

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: THE INTERPENETRATION OF PHILOSOPHY AND PORNOGRAPHY

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1. HAVE YOU ANYTHING . . . PHILOSOPHICAL?

Patrons of pre-revolutionary French bookshops who requested ‘livres philosophiques’ did not receive what their modern counterparts would expect. As the book dealer Hubert Cazin explained to the officers holding him in the Bastille, the term was ‘a conventional expression in the book trade to characterize everything that is forbidden’ (quoted in Darnton, 1996, p. 7). Research by historian Robert Darnton in the extensive archives of the eighteenth-century Swiss publisher Société typographique de Neuchâtel has shown that this use of ‘philosophical books’ was widespread. The term encompassed categories of book we now keep separate: the irreligious, the seditious, the libellous, but above all the pornographic.

What should we make of this curious practice? An initial suspicion would be that Cazin and his colleagues were just trying to put the authorities off the scent. Satisfying the French appetite for clandestine literature was a risky endeavour, but lucrative for the determined and ingenious. One stratagem was to ‘marry’ the unbound sheets of such material with sheets from blameless works: interleaving them to escape detection by customs officers (Darnton, 1996, p. 17). Perhaps the euphemism ‘philosophical books’ worked the same way—hiding the explicit and salacious in a tedious sounding category censors would be quick to overlook. However, reality is considerably stranger. Firstly, many of the ideas which the French censor found too controversial were in some respect philosophical, such as challenges to the authority of the monarchy or the Catholic church. But that does not explain the classification of overt pornography as philosophical. Secondly, although some of the works fit happily into modern categories, whether as respectable Enlightenment classics or disreputable libertine smut, many others are hopelessly hybridized: improbable marriages of philosophy and pornography.

Closer inspection of some individual works and their authors may make the situation clearer. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was one of the giants of the French Enlightenment. Best known as the principal editor and contributor of the *Encyclopedie*, a thirty-five volume treasury of scientifically and politically progressive thought, and as the author of works disseminating innovative philosophical ideas, he was also responsible for *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* (1748). This novel concerns one ‘Sultan Mangogul’ (a thinly veiled caricature of Louis XV), who acquires a magic ring with which he may command women’s genitals to speak. The central conceit, that the women’s lower lips speak truths their upper lips disavow, is not original to Diderot, and may be traced back to the thirteenth century fable ‘Le Chevalier Qui Fist Parler les Cons’ (Hellman and O’Gorman, 1965, pp. 105 ff.). Despite its apparent misogyny, this idea has been appropriated by feminist philosophers such

as Luce Irigaray as a positive metaphor for the subtleties of female communication (Sheriff, 2001). Diderot's excursions into the erotic were not restricted to his youth. At the opposite end of his career he published *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772). This fictional work expands the description of Tahiti by the explorer Louis-Antoine, Comte de Bougainville (1729–1811) into a utopian vision of free love, and a powerful statement of the Enlightenment myth of the 'noble savage': that life in a state of nature would be free and blissful.

The philosophical writings of Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens (1704–1771) were almost as numerous as those of Diderot, but are now little read. His principal claim to literary immortality may be *Thérèse Philosophe* (1748), a sexually explicit work he never publicly acknowledged. (Diderot is sometimes credited with this too, but most scholars share the Marquis de Sade's confidence in ascribing it to Argens; Darnton, 1996, p. 89.) The title translates as 'Thérèse, Philosopher', and may allude to an early Enlightenment manifesto, *Le Philosophe* (published 1743, but known earlier in manuscript), attributed to César Chesneau Dumarsais (1676–1756) and later reworked by both Diderot and Voltaire. Dumarsais presents an ideal of the (male) philosopher: committed to reason, which he follows wherever it leads, impatient with religious superstition and conventional morality, conscious of how subject he is to external causes, but determined to understand their influence upon him. Argens's novel concludes with a similar statement of Enlightenment values:

[W]e do not think as we like. The soul has no will, and is only influenced by the senses; that is to say by matter. Reason enlightens us, but cannot determine our actions. Self-love (the pleasure we hope for or the pain we try to avoid) is the motivating force for all our decisions. . . . There is no religion for God is sufficient unto Himself. (Argens, 1996, p. 299)

