

THE MORALITY OF PROSTITUTION

SARA MACKENZIE

In some people's ideal world prostitution would not exist. In other people's ideal world marriage would not exist. In the ideal world of some poor unfortunates sex itself would not exist. However, sex, marriage and prostitution all do exist in today's world and our moral attitudes towards them have to be considered.

PROSTITUTION IS MORALLY NEUTRAL

I have always found sex to be a rather peculiar thing morally. People have such emotionally charged and divergent views about it. With other subjects such as world peace, or an end to starvation, there seems to be general agreement that these are "Good Things". But bring up the subject of sex and immediately there are

vastly different views as to whether it is a "Good Thing" or a "Bad Thing". Also with prostitution.

There are some to whom prostitutes are near heroes, such as Robert Heinlein who characterises them as such in his books ... There are others to whom prostitutes represent "fallen women". To the vast majority of people they are an unknown quantity apart from stereotypical received media images. To some feminists and psychologists they are victims. Of course, the truth is that they are none of these things. In the main they are a non-homogeneous group of people doing a job. The same job. And that is about the only common characteristic many prostitutes share.

To me, prostitution is morally neutral, as is sex itself. It is how one uses prostitution that gives it moral

Libertarian Alliance Pamphlet No. 19

ISSN 0953-7783 ISBN 1 85637 133 4

A Joint Libertarian Alliance/British Association of Libertarian Feminists Publication

© 1992: Libertarian Alliance; British Association of Libertarian Feminists; Sara Mackenzie.

Sara Mackenzie is an ex-prostitute who is currently a writer and researcher.

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF LIBERTARIAN FEMINISTS

Chairwoman: Judy Tame



25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN

www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

value. The act of paying for sex for me confers no moral value on it one way or another. It is neither good nor bad, it is simply an act. This also applies for me in the separation of sex from love and marriage (or a committed relationship, etc.). If one uses prostitution, or sex itself, to try to harm another human being it is morally bad. If one uses either to help or give pleasure to another human being it is morally good. It is as simple as that. Of course, in the real world it is never as simple as that, but that is my bottom line.

The morality I personally apply to my working life is not different from the one I apply in my personal life, since I think the issues—sex, its uses and respect for other people—are the same. My boundaries are that I would never commit a sex act with a child, an animal or another adult against their will. The reason for the first two is that I do not believe they can give informed consent, and for the latter because clearly they have not given their consent. I would also not do anything that harmed another person, or myself permanently, physically or psychologically, and I would not take part in sex that would be used against people, e.g. for blackmail or corruption purposes. Also, with the advent of AIDS I think we have a duty to ourselves and other people to practise safer sex, be informed about sexual health matters, have regular check-ups and keep ourselves generally fit and healthy.

SEX AND RELIGION

In an ideal world, of course, we would all follow our own personal morality to the letter. However, being only human beings, we do the best we can, and we are, hopefully, tolerant of other people's shortcomings. Unfortunately, in their quest for human perfection and saintliness, some religions become almost inhuman in their intolerance of the differences between people in their desire, capacity and need to have dissimilar lifestyles. The way they address these differences is usually by trying to impose their blueprint for the perfect human society on the people of the country or countries they are powerful within. They use a number of devices ranging from gentle psychological persuasion to downright brutality, but their justification is universal: they have the right to do it because God said they could, or should. Their blueprint rarely allows for sex outside marriage, homosexuality or prostitution. And yet they claim to want to make human beings happy.

For all those religious extremists (note that I do not say those with a religious belief) of the patriarchal religions who consider that sex is only valid within marriage, or at the very least, within a committed relationship, I would have this to ask. What do you have to say, or offer, to those who, because of their circumstances or personalities, are not able to have such a

relationship? What do you say to those who yearn for the human contact of sex but do not wish to exploit or hurt anyone in seeking this by taking anyone by force (rape), or by making false promises ("Yes, I'll leave my wife/marry you", etc.), or by playing around with people's feelings ("Of course I love you", etc.)? I would contend that you do not have anything to say or offer that would mean very much to many people in such circumstances. Being told to control oneself does not fulfil a person in such situations as much as the warmth of another human body and human sexuality.

In my view, rather than fulfil one's needs in the ways previously mentioned, it is far more moral to do an honest deal with another person who is willing to offer companionship and sex for money. What I consider one of the most immoral things to do in the area of human sexuality is to feign love for another person in order to get sex. This way you can break another person's heart, possibly also their relationships and family life, and from what I have seen they rarely deserve it. Better to go to a professional who can handle the situation, rather than get the sixteen-year-old office girl pregnant.

