as evident as it sounds, how can the movie industry get away with it?”

“My belief is that Hollywood feels empowered; it is doing no less than what the representatives of the people, the government, allow it to do. We all know that Hollywood doesn’t necessarily follow moral values anymore than a dog would chase down a porcupine. Hollywood follows what corporate America follows; the Almighty Dollar.”

“Thank you, Ms. Williamson,” I said. “Let me ask, what do we make of the government’s difficulties when dealing with these depictions of human sexuality and pornography?” Ms. Vanhurst.”

“I think that the government is divided when it comes to pornography, obscenity, vulgarity, and what have you. Take the Internet. Congress and the Executive have attempted to regulate access to pornography on the Internet, but the courts see this subject from a different perspective. The issue is one of competing values, and whenever values compete, there will be winners and losers. In this case, who is competing, and whose rights are being protected? At one end are

minors, who traditionally have been society's most *Protected Species* because they're so vulnerable. At the other end are adults, a mature class of human beings who, by virtue of their status in the social hierarchy, enjoy a series of perks called rights and liberties that seemingly cannot be denied to them without setting democracy at bay. Then you have the referees, the Supreme Court Justices, who keep finding Internet regulations approved by the Congress as unconstitutional.

"Their reasoning? Some provisions aimed at protecting minors limit the Web publishers' freedom to communicate with adults, and that, according to the justices, is a no-no."

"You seem to be disregarding that view, Ms. Vanhurst," I remarked.

"The justices' interpretation of the Constitution when it comes to pornography may be acceptable when pornography is viewed from the specific and narrow angle of freedom of speech. I don't question this rationale. However, is this the only way from which to approach this issue? I think that court decisions depend heavily on the angles from which justices view a constitutional question. I suppose that if I were an adult on a sinking ship, I definitely would want these justices to issue the command, which would be something like, 'adults first, children last!'"

"Ms. Vanhurst, you seem to be suggesting that there are different ways to look at the Constitution in order to seek remedy to very complex social problems," I said. "This means that we are at the mercy of the courts."

"We'll always be at the mercy of the courts," she replied. "But then, I don't see anything wrong with that. The Constitution mandates that such *is* the role of the courts. What I'm saying is that there is more than one way to read the Constitution. If everyone looks at a mountain-top from the same location, well, everyone will continue to see the same view. You need to move away or move in closer or go on to the other side. In other words, don't look at pornography only from the standpoint of the First Amendment, but rather look at the problems the movie industry could be causing."

"But I'm sure you understand that this is not only a constitutional issue, Ms. Vanhurst, it's a technological matter as well," I said. "We don't have the necessary technology to successfully filter what comes through the Internet."

"But, shouldn't that limitation be taken into account when rendering a decision?" she asked. "In this case the logic is that since the available technology is not completely effective, let us not use whatever means there are to deal with the problem. That's not how we proceed when we intend to solve a social problem. I would have thought that, if viewed from a social angle, one would have said, 'let's use whatever stopgaps we have within reach, precisely because the technology hasn't been perfected, while we keep searching for even better technologies.' And, I believe you're the one who reminded us, sir, that this issue affects not only children; it affects adults, too, as well as the social fabric. As a matter of fact, I tested available technological devices and they work pretty well without

censoring scientific or political information, in which case, why can't they be mandated to become part of the software, just like seat belts are mandated as protective elements in all vehicles?"

"That's a very good suggestion, Ms. Vanhurst," I said, "but perhaps I should remind you that the courts and the constitution are not social problem-solving tools."

"But of course they are!" she replied. "Even justices who believe in a narrow interpretation of the constitution realize that their decisions not only involve mere legal interpretations. Legal cases usually portray social, political, and economic conflict affecting many people, and justices are asked to settle these cases within the framework of the constitution. They may want to ignore the social impact of their decisions hiding behind a fictitious constitutional façade, but in one way or another, they're all activists; some more restrained than others, but activists no less!"

Meanwhile, Ms. Bynum interrupted. "What about those who *promote* the Sexual Revolution, the Howard Sterns, the CEOs, producers, directors, writers, the *faceless* individuals. Don't they have any responsibility? I know that if I were one of them, my children would feel very embarrassed and ashamed of me as a parent."

"One would hope they might realize they have a moral responsibility," replied Ms. Vanhurst. "However, I presume it is difficult for these individuals to feel the burden of that responsibility when they have Supreme Court Justices supporting what they do."

"I'm going to make a distinction that may sound odd," I said. "It's about Howard Stern. He's a very interesting individual. In my view, there are two Howard Sterns, and I don't know if that's the case with others in the industry."

"I have seen Howard Stern two or three times outside his normal elements, and frankly it's a different Howard Stern. He projects an amazing personality when he's not acting like a boring adult behaving like a child. I remember seeing him on the *Letterman Show*, and not only is he quite a conversationalist with a very pleasant and assertive voice. He displayed wit that's normally not heard or seen on his radio or his television shows. But, above all, what struck me about him was what I witnessed throughout his interview with Katie Couric some time ago; he revealed a different personality, that of a very sensitive family man, capable of acknowledging the sadness of his divorce and of manifesting his love and concern for his daughters. That was an eye opener! Talk about irony; if he were to show the same concerns and sensitivity for women that he shows toward his daughters, he could easily be a success in a late-night TV spot. Not that it's in his blood to do so, I think, but it still makes you think about wasting one's talents and opportunities."

"Okay, let's end it for the evening. During our next class we'll roam

through the world of statistics in order to find out if there might be a close relationship between the sexual content of media entertainment and the individual and social cost of sex. I'll see you next week."

As I'm prepared to leave the class, I can't help but wonder if the arguments presented so far created, at the very least, some skepticism. After all, skepticism is but a stepping-stone to further enlightenment.

Endnotes

¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.

² "Sexual or Erotic Films," at www.filmsite.org/sexualfilms.html.

³ Study Finds Film Ratings Are Growing More Lenient, *The New York Times*, July 14, 2004.

⁴ The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Sex on TV*, 2005, p. 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Executive Summary.

⁶ Thornton A, Attitudes, Values, and Norms Related to Nonmarital Fertility, in *Report to Congress on Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing*, (PHS) 95-1257, September, 1995, National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁷ Screen Sizzlers, *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2004.