However, Thérèse acquires these insights from primarily sexual experience. Withdrawn from her convent by a mother concerned that celibacy is fatally weakening her constitution, she first seeks refuge with a celebrated divine, Father Dirrag, an anagrammatic allusion to Jean-Baptiste Girard (1680–1733), a Jesuit whose alleged seduction of a female pupil was a recent scandal. Dirrag is revealed to Thérèse as a hypocrite—she eavesdrops as he persuades a naive (or concupiscent) pupil, through materialist arguments masquerading as Christianity, to accept as spiritual exercises a series of increasingly sexual acts, culminating with an orgasm the pupil mistakes for a transport of religious ecstasy. Thérèse is rescued by a family friend, Mme C., who it transpires is cheerfully cohabiting with another priest, the Abbé T. Again, the still virginal but increasingly voyeuristic Thérèse observes them at close quarters, as they alternate between sexual and philosophical intercourse. Eventually, after an interlude conversing with a retired prostitute (a venerable theme, as we shall see), Thérèse finds contentment as the mistress of an intellectual count who bets his library against her virginity that she won't be able to spend two weeks reading the former without volunteering to surrender the latter. Thus the textual and the sexual intermingle in the novel's form and content.

By far the best known, indeed infamous, of French Enlightenment pornographers is Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). He is less well known as a philosopher. None of his publications are primarily philosophical in the twenty-first century sense, although commentators have professed to extract significant

philosophical content (Airaksinen, 1995, for example). This should not surprise—his works are similar in structure to *Thérèse Philosophe*: explicit sex interrupted by philosophical argument, or vice versa, depending on your priorities. For example, in his dialogue *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (1795) the initially virginal Eugénie receives (enthusiastically) a hands-on sexual education from three older debauchees, one of whom breaks off mid-orgy to read aloud a recently purchased pamphlet, ‘Frenchmen! One more effort, if you truly wish to be republicans!’ This argues for the abolition of capital punishment, on the novel grounds that the crimes for which it was traditionally exacted, calumny, theft, immorality, and murder, are not crimes at all, since entirely natural. This argument is typical of Sade—he categorically rejects the cheerful optimism about human nature we saw in Diderot’s vision of Tahiti, while apparently endorsing the Enlightenment argument that laws of nature should trump laws of man. Sade’s view of life in a state of nature is at least as bleak as Thomas Hobbes’s ‘nasty, brutish and short’, and the nastiness is explored in remorseless detail and at prodigious length. Even *Philosophie*, the shortest and most light-hearted of his pornographic works, culminates with Eugénie raping and, by implication, murdering her own mother. The tricky question Sade’s interpreters have never resolved is whether he should be read as a satirist, showing by the blackest of comedy how the Enlightenment project can lead to an abominable conclusion, or whether he sincerely embraces those abominations.

These three examples demonstrate not only that some ‘philosophical books’ were written by actual philosophers, but also the intimacy of the synthesis of philosophy with pornography widespread in the literary undergrowth of the French Enlightenment.

2. A DEEPER EXPLORATION

One way of understanding the surprising connection between pornography and philosophy is to explore their shared history. The history of pornography, however, raises questions of definition which go beyond the scope of this chapter. Firstly, I shall make no attempt to distinguish pornography from erotica; secondly, I propose to understand them both as texts and images intended to produce sexual arousal. This is a conscious oversimplification, even for twenty-first century pornography. It may be criticized as excluding some material, or including too much, or as resting on a fundamentally wrong-headed approach. Matters become far worse when we go back in time. It has been argued (notably by Kendrick, 1987) that the word ‘pornography’ is a nineteenth century neologism. Of course, we could say with US Supreme Court Judge Potter Stewart that we know pornography when we see it (Tang, 1999, p. 23). Surely historical ‘pornography’ had a similar effect on its consumers as the modern sort, whatever they called it? This appeal to common sense is plausible, but can lead us astray the further back we go. Victorian archaeologists excavating Pompeii confidently designated any building with sexually explicit wall paintings as a brothel, eventually identifying thirty-five of them, eighty times as many per capita as Rome itself (Tang, 1999, p. 35). Modern classicists interpret the material differently, concluding that the Romans had, by modern standards, an astonishingly broad-minded approach to interior décor. Shorn of context, the Pompeian wall-paintings strike us as pornographic, but perhaps the Romans saw them differently. Projecting our own standards into the past can lead to profound misunderstanding.

