

Response to “J.G. Fichte’s Account of Feminine Sexual Desire” by Yolanda Estes

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Dr. Estes’s paper argues that a useful account of human sexuality can be drawn from the work of J.G. Fichte, one which allows a flexibility, through its articulation of gender difference as an expression of desire, in negotiating human equality and helping to draw all humans closer together in a common bond of “free, mutual give and take” (p. 14, quoting Fichte). I am quite sympathetic to this, for two reasons. First, I am sympathetic to Dr. Estes’s account of gender roles as fluid, and of human sexuality as ideally encouraging the development of human capacities, such that our sexual relationships can play a role in making us better people. Second, I am sympathetic to her developing an interpretation of Fichte that can speak to our present-day concerns; his strengths as a philosopher are generally not well-known in philosophy as a whole. I do think that it ought to be possible to use Fichte in the context of a contemporary concern with social justice, such as might be suggested by Dr. Estes’s account of the give and take of strengths and weaknesses by which society alleviates natural inequities.

Despite this, I am not entirely convinced that Fichte’s account of human sexuality – particularly feminine sexuality – is one that can be readily taken up. I will pick up from the two objections raised by Dr. Estes at the end of her paper, which anticipate my concerns. The first possible objection she raises is that some readers might believe her interpretation of Fichte to be inaccurate, or unfaithful to Fichte’s personal views. The second is that the limitations of Fichte’s philosophy – a systematic, foundationalist project – might hamper its being used for contemporary projects on “gender, equality, and justice.” Despite Dr. Estes’s replies to these objections in her conclusion, I think there is still more work to be done in justifying this interpretation. Admittedly,

her replies were limited by the context of a short conference paper, so I am looking forward to hearing what a more detailed response might be.

The first objection, again, is that her interpretation of Fichte is inaccurate. She responds that “while the implications that [she draws] ... might be unfaithful to Fichte’s personal views, they are only objectionable if they are unfaithful to the arguments presented in Fichte’s works” (p. 13) She acknowledges that her inferences may go beyond what Fichte wrote or believed, but as such they are “implicit rather than explicit aspects of his philosophy” (p. 13).

In order to determine whether or not Dr. Estes’s interpretation is accurate – or, at least, a plausible and compelling way of considering Fichte’s view of human sexuality – it makes sense to consider in a little more detail what Fichte says about the sexual drives of men and women.

It is true, indeed, that the sexual drive is found in both sexes (FNR 264). This arrangement is found, argues Fichte, throughout all of Nature: one sex has the conditions required for the generation of a body and is referred to as the female, and the other sex has the “first, moving principle” and is known as the male sex (FNR 266). This, of course, echoes the old Aristotelian division of the sexes into the one supplying the matter and the one supplying the form in generation. Fichte utterly denies the possibility of asexual reproduction in nature, believing this separation of form and matter is required “if nature was to have any lasting shape” (FNR 266).

This means that the female sex (throughout nature) has certain biological or physiological properties. This physiological difference, Fichte says, is the reason for the specific determination of the sexes as “entirely active” or “entirely passive” in the act of procreation (FNR 266). This physiological difference leads to a difference in how female and male humans must experience their sexual drive. Fichte’s moves immediately from the biological to the rational, showing that for him they really are connected (We can see this as well elsewhere in the *Foundations of Natural Right* with

his comments about the connection between facial features and moral and intellectual character [FNR 78]). Because reason must express itself in activity, woman, insofar as she is rational, despite having the passive role in procreation, must still conceive of herself as active. It is “contrary to reason for the second sex to have the satisfaction of the sexual drive as its end, for it would then have mere passivity as its end” (FNR 266). Thus, the satisfaction of a woman’s sexual drive must take on a different form, must appear differently from what it is actually or initially. Once transformed, this drive appears as love.

