Bar On and Hopkins on Sado-Masochism

Bar On

- We can define Sado-Masochism (SM) to be any practice which eroticizes violence, domination, pain, or powerlessness.

- The opponents of SM do not think that SM should be outlawed. Nevertheless, they think that SM is morally problematic.

- Bar On presents the following argument against the practice of SM:

  P1 Practices which violate the right to determine what can be done to and with one’s body are morally unacceptable.

  P2 The eroticization of violence, domination, pain, or powerlessness violates the right to determine what can be done to and with one’s body.

  C1 Sexual practices based on the eroticization of violence, domination, pain, or powerlessness are morally unacceptable.

  P3 SM is a sexual practice based upon the eroticization of violence, domination, pain, and powerlessness.

  C2 SM is morally unacceptable.

- She suspects that defenders of SM would push back on P2. She imagines the following line of response: the submissive participants in an SM act consent to being dominated and pained. Moreover, they have the power to end the encounter whenever they like. Given that they have consented, and that they retain the power to opt out of the encounter, SM does not violate their right to determine what can be done to and with their body.

  - Bar On: In previous epochs, we can make out clear examples of people who consented to horrifying acts. To use Hopkins’ examples: women in India consented to throwing themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, and women in China consented to having their daughter’s feet bound. But such consent is ‘merely formal’. That they consented does not mean that they were not being oppressed, or that they possessed the right to determine what happened to their own bodies.

  - So, merely pointing to the fact that the masochist has consented does not establish that the masochist is not being oppressed. And we should be especially suspicious of the claim that the masochist is not being oppressed, given the nature of these sexual encounters—the masochist is bound and bruised, pained and humiliated. Just as
the Indian wife’s decision to throw herself on the funeral pyre—even if it is her decision—is a clear case of oppression, so too is the masochist’s decision to be bound, pained, and humiliated for the sadist’s sexual pleasure. Consent does not lessen this oppression.

Hopkins

- Rather than insist that SM participants really do consent to these sex acts, Hopkins attempts another line of defense: he claims that opposition to SM has misunderstood its nature. SM does not replicate rape, domination, and powerlessness. Rather, SM simulates rape, domination, and powerlessness.

  - Similarly, people riding on a roller coaster simulate plummeting to their deaths. That does not mean that they replicate plummeting to their deaths.

- Because SM simulates, and doesn’t replicate, rape, domination, and powerlessness, several of the morally problematic features of those activities are missing.

  - In a real rape, the victim is not a participant. They have little or not power. In a simulated rape, on the other hand, the “victim” (the person playing the role of victim) negotiates the features of the simulated rape ahead of time, and can used ‘safe words’ to stop or control the scene as it progresses.

- With the distinction between simulation and replication in hand, Hopkins rejects Bar On’s P3. We should not conclude that SM participants derive pleasure from domination, submission, or rape. However, they derive pleasure from the simulation of domination, submission, and rape.

  - This is analogous to the person who rides the roller coaster deriving pleasure from simulating plummeting to their death, even though they are rightly horrified by the thought of actually plummeting to their death.

- What SM participants desire, Hopkins claims, is not domination, submission, or rape, but rather just the simulation of domination, submission, and rape. The simulation is not an inferior substitute for the real deal, which is actually desired—the simulation itself is what is ultimately desired.

- Even if Bar On is correct that we should be critical of the idea that anyone consents to being dominated and humiliated—or that consent to such treatment is impossible—we should not be so critical of the idea that somebody could consent to simulating domination and humiliation.