Nevertheless, these worries can be answered directly for at least one work: *L'École des Filles* (1655), whose pretensions to philosophy are explicit in its subtitle, *La Philosophie des Dames*. Its authorship has never been satisfactorily established, although its publishers, Jean L'Ange and Michel Millot, were respectively fined and hanged in effigy as putative authors (DeJean, 1996, p. 112). The reader response to this book is unusually well-documented. The English diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) records encountering it at a book shop on 13 January 1668. His initial expectations of a suitable present for his wife are overturned by a quick browse, but on 8 February he returns to buy a copy for himself. The following night he reads it:

I did read through *L'Escolle des Filles*; a lewd book, but what doth me no wrong to read for information sake (but it did hazer [cause] my prick para [to] stand all the while, and una vez to decharger [to discharge once]); and after I had done it, I burned it, that it might not be among my books to my shame; and so at night to supper and then to bed (quoted in Turner, 2003, p. 2).

The ejaculatory effect, ineffectually concealed by Pepys's macaronic jargon, and indeed the subsequent incineration, are recognizable in more modern porn consumers. The book which so moved Pepys is a dialogue between two women, in which the experienced Susanne instructs the prospective bride Fanchon in sexual technique. Its claims to philosophical interest may seem slim, but it has been read as both satirizing and utilizing the new scientific method of René Descartes—after a 'discourse on method', a 'process of discovery . . . unfolds: isolation in a heated room, elimination of customary prejudices and external authorities, introspection and lucidly ordered exposition of the fundamentals derived from it' (Turner, 2003, p. 128).

The device of a young woman receiving sexual education from a more experienced woman is widespread; we saw it in *Thérèse Philosophe* and *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*. The older woman is often, although not invariably, a current or former prostitute, hence such works are sometimes described as whore or courtesan dialogues. Numerous other contemporary examples could be cited; the common inspiration seems to be the *Ragionamenti*, or *Dialogues*, of Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) which first appeared in 1536, with a sequel in 1556. Aretino, a Renaissance humanist, made an even more influential contribution to erotic literature, the *Sonetti sopra I 'XVI Modi'* (1524), or 'sonnets on the sixteen ways of doing it'. These verses were inspired by a series of prints anatomically detailed enough to land their engraver in a papal prison. Aretino successfully lobbied the pope for his release—and then composed the accompanying sonnets (Findlen, 1996, pp. 95 f.). The first of the *Ragionamenti* is a debate between two women, Nanna and Antonia, as to which of the three careers available to women, wife, nun or whore, Nanna should chose for her daughter Pippa. They decide on the last, since 'the nun betrays her holy vows and the married woman murders the holy bond of matrimony, but the whore violates neither her monastery nor her husband' (Aretino, 1994, p. 158). In the sequel Pippa receives an education in her future career.

The *Ragionamenti* are in part a satire on the more earnest dialogues of Aretino's contemporary Renaissance humanists. They in turn were inspired by the resurgence of interest in Plato, whose principal works were translated into Latin in the

fifteenth century, having being unknown in western Europe for centuries (Woodhouse, 1982, p. 122). Of particular influence was Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue debating the nature of love. The preferred theory involves an ascent from mere physical lust to more rarefied forms of love, culminating in an abstract intellectual ideal. The Renaissance reading of this passage is the source for the concept of 'platonic love'—although our use of that idea overlooks its roots in physical intimacy. An even closer connexion between sex and philosophy may be found elsewhere in Plato's work. In his *Republic* Plato has Socrates characterize philosophy as at 'the mercy of others who aren't good enough for her, and who defile her and gain her the kind of tarnished reputation you say her detractors ascribe to her—for going about with people who are either worthless or obnoxious' (Plato, 1993, 495c). This sexual metaphor for philosophy may mark the inception of its relationship with pornography.