What of the married man who goes to a prostitute? What of the morality of that? Well, all I can say is that, firstly, anyone's personal morality is precisely that: their personal morality. That means they are responsible for it, and they alone are responsible for it. Prostitutes do not rape or seduce their clients even if they could be said to "tempt" them. At the level of escort girls, this "temptation" is not even initially visible; clients merely assume (and rightly so in the main) that behind the discreet ad or introduction, sex is one of the possible services available. However, contrary to the view of female sexuality favoured by many traditional religions, this female sexuality is not rampant and actively waiting to seek men out, to "devour" them and to lead them to sin; on the contrary it is calm, civilised, warm and receptive. It is men who actively seek out prostitutes; and prostitutes who warmly receive their clients.

THE SAD SIDE OF PROSTITUTION IS EXAGGERATED

It may come as a shock to some readers to actually learn that I, and my friends, *like* our clients, and that they like us. It is a scene far removed from the surly encounters of mean faced clients conducting hostile and feelingless sex with hard nosed drug addict prostitutes down some back street near a main line railway station. Although it has not been unknown for some respected law enforcement officials who impose state morality on the rest of us to engage in prostitution at this level, this is mainly an image beloved of, and useful to, the media.

I am not saying that such encounters do not exist. I know that they do. But there are two reasons why I am not prepared to discuss them here. One is that this negative side of prostitution has already been dealt with by endless documentaries, films and books. The second is that I am not qualified to do so since I have not experienced it, although I have had contact with some who have.

On a cynical note, during conversations with the girls who have been involved in the sadder side of prostitution, I have observed that nearly all of the media portrayals of it and all the so-called “research” into it has served more to line the pockets of the politicians and documentary makers than actually improve the situation of those involved (this being the usual justification for the documentaries and the “research” in the first place). These media portrayals also unfortunately serve the more hideous purpose of giving to those people in our society who are morally, psychologically and emotionally impaired by insecurity yet another group to look down upon. They thus help to keep the masses in their place.

WOMEN ARE ENTITLED TO SEXUAL FULFILMENT

I write about escort work because it is what I know about. It may be that some of what I write about here challenges some women and makes it appear that I am anti-women and only pro-men. This is certainly not the case. I am pro human beings and human rights. I think the imbalance, in most prostitutes being women and most clients men, is a reflection of society and not of my particular point of view.

Most of what I said about the morality of sexual behaviour at the beginning of this paper applies equally to women and to sexual encounters outside of those experienced between prostitute and client. It is merely that most women who are not in a sexual relationship, or seeking a sexual encounter outside of one, do not need the services of a prostitute. That’s just the way it is. And if they did need the services of a prostitute (male for argument’s sake), it would be difficult for them to find one. That’s also just the way it is.

But in my book, it’s also the way it shouldn’t be. Women are just as entitled to sexual fulfilment as men are, and if the way they get this is through payment this should be just as easily accessible to them as it is to men. Indeed, all the evidence is that, given the need, the opportunity and the wealth, women will pay for sex with money or favours as much as men will. (I base this on the toyboy/casting couch developments apparently taking place in the Western world amongst certain old ladies at the moment.) Whether you view this situation as evidence of women’s continuing liberation, or of the decline of moral standards in general depends entirely on where you stand. I am sure you know which side of the fence I am on.

PROSTITUTION AS A SAFETY VALVE

In this vein, on the discussion of sexual morals in general, my conclusion from what I have learned in my profession is that those attached men who seek out prostitutes are looking for sexual excitement or release outside of their relationship, and would do so whether this was paid for or not. And despite what many moralists or puritans think, prostitution does not in this respect threaten the institution of marriage. On the contrary, it upholds it. Prostitution in this sense acts as a safety valve. It allows for a sexual liaison outside of the main relationship without the attendant emotional complications that may be encountered with an unpaid partner, e.g. the risk of the paramour falling in love and demanding that a man leave his wife etc., even though this was never promised in the first place. Unless sex is a ten minute one off back street act, I contend that it is impossible to guarantee that emotions of affection and love are not aroused but at least within the confines of the prostitute/client relationship this is mitigated as much as possible, and a true professional in this sense should be attuned to the emotions of her clients and of herself in this direction. Love was not part of the deal (although care, healing and romance might be) and it is part of the prostitute’s job (not the client’s) to control the emotional boundaries in the relationship and keep it professional, in the same way as a doctor or psychotherapist might.

I recently had a client who fell in love with me and wanted to marry me, but since I did not love him and since I do not mess around with people’s feelings—even for money—and would never marry anyone just for money, I had to terminate the relationship. I still see this ex-client and several others for dinner occasionally. So much for hostility and exploitation between prostitutes and clients!

