Sexual Liberalism as Wantonism: A Frankfurtian Defense of Srinivasan

In The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century, Amia Srinivasan offers a new view of sexual desire situated between sexual conservatism and liberalism. She argues that sexual desire should be within the purview of feminist critique given that conventional desires often reflect systems of domination, and that the critique of desire is a way to emancipate ourselves from such systems. However, critics worry that any kind of critique of desire runs the risk of returning to sexual conservatism. To help motivate Srinivasan's theory, I introduce Harry Frankfurt's "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" to draw upon the concept of a "wanton" to first help critique the liberal view of desire, and to offer a way of critiquing our own desire without running into the problems of sexual conservatism.

I.

Are sexual desires a private, personal matter that ought to be free from moral or political critique? Does any critique of sexual desire—even racist hierarchies of desire—inevitably fall into an oppressive authoritarianism or a judgmental moralism? Or is critically examining what we want and why we want it a necessary step towards freedom? The liberal view of sexual desire treats desires as individual preferences that ought to be taken at face value and treated as beyond question. The opposing view is sexual conservatism, which prescribes that we ought to have certain desires, but not others. Dissatisfied with both options, Amia Srinivasan offers a feminist critique of desire, seeking to neither treat sexual desires as mere preferences nor

prescribe a single standard of desire for everyone. Critics, however, worry that Srinivasan's middle ground is not coherent or just ends up falling into sexual authoritarianism. Andrea Long Chu specifically worries that Srinivasan's critique runs the risk of being moralizing: telling people what they are "supposed" to desire and not desire.

In this paper I argue that Srinivasan's position is coherent by drawing upon Harry Frankfurt's theory of free will and higher-order desires. On this view, free will involves a second-order critiquing of desires: to be free, we need to ask whether we want to desire our desires. On this Frankfurtian view of desire, the problem with sexual liberalism is that it falls short of truly free agency, asking us to be no more than what Frankfurt calls "wantons"—beings that do not critically reflect on their desires. Moreover, I argue that this second-order evaluation of our desires need not be moralizing, as long as we are asking ourselves what we want, not what we are "supposed" to want. I will do this by first outlining Srinivasan's argument and Chu's criticism. I will then introduce Frankfurt's theory to defend Srinivasan's feminist position.

II.

The sexual conservative view prescribes that certain desires—for example, heterosexual, same-race relationships, and a gender-structured family—are the ones we are "supposed" to want, and other desires—such as homosexuality and queerness—ought to be resisted. Conversely, the liberal view of sexual desire rejects the conservative view of prescriptive desire, where it does not see desire as a matter of right or wrong, good or bad. Instead, it treats desires as preferences, or an individual matter to be respected. For the liberal, differences in sexual desires are just different sexual

preferences, no different from preferences for ice cream flavours: some people like plain vanilla, others more adventurous flavours, and some would prefer another dessert, or none at all. The important value for the liberal is that no one is shamed for their desires, and that all desires are treated with respect, so long as it does not violate another person's rights. A sexual conservative would reject this analogy altogether, and insist that sexual desire is not just mere preference, but to be treated as something in the realm of ethics or politics.

Srinivasan recognizes that liberalism has had an important place historically, leading the way for sexual liberation and resisting the authoritarianism that sexual conservatism led to; nevertheless, she argues that this way of thinking about desire limits our ability to experience true freedom. Furthermore, liberalism fails to challenge problematic hierarchies of desire which further patterns of discrimination and oppression. Liberalism has little to say if people's sexual desires follow dominant hierarchies of desirability—desiring slim rather than big, white rather than BIPOC—so long as sexual acts themselves are consensual. As Srinivasan puts it, liberalism treats desires as "primordial", where they are beyond the sphere of politics or ethics (Srinivasan 2021, 84). If we are to follow through with these liberal values, there is little we can say about sex and desire; the former needs only to be consensual, and the latter is simply a matter of individual preference. If this were indeed the case, then it would seem that sex and desire are beyond critique.