Plato is the best known author of Socratic dialogues, in which philosophical ideas are developed in conversation between Socrates and supportive or hostile interlocutors. Socratic dialogues were written both by former pupils such as Plato and Xenophon, and by later writers with no direct acquaintance with Socrates. Since Socrates left behind no writings of his own, such works are our only access to his thought, but it is clear that the Socratic dialogue developed a life of its own as a leading genre of ancient philosophy. Correspondingly, the courtesan dialogue was a leading genre of ancient pornography. The best known surviving example is that of Lucian, the second-century A.D. humorist, whose work is likely to have influenced Aretino (Findlen, 1996, p. 78). Crossovers—dialogues between philosophers and courtesans—are surprisingly common (McClure, 2003, p. 102). This juxtaposition seems to have served a variety of purposes for ancient authors. It could be satirical: Epicurus and his school were often linked to courtesans in this way, since he admitted women and taught that pleasure was the highest good. (The innuendo was misleading, since the Epicurean ideal was closer to the avoidance of pain than unbridled hedonism.) But one of the most frequent purposes of these comparisons is to reflect on persuasion, something both professions have in common, whether by deduction or seduction. This could serve to unite or separate philosophers and courtesans, as demonstrated by two younger contemporaries of Lucian. Alciphron finds a lowest common denominator: 'the means by which they persuade are different; but one end—gain—is the goal for both'; whereas Aelian has Socrates distinguish himself from a courtesan in terms of his comparative lack of success: 'you lead all of your followers on the downward path while I force them to move toward virtue. The ascent is steep and unfamiliar for most people' (both quoted in McClure, 2003, p. 102). I shall return to these two modes of persuasion in the final section.

3. THE LAY OF ARISTOTLE

Although Plato's works were scarcely known in the middle ages, Aristotle was so strongly associated with philosophy that he could be referred to just as 'The Philosopher'. Yet many medieval and early modern depictions of Aristotle show him naked, on all fours, and being whipped by a woman riding on his back, as in Fig. 1 (see Bagley, 1986, for other examples). An analysis of this unexpected predilection for female domination may clarify the relationship between physicality and philosophy. The narrative behind these images describes Aristotle's humbling by the mistress of his pupil, Alexander the Great. The earliest known version is