The relationship that exists between myself and my present clients, and more particularly between myself and my ex-clients as mentioned in the last paragraph, shows beyond any shadow of doubt that prostitution goes beyond two objects engaging in an act with each other. It is about two people engaging in a particular way of interacting, some of which may or may not include sex. (I say this because sometimes clients just want to talk!)

PROSTITUTES DO NOT SELL THEMSELVES

A prostitute is not a commodity and neither is sex. Prostitution is a service and a prostitute sells her companionship and sex as a service. Her body is present at the time of transaction as the vehicle for these services as is the body of any other professional at the time of selling a service. A surgeon can only perform surgery through using his hands, and give comfort to the patients through speaking to them. At the time of the transaction he uses his body —his hands and voice — to bring into practise the knowledge of his

profession. Employees give up some control over their bodies during periods of employment; they contract them to employers in exchange for rewards. When the transaction of service or employment is over both the prostitute and employee walk away as free individuals with the reward they have earned. At the very most, both the prostitute and the employee “rent” their bodies, time, skills and knowledge for an exchange. (It is not for nothing that young male prostitutes are called “rent boys”.) The ownership of each remains with their self. The only way a person could sell himself as a commodity would be if a person sold himself into slavery.

I would say that in some ways prostitutes have more freedom as autonomous individuals than many employees, since they can negotiate their fees over and over again with every single transaction and can vary them accordingly.

To continue with the actual practice and morality of prostitution and not just the economics of it, I would refer once again to the situation of clients possibly falling in love with prostitutes (and sometimes *vice versa*). The former situation has occurred many times in my professional life and in those of colleagues, and it wreaks more emotional havoc than any hostile or misunderstanding attitudes of the public at large. It is of course a risk anyone in a therapeutic job takes, the difference being that other therapeutic professions are honoured and esteemed by society whilst mine is not. I only wish the reader could speak to my clients in the way they speak to me, to learn how honoured and esteemed prostitutes are by their clients, but I suspect that a large part of society’s hostility stems from the fact that people at some level already know or suspect this and this threatens too many people too much of the time. The final tribute must surely be the one that came from one client of mine who paid for my mother’s hospital bills prior to her death. I have never felt less degraded in my life!

CONTROL MASQUERADING AS CARE

I have talked at large about the day-to-day situation of my job because I do not believe there is any morality in holding an intellectual viewpoint that is not supportable by one’s emotional reality. In this respect this paper is a digression from the normal intellectual/academic position taken by most LA publications. (Not that I’m criticising!)

I support the libertarian viewpoint that first and foremost we own our own bodies and that they are ours to do with as we please, provided we do not infringe upon others. It therefore follows that prostitution as an act between consenting adults should not be coercively controlled by outside agencies, whatever these agencies are, e.g. state, religion, etc. Indeed, I uphold that the most immoral desire of all is the desire to control, especially consenting adults engaging in sex-

ual activities that in reality should concern no-one but themselves. (I personally do not believe that children or animals can give informed consent so I reserve my freedom of choice of activity to consenting adults. Others may agree or disagree with this point. That is their right.)

Behind all the laws concerning the criminalisation of prostitution lurks not real care, but control masquerading as care. The desire to impose one’s moral code on the other, even against that other’s will. And the desire to control usually arises from insecurity and fear. To those who seek to control prostitution in particular, and sexuality general, I would suggest that they investigate their own fears rather than seek to control others. As one of Shakespeare’s characters once said, they “protest too much”.

The intellectual framework of libertarianism helps prostitution since libertarianism encompasses as one of its central tenets the concept of property rights, and recognises that prostitutes own their own bodies and should be free to engage with their clients in paid sexual liaison with them. However, I hope that this paper has also helped the reader to understand the living reality of prostitution and prostitutes. It was never intended to just put forward an intellectual argument.

I was about to write that this paper was written by a real prostitute, not just an intellectual. I’ll re-phrase that. This paper was written by a prostitute who is also an intellectual. And while we are in the business of dispelling myths, among my prostitute friends right now are practising nurses, beauty therapists, solicitors, company directors, etc. In fact my own background is that I, like Virginia Bottomley, was a qualified social worker. (And we’ll have no hissing from the back row of the ranks of the libertarians, whether at mine or at Virginia Bottomley’s former profession!) Prostitutes don’t wear labels or come in stereotype forms; your employer, employee, friend, in fact anyone you know (including men), may be, or may have been a prostitute! I should know, some of my best friends are prostitutes! Threatening? You bet! All I’m saying is, liberate your minds and throw off the shackles of prejudice and idiocy. You are the only ones losing out.

A PROSTITUTE’S MORALS MAY BE DIFFERENT FROM YOURS BUT THEY ARE NOT ABSENT

To