Fichte’s account of the necessity of the transformation of woman’s sexual drive into love doesn’t rule out, conceptually, the possibility of woman *failing* to effect this transformation. He acknowledges this as a possibility. He conceives of it, however, as utterly immoral. As he states in the *System of Ethics*:

In its raw state, a woman’s sexual drive is the most repugnant and disgusting thing that exists in nature, and at the same time it indicates the absolute absence of all morality. The lack of a chaste heart in a woman, which consists precisely in the sexual drive expressing itself in her directly, even if for other reasons it never erupts in actions, is the foundation of all vice. In contrast, female purity and chastity, which consists precisely in her sexual drive never manifesting itself as such but only in the shape of love, is the source of everything noble and great in the human soul. For a woman chastity is the principle of all morality (SE 312-313).

The first question I have for Dr. Estes, in her depiction of Fichte’s account of human sexuality as one which “elevates human sexual activity by allowing for a natural transition from lust to conjugal tenderness” (p. 13) is how she would want to characterize sexual activity that fails to

make this transition. Is it really bad, or repugnant as Fichte says, or simply not fully developed (in the context of a project of establishing a just society)?

I will make a brief digression here, to what Dr. Estes mentioned as the second possible objection to her interpretation, which is its embeddedness in Fichte's systematic philosophy. She suggests that a possible way of avoiding this problem is to separate Fichte's account of sexuality from his system. With regard to the passage I have just read, however, its misogyny is slightly tempered in the context of Fichte's understanding of morality, since *anything* that we do for pure pleasure, especially anything involving the body, is repugnant – we ought to eat and drink in order to maintain our strength, as the body ought to be a tool for pursuing our moral vocation, rather than a tool for pleasure (SE 205). It would thus be true that any sexual activity, including male sexual activity, aimed at pure pleasure rather than ultimate transformation into morality would be repugnant to Fichte. There is, however, something especially pointed about Fichte's referring to the direct expression of the female sexual drive as the “foundation of *all* vice”. The second question I have, then, is whether Dr. Estes can expand on her statement that Fichte's account of sexuality “can be separated – even if perhaps it ought not to be separated” from Fichte's system (p. 14).

Another question concerns the nature of the transformation of woman's sexual drive into love. Dr. Estes says, “in order to remain consistent with herself, she must transform and manifest her sexual drive as a drive toward activity” (p. 9). However, I'm not sure how much of this transformation is under a woman's conscious control. Fichte writes that her sexual drive should not enter her consciousness “in its true form” (FNR 267), and that she “cannot acknowledge this drive” (FNR 268). (It's interesting to note that Fichte says that even prostitutes don't acknowledge this drive in its true form, but say they are doing it for the money. [FNR 268]). Consequently, woman is never supposed to know the true form of the drive which is going to determine her life (since her

purpose, for Fichte, is marriage.) She cannot analyze her own drive. It is not even supposed to show up to her consciousness, and if it does, it is something to hold “repugnant,” not something to accept as the first step toward an eventual transformation into love. She does not learn to love; she is only allowed to acknowledge love. Her sexual desire is supposed to be transformed into a “drive to satisfy the man” (FNR 269) and utter submissiveness, without her able to even recognize, within the scope of moral behaviour, that this is what is taking place. It is nice that Fichte refers to love as the “noblest of all natural drives” (FNR 269), but it is predicated on woman never being allowed to recognize its true basis. (On a similar note, I am not sure how fair Fichte is being to men either, in arguing that they can only learn love from a relationship with a woman.)

How much of this is simply a reflection of Fichte’s regrettable views on women, given how deeply entwined it is with his account of the transformation of the sexual drive, which is precisely what Dr. Estes wants to make use of? Is the logic of transformation detachable from Fichte’s analysis of sexual desire itself, in a way that permits Dr. Estes’s interpretation?

I would like to thank Dr. Estes again for her paper, and I share her hope for a day when society might draw together in a “bond of free, mutual give and take” (EPW 161; Estes p. 14).