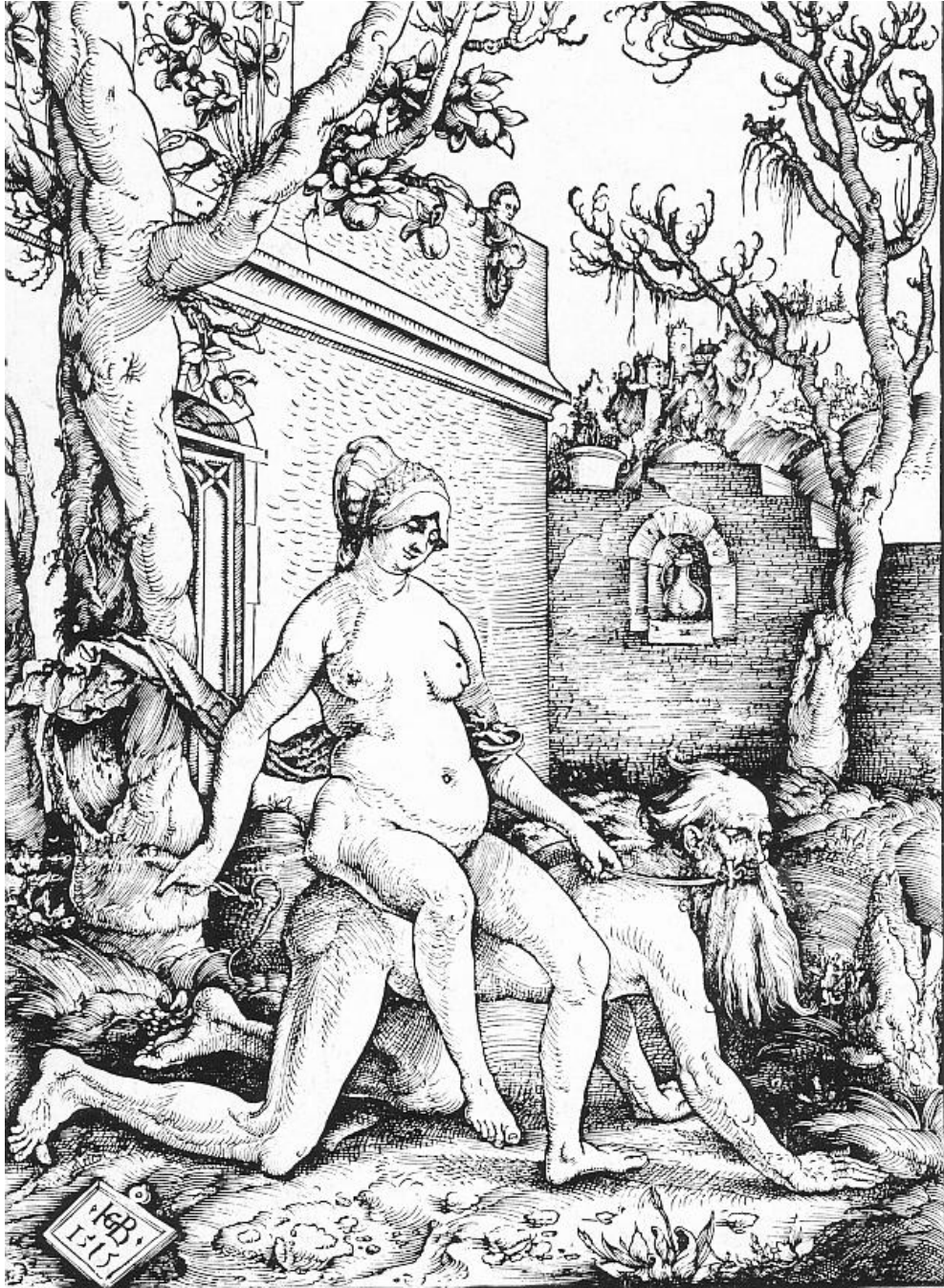


FIGURE 1. Aristotle and Phyllis by Hans Baldung, 1513

Henri d'Andeli's thirteenth century *Lay of Aristotle*, which was frequently retold. Whether or not Andeli invented the story, no modern commentator supposes it to have any connexion to the historical Aristotle (Blackburn, 2004, p. 10). In the story Alexander, campaigning in India, is distracted from his duties by an affair with a local girl. (Andeli does not name the girl. Later sources generally call her Phyllis, or occasionally Campaspe, seemingly by confusion with a different legendary mistress of Alexander.) Aristotle advises him to break it off, counseling that 'Your heart has so far strayed as to forget/the rule of moderation: hero's goal' (Andeli, 1963, p. 334). Phyllis finds out, and devises a plan to get her revenge. As she tells Alexander:

Against me then, as you shall see tomorrow,
your master's subtle skill in dialectic,
his intellect, his vaunted golden mean
will not prevail. Rise early and you'll see
how Nature takes the measure of your master (Andeli, 1963, p. 336)

The 'golden mean' is the same 'rule of moderation' which Aristotle pressed on Alexander. In Aristotle's ethics virtue is a middle way which practical reason should navigate between opposed extremities of vice. Phyllis identifies herself with a Nature powerful enough to sweep aside such subtle ethical calculus. The following morning she disports herself outside Aristotle's study so seductively that he attempts to ravish her. She affects to consent, but on one condition:

I find a great desire has overcome me
to make of you my steed and ride you now
across the greensward underneath the trees.
And you must be (no villain rider I!)
saddled to carry me in elegance. (Andeli, 1963, p. 339)

The plan is enacted, to the amusement of Alexander in his concealed viewpoint. After absorbing the absurd spectacle, he reveals the trick to Aristotle. But it is the philosopher who has the last word:

In one short hour, Love omnipotent
has toppled all my wisdom's wide empire.
Now learn from this: if I, both old and wise,
have yet been driven to commit a deed
mad even to dream of, shocking to perform,
you, lusty youth, will surely not go free (Andeli, 1963, p. 340)

The story, and especially its comic denouement, was a frequent subject for mediæval and Renaissance art. Fig. 1, the second of two versions by Hans Baldung, a pupil of Albrecht Dürer, is characteristic. There is no saddle, but like most artists, Baldung has added a bridle and riding crop to this scene of pioneering pony-play.

This story can be read two ways. For Andeli and his contemporaries, Aristotle is right: Nature must be subordinated to reason (and by extension, woman to man). The narrative illustrates the perilous consequences of ignoring this injunction. But, on the view defended by Diderot or Argens, Phyllis is right: Nature cannot be subordinated to reason. If even Aristotle cannot abide by his own injunctions, what chance would Alexander, or the rest of us have? The difference between these two perspectives may determine how the hybridization of pornography with philosophy is received. On Aristotle's account, it is a bizarre anomaly; on Phyllis's,

an intelligible continuity. Conversely, philosophical arguments for the censorship of pornography would be incongruous to Phyllis, but welcomed by Aristotle.

4. TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

We have seen that Phyllis's perspective has had a hand in many different theses. The most philosophically central of these is the analysis of persuasion. I will conclude with a novel application of this analysis, which may help defend Phyllis's diversity against 'Aristotelian' censorship. But first I should address the outstanding problem of classification. The categories which we apply to the world, and especially the categories which we apply to human activity, may appear to be natural and unalterable, but they have histories, and may be transformed in a few generations. We have already seen that 'pornography' is one such category. 'Philosophy' is another. The term is not a new one—it can be traced back two and a half millennia. But its use has altered throughout that period. For example, much of what we now call science was called philosophy by its discoverers. The use of 'philosophy' in the eighteenth-century French book trade was extraordinary, but it was part of a complex history of changing meaning.

The nineteenth century saw increasing academic specialization and professionalization. Philosophy and science drew apart, but the universities came to monopolize them both. New venues for publication opened up, and the general market became less important. Moreover, university professors became concerned with respectability in ways that had not troubled the amateurs of past generations. In the later nineteenth century the study of sexuality came within the scope of academic science. Although some of this work repeated that of the previous century, it did so on very different terms, professing to substitute the dispassionate objectivity of a narrow elite for particularity and mass audience appeal. Concepts of free speech also evolved in the nineteenth century. New liberal democracies expected a freedom of political speech, both on the hustings and in print, alien to absolutist monarchies such as pre-revolutionary France. But such freedom did not extend to all varieties of banned speech. Hence pornography emerged as a separate category of material that could be safely banned by societies otherwise congratulating themselves on their freedoms. These processes may explain the rarity of philosophical pornography in the last two centuries.

Yet there have been occasional revivals. New York philosophy professor John Lange is much better known as John Norman, author of the Gor series, a sequence of more than two dozen fantasy novels increasingly concerned with depicting and justifying the sexual subordination of women to men. As he states in a typical passage, 'In the Gorean view, female slavery is a societal institution which enables the female, as most Earth societies would not, to exhibit, in a reinforcing environment, her biological nature. It provides a rich soil in which the flower of her beauty and nature, and its submission to a man, may thrive' (quoted in Fitting, 2000, p. 93). The Gor books were best-sellers in the 1970s, but dwindled in popularity in the 1980s, and struggled to find a publisher in the 1990s—something Lange attributes to feminist conspiracy (Fitting, 2000, p. 102). However, in recent years his work has found a new audience, and inspired a vast, mostly internet-based sexual subculture (Bardzell and Odom, 2008). (Not a boast many philosophers can make!) Curiously, a substantial proportion of both audiences appears to be female (Fitting, 2000, p. 94). In his one philosophical monograph, Lange stated that 'it cannot be

denied that there is a certain schizophrenic charm in embracing an immoral theory at a suitably abstract level while in practice devoting oneself earnestly to worthy endeavors, redoubling as though in compensation one's efforts to bring about a more just state of affairs in the world' (Lange, 1970, p. 55). It is tempting to read this autobiographically, as suggesting that the attitude to gender relations in his novels is satirical. But other statements would suggest that he is sincere—indeed, it would be consistent for him to view his novels as the 'worthy endeavors' and gender equality as the 'immoral theory'.

In recent decades, philosophical engagement with pornography has mostly comprised arguments for its censorship. Paradoxically, Lange's novels may undercut one of the most sophisticated of these, that pornography tacitly subordinates women (Langton, 2009, pp. 38 ff.). Lange intermingles his pornography with explicit philosophical advocacy of such subordination. This poses a dilemma. Prospective censors must choose between banning the whole thing or just the pornography. If they endorse the former, they concede that their programme is not just aimed at disposable entertainment, but strikes directly at freedom of thought (if freedom includes the freedom to be wrong). But what grounds could they have for sparing the philosophy? It endorses conclusions just as obnoxious as the pornography. The only practical basis for tolerating philosophical arguments for conclusions forbidden to pornography would seem to be that the philosophy is less harmful, that is less persuasive than the pornography. Lange's philosophy may well be less persuasive than his pornography, but if his arguments are so weak, then the feminist counterarguments must be exceptionally strong. Hence censorship would be unnecessary, unless even these exceptionally strong arguments are weaker than pornography, that is, unless philosophy is *in general* less persuasive than pornography. But if this depressing observation is true, how could anyone be persuaded by the philosophical arguments for censorship, since they are to be weighed against pornography which, even the censors must admit, indeed insist, is more persuasive? Of course, this does not mean that what they say is not true, only that if it is then it will not be persuasive. Which suggests that if their argument is persuasive, then their conclusion must be false.

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