However, Srinivasan argues that this should not be the case: desire can be problematic. Is there no problem, she asks, with the bodies that are often found the most desirable to be ones that are slim, light-skinned, able-bodied, and cisgendered? Can it still be said that these are just individual preferences, or do

they reflect systems of oppression—heteronormativity, patriarchy—that we are, in other contexts, opposed to (Srinivasan 2021, 84-85)? Srinivasan considers the case of dating apps, where people can post their preference: the prevalent trend is that the most desired qualities in a partner mirror the kind of social hierarchy found everywhere else, where people of colour, transgendered, or plus-sized, are not only less represented, but sometimes openly discriminated against (Srinivasan 2021, 85). Consider how having a preference for certain ethnicities that result in rejecting dating app matches might be considered acceptable under the tolerance for sexual desire as a preference. Yet having the kind of preference which leads to the rejection of friendships or neighbours based on ethnicity would be unacceptable.

If sexual desire in individuals reflects the kinds of discrimination broadly found in society, then it is unlikely that these desires form in a vacuum. Considering what the typical Playboy cover over the years looked like, or the race and body type of the most popular porn stars, or any other medium that fosters desire, it is not unreasonable to conclude desires are at least partially shaped by external forces. Thus, there is good reason to move beyond the liberal viewpoint that understands desire just as innate, and to acknowledge that our sexual desires are in a broad sense political, in that it reflects certain values from the culture and society we come from, both good and bad. The problem with the liberal view is that if we demand that desire be respected and unquestioned in all its forms, then we also insist that patterns of discrimination are also acceptable, so long as it falls under the purview of individual desire. Under liberalism, it seems that there is nothing we can say about someone who actively desires petite, submissive, East Asian women, while at the same time rejecting the notion of ever desiring black or

indigenous women. So long as desires are acted upon with consent, then the desire itself is unproblematic.

With this critique in mind, I believe that Srinivasan is trying to call attention to and revive a feminist tradition from theorists such as Lorde (1984, 53-60), Rich (2003, 11-48), and Willis (2014, 217-225), that critiques sexual desire as a central aspect of the patriarchal and oppressive relations we have been socialized to. It is important to note Srinivasan is not trying to argue that people have a right to be desired, especially not based on race or gender alone. To say that people have a right to be desired implies that people also have an obligation to desire, but asking people to desire someone based on their traits alone seems no different than the kind of sexual authoritarianism which prescribes "right" and "wrong" forms of desire. Furthermore, Srinivasan does not deny that individuals do have a right to their desires, and recognizes that people have a right to be left alone (Srinivasan 2021, 96). Nevertheless, Srinivasan does think that we should be concerned with the fact that many people's sexual desires simply reflect oppressive hierarchies in place. She asks, how do we "dwell in the ambivalent place where we acknowledge that no one is obliged to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired, but also that who is desired and who isn't is a political question, a question often answered by more general patterns of domination and exclusion" (Srinivasan 2021, 90)? An ongoing concern that Srinivasan has throughout her critique of desire is what it means if sexual desire is political. Srinivasan argues that even if the politics of problematic sexual desire is fundamentally a structural problem, we are not absolved of individual responsibility. Deciding for ourselves how we should think of desire determines our role in it (Srinivasan 2021, 101). Both in the introduction (Srinivasan 2021, xiii) and the final section of the Coda (Srinivasan 2021, 122),

Srinivasan asserts that sex—and by extension, our desires—is not free. Desire is personal, but at the same time, shaped by the external world. This raises the question of agency—if desires are not immune to external pressure, to what extent is desire our own? Do we have a responsibility to ourselves to try to free our desires from these external pressures? Is sexual self-critique necessary to make ourselves less "externally defined"—a phrase that Srinivasan (2021, 100) borrows from Audre Lorde (1984, 58). Srinivasan asks, "Is there no difference between 'telling people to change their desires' and asking ourselves what we want, why we want it, and what it is we want to want? Must the transformation of desire be a disciplinary project…or can it be an emancipatory one" (Srinivasan 2021, 100)?

My goal here is to offer an interpretation of Srinivasan's "emancipatory," rather than "disciplinary," project of transforming our desires. Here, Srinivasan takes emancipation to mean freeing our desires from politics, and discipline to mean aligning our desires with politics. The idea is to free our desires from the external pressures and hierarchies of desire that we are socialized into, while avoiding setting up another moralizing standard for what we are "supposed" to want. This project is to be approached first as an individual striving to take control of our desires—whether this means changing our desires to escape the hierarchies of discrimination and oppression—or affirming them as what we genuinely want to want as a means of avoiding sexual wantonism. If the goal of this project is our own freedom in desire, guided by a want for free agency, then we also avoid the problems that arise in judging the desires of others.

