Longino, Willis, and Garry on Pornography

Longino

- Pornography is not wrong because it shows nudity or sexuality. It is not wrong because it appeals to ‘prurient interests’. Pornography is wrong because it degrades and demeans women and leads to harm.

- Longino stipulatively defines ‘pornography’ to refer to verbal or pictorial material which represents sexual behavior which is degrading or abusing to one of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation.
  - Not all pictures or descriptions of sexual behavior counts, therefore, as pornography, on Longino’s definition.
  - Books and films like The Girl with the Dragon Tatoo don’t count as pornography, since they don’t endorse women’s degradation, even if they portray it.
  - Depictions of sexual behavior which endorse the behavior without degrading or demeaning the participants, Longino calls ‘erotica’.

- Since, as a matter of fact, most actual pornography is pornography in which women are the degraded or abused participant, most actual pornography is wrong because it demeans and abuses women, and leads to harm.

- How does pornography demean and degrade women?
  - Women in pornography are only concerned with the sexual pleasure of men; men are not at all concerned with the sexual pleasure of women (or else the woman is depicted as taking pleasure in the man’s sexual gratification).
  - In violent pornography, women are physically abused (bound, tortured, or raped) for men’s sexual gratification.

  P1 Pornography encourages its consumers to adopt the attitude that women are primarily good for sexual use by men, that they derive pleasure from men’s sexual gratification, and that they are fit for abusive and demeaning treatment.

  P2 To some extent, pornography succeeds in getting its consumers to adopt these attitude.

  P3 These attitudes are causally responsible for violence against women and hampering the equality of women in society.

C Pornography harms women.
Willis

- Longino is correct that, as a matter of fact, much pornography is sexist; but many women also enjoy pornography.

- However, Willis objects to Longino’s ‘language game’ of stipulatively defining pornography to be demeaning sexual displays, and her attempts to distinguish it from ‘erotica’.
  - In the first place, defining ‘pornography’ in this way just serves to burden those women who enjoy pornography with more sexual shame and guilt.
  - In the second place, pornography cannot be cleanly distinguished from erotica.

P1 ‘Pornographic’ materials are those which endorse morally objectionable sexual impulses conditioned by the patriarchy.

P2 ‘Erotic’ materials are those which endorse natural, innate sexual desires which are not morally objectionable.

P3 We have no standard for distinguishing between natural and innate sexual impulses and those which have been social conditioned by the patriarchy.

C We have no standard for distinguishing between ‘pornography’ and ‘erotica.’

- Willis says that the de facto standard used to distinguish erotica from pornography is “what turns me on is erotic; what turns you on is pornographic.”

- Willis questions Longino’s causal hypothesis: she doubts that getting rid of pornography would have any effect on the statistics for rape and wife-beating.

Garry

- The respect that men traditionally have for women is predicated on the idea that women are more pure, delicate, and have more refined sensibilities than men. These are ‘good women.’ Women who fall short of these ideals lose this respect—they are thrown from the pedestal. They are ‘bad women.’

- Given that sexuality is considered dirty, one way that women could fall short of these ideals and be a ‘bad woman’ is by being associated with sexuality through appearing in pornography. Since individual women are taken to stand for all women, pornography can depict all women as ‘bad’ women.

- Gary doesn’t think that feminists need to buy into this traditional conception of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women in order to say that pornography degrades women.
  - Rather, feminists could object to being treated as sex objects not because they think that there’s anything dirty about sex, but because they know that the person treating
them as a sex object thinks that there’s something dirty about sex, or just that society at large thinks that there’s something dirty about sex, and that it makes them a ‘bad’ woman. And they object to being thought of in this way.

– Alternatively, they could believe that, in our society, sex is associated with the idea of harm—to ‘screw’ somebody is to harm them; and the one being harmed is the female, the one being screwed. Then, a feminist could object to being treated as a sex object because, in our society, to treat a woman as a sexual object is thereby to treat them as less than fully human.

• This is why, when pornography depicts women as sex objects, it harms them in a way that it doesn’t harm men to be depicted as sex objects. Just like spreading the rumor around high school that you have a prolific sexual history damages you more if you’re a woman than a man, so too being seen as a sexual object can harm women in a way that it can’t harm men—it takes away their respect, and turns them into ‘bad’ women.

• Nevertheless, given changes in society’s attitudes, there would not be anything wrong with pornography per se.