

Desensitization from a Gra(e)y Morality

A Rejoinder to Ole Martin Moen's Philosophical Review of "50 Shades of Grey"

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50 Shades of Grey has provided the public a “peep” on the enterprise of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline with Sadism and Masochism). Print and big screen depiction of BDSM is not an entirely novel as a topic for quite a many as interminable as other morally disturbing dilemma and realities. However, it has become a recent hype which tends to question the way we look, understand, and even subtly or largely accept this theme. As Prof. Ole Martin Moen's¹ statement, “it seeks to challenge common stereotypes”. Although at the end, he revoke by stating that it is yet to be made clear. Nonetheless, it triggered the way many of us think of convention, power neutrality of relationships, moral and psychological perception to deviancies, just to name a few. But what is more alarming and why philosophers ought to poke their noses on this topic are the ethical implications of the public's reception of the story, i.e., how the story may potentially desensitizes the public from BDSM.

This paper intends to be a rejoinder, not much of a reply to an argument but a continuing philosophical review initiated by Prof. Ole Martin Moen on his article on 50 Shades of Grey.

An Unconventional Analogy

50 Shades of Grey has inversely portrayed a modern (or aptly, distorted) Cinderella story. It tells us about the classic innocent fragile young lady (Anastasia Steele) waiting for the dashing prince charming (Christian Grey) to change her life, and change it did. However in this story, thralldom, bondage and punishment are not done by the wicked step-relatives but by the prince himself. There were no longer ornamented grand ballrooms, but instead, a velvety red playroom. The glass shoes were replaced by gray blindfold, ties and cuffs. She doesn't wear elegant gowns magically garb at her anymore; even so, she doesn't wear anything at all (isn't that magical?). She ceases from running away at the stroke of midnight but eludes the signing of the contract. The thrill of the long search and catch was no longer there, but by submission and dominance instead. Grey, the prince, was still depicted with royalty – his empire with all the fancy perks opulence vestiges him. It was there to impress and Steele was bedazzled.

However, these impressions portray a resounding testament and toleration for some, that power and prestige, still, wins over the girl. She was not bedazzled by sheer brilliance but by dominance. It should be made clear that dominance and submission in a BDSM condition is consensual. It may be perceived that there is a small voice saying its 'ok' to initially coerce the girl, thinking that she will definitely consent to it later. Consent is not given *ex post facto*. It defeats the purpose of consent after the fact. Taking a person against her will is not consensual and can be considered as an act of violence.

¹ Ole Martin Moen, “Fifty Shades of Grey” - A Philosophical Review. *Practical Ethics*, February 15, 2015, accessed February 22, 2015, <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2015/02/fifty-shades-of-grey-a-philosophical-review/>.

Violence is regarded as one of the modifiers of human acts. This implies that force or violence, undoubtedly, can compel someone to do something, however it cannot compel people to will the same thing. Hence, when a woman who consents during or after the fact, the voluntariness of her will, even though apparently given, may be questioned.

Porn is the New Romance

Yes, it was utterly clear that Mr. Grey said “[he] doesn’t do romance.” But if you would consult Google for the definition of *romance*, it connotes a feeling of mystery, excitement, and remoteness from everyday life. It does not necessitate love, but a mere association of it. This projects a balance between attraction and indifference to the object of romance. The way Mr. Grey pursued Ms. Steele in a constant oscillation of wanting and not-wanting, the struggle of taking and shoving her away, affirms otherwise.

But towards the gist of the story, sexual deviancy has been introduced and gradually conveyed as something thrilling, something reassuring, something positive, and something to look forward. There is a lure of submission, a new found hedonistic spice. The story is not just a tease to get people interested in BDSM but a subtle marketing pitch for pornography. Pornography is already there time immemorial, but guising it to look as romance is disconcerting. There is a reason why BDSM, particularly sexual sadism (302.84) and sexual masochism (302.83), are among the list of Paraphillias (Sexual Disorders) in APA’s DSM 5. Yet morally, treating people as mere objects of sexual gratuity or pleasure is base and vile, among others, and definitely least of it is romance.

Boiling the Frog

The argument on romance might be the least of our concerns. But subsequently, the constant infusion of violent pornography or deviancies may incur, not only a free reign of inhibitions, more likely the sum of all fears. Allow me to recourse to a popular tale to explicate my point. Most of us have heard the story of how to boil a live frog. The first scenario was placing water in a casserole, heating it up until it boils. Then, place the live frog in the boiling water. Impulsively, the frog will jump out of the water. Catch the same frog. This time place the frog in a casserole with tepid water. Then, boil it slowly. The frog will get used to the gradual rising of the heat, apparently enjoying the water. It will not notice that the constant increase of heat will boil him and it will be too late to realize and jump out of it. And that is how to boil a frog. This is what happens when a taboo becomes a commonplace and it becomes subtly acceptable at the start. Then, low and behold, it will become the convention. Unbeknownst, the fatally boiling water will continue to cook the society dry, until it is late. This is not a case of a slippery slope fallacy, but a situation psychologists’ called “learned helplessness”². When certain situations are perpetuated and tolerated overtime, eventually, we develop callous. Callousness numbs us of the realities the situation inflicts and we realize that we are seemingly helpless to redress it anymore. We become desensitized to it.

² Jovino G. Mirov. “The Malady of Apathy and the Task of Philosophy”. *Ad Veritatem* 8, no. 2 (2009): 393-411.

The Dread and Task

This may be considered as the dread of ethicists in our society, when the morally bad turns confusingly gray and the society develops learned helplessness and apathy towards it. Later, it might become the convention, the new normal. Remember that evolution is gradual but looking everything at hindsight, changes were radical. The sum of all fears is a society morally bewildered and indifferent to act. The task of ethicists and philosophers alike is to continue to ask and be critical of realities that confront us and at the same time empower the public with informed moral vigilance.