III.

To better understand how one might achieve this freedom, I will be using Frankfurt's (1971) theory of free will. This theory

is based on a distinction of two types of desires: first-order desires and second-order desires. A first-order desire is a direct desire for something or to do something, such as a desire to eat ice cream, or a desire to have sex with a particular body type. First-order desires include a desire to not do something or wanting something. A first-order desire that actually moves us to action is what Frankfurt refers to as the will (Frankfurt 1971, 8). When my desire to eat ice cream moves me to go get ice cream from the freezer, then that desire is my will. A second-order desire is a desire to have, or not have, a certain desire, such as a desire to not want ice cream, or a desire to maintain my desire for sex with my partner. In the case that a second-order desire is about a desire that we actually want to move us to action—a desire that we want to be our will—then it is a kind of special second-order desire called a second-order volition (Frankfurt 1971, 7-10). If my second-order desire is that I not only want my first-order desire for ice cream, but I want my desire for ice cream to actually move me to get ice cream—I want to want ice cream—then it is a second-order volition. Under Frankfurt's theory, we are exercising our freedom of will if, and only if, the first-order desire that moves us, the will, aligns with a second-order volition (Frankfurt 1971, 15). Simply put, to act as a free agent, we must not merely act on our strongest desires: we must want to act on the desires that move us.

Frankfurt refers to someone who acts without any kind of second-order volition guiding their will as a wanton: a person with no real sense of agency (Frankfurt 1971, 10-14). For example, I am acting as a wanton when I simply act upon my first-order desires for ice cream, without any kind of deliberation as to whether I even wanted this desire to actually move me to action. Note that this is not the same as me not acting freely, where my will to get ice cream was not the first-order desire that

I wanted to be my will. A wanton is a rational being with the ability to form second-order desires but does not care which first-order desires are actually acted upon, thus has no second-order volitions (Frankfurt 1971, 12-13). The important distinction is that in the former case, enough deliberation has been given to my desires to form second-order volitions, and even if my will and second-order volition does not align, I am still an agent, even if not acting freely in this moment. The wanton seems to be lacking the kind of agency we value—the very agency that separates us as beings with agency, from those that we consider lacking true agency. Frankfurt argues that what makes a person a person is this deeper deliberation, or critical self-reflection, that allows one to care about which desires end up moving them to act (Frankfurt 1971, 11-12).

With this Frankfurtian view in hand, we can see why liberalism about sexual desire falls short. Acting upon sexual desires without further qualifications about the desire is acting wantonly. If liberalism asks that desires be left alone and protected from critique, while also accepting that these desires move us to action, then liberalism is in fact asking us to be wantons, as least in sex driven by desire. The liberal view of desire thus falls short of an important dimension of freedom. The full freedom of agency is achieved by asking what we want to want and allowing this to form second-order volitions to hopefully guide our first-order desires. That said, liberalism is content to insist that first-order desires be tolerated and respected, not interrogated.

Suppose I fiercely believe in and support ending racial discrimination and bigotry, but when I get on my dating app, I only look for dates with white, cisgendered, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, and physically fit partners, as that is

who I desire sex with. If we are to understand desires as political, that is, shaped by the hierarchies and the oppressions of our

society, and recognize that some desires may fit into broader patterns of discrimination, my personal desires here can be subject to critique where I might become more free by aligning my sexual desire, a first-order desire, with some higher level of rationale. If those first-order desires for conventionally attractive people become my will by moving me to action, and I do not think about whether these desires are acceptable to me, based on my own values, then it would seem I am acting as a wanton. After all, I have been brought up to understand that these desires are primordial, personal, and beyond moral scrutiny.

Frankfurt's theory would suggest that I am not acting freely; my will is not being guided by a second-order volition here, and thus, I am acting wantonly. Upon closer inspection, I may come to realize that I am not fully comfortable with the dates I go on, as the desires that move me to action do not align with my values—they are shaped by the very discrimination I wish to challenge in other contexts. These dates may not directly be discriminatory taken at face value, but by examining the desires that I acted upon to get these dates, I can start to form judgements about these first-order desires. If I wanted to be free, or at least more free, I would have to consider not only the kind of desires I have, but what kind of desires I want to actually move me to action. This is especially important in the context of sexual desire, where desire is understood as political.

IV.

Recall that Srinivasan is setting up her feminist critique of sexual desire that offers an alternative to both sexual conservatism and liberalism. However, critics worry that any critique of sexual desire will reintroduce something akin to sexual conservatism. If a critique of desire is taken to mean that people ought to change, then it will just be another form of

prescriptive desire based on feminist values instead of conservative ones. If desires are at all prescriptive, regardless of which values these prescriptions stem from, we seem to be back at sexual authoritarianism.

One version of this worry is voiced by Chu, who argues that even if these patterns of discrimination are true in desire, asking for change at all is a form of moralism. Chu worries that "moralism about the desires of the oppressor can be a shell corporation for moralism about the desires of the oppressed (Berg and Chu 2019)." Historically, the moralizing of desire often ends up targeting queer and otherwise sexually marginalized communities (Berg and Chu 2019), whose desires were already at risk of scrutiny and being judged as wrong, while ignoring the most conventional desires in need of critique. As she puts it, "It's really… hard to figure out a way to tell people to change their desires that isn't moralistic, and that isn't actually about doing the same kind of thing to desire that supposedly queer politics was supposed to be against in the first place. Queers are very, very bad at talking about desires that they are not supposed to have, especially considering that they are people who have, by definition, desires that they are not supposed to have (Berg and Chu 2019)." The concern here is that in an attempt to target problematic kinds of sexual desire, the typical, mundane desires that are often not critically questioned or thought about—such as the seemingly innocuous preference for slim blondes—is too easily redirected to those desires already on the margins. One only needs to consider the times in history where attempts to control or shape the most common desires, say, the desires of men, led to policies that instead restricted the freedoms of women to see that this is a problem to be taken seriously. Srinivasan too, recognizes that such concerns are not unwarranted (Srinivasan 2021, 96).

However, I think that we should understand that Srinivasan's goal here is more about how we emancipate our own sexual desires from politics, rather than passing judgement on the desires of others. She clarifies this point during an interview about The Right to Sex, by suggesting that she has no interest in telling someone what they ought to desire, but rather, asking if what we feel is desire, or a political force guiding what we should not desire. Srinivasan suggests that this also keeps to the queer tradition of the critique of desire (Haas 2021).

I argue that by going through a Frankfurtian critique of our own desires, where we first examine our first-order desires, and then proceed to form second-order desires and volitions, we can both undergo Srinivasan's project, while avoiding the problem that Chu raises. It need not be the case that our first-order desires have to change. Instead, by first examining what our first-order desires are, we can proceed to form second-order desires as a process of coming to know our own desires. If we see that our first-order desires only come from an external source, it might be the case that our second-order desires are to reject the first-order desires. Or it might be the case that we want to maintain our first-order desires because they come from a place of self-knowledge. By critically reflecting upon our own desires, we are acting as persons, in the Frankfurtian sense.

By forming second-order desires about the first, we change our relationship with our first-order desires. There is a difference between wantonism—where we follow a first-order desire without further consideration—and being moved by a first-order desire that is affirmed by a second-order volition. At the very least, one would hope that by having second-order volitions, they are more like a person with agency. This is a way

of achieving emancipation, while still avoiding any kind of prescription of what desire ought, or ought not, to be.

V.

If freedom of the will is only achieved by asking whether we actually want our first-order desires, and the goal of a project to reshape our desires is meant to be emancipatory rather than disciplinary, then it is my hope that my interpretation of Srinivasan's emancipation shows that her argument is not as vulnerable to Chu's objection. Seriously critiquing our own desires by asking what we desire, and whether we want to have these first-order desires, can reveal to us whether our desires reflect oppressive practices and be part of an emancipatory project, at which point we can have further desires about whether we want to maintain our original desires, rather than try to discipline our desires and force them to meet external standards. This would be the first step towards freedom. By seriously critiquing and recognizing the political problems of desire, while at the same time analyzing our own desires, we can consider which desires, if any, should be affirmed and chosen to be the ones we want to move us to action. By doing so, we can genuinely try to open up the possibility of being part of the change for less discriminatory desires. Even if in the end, like Chu, we decide that we might be unable to change problematic desires, our desires may become more free in the process. Srinivasan's The Right to Sex aims to take the first steps in imagining a better world, rather than prescribing one, in which we discover what true sexual freedom means; to take the first step requires us to be open to examining our own desires while respecting the desires of others, and a Frankfurtian account of desire may be the first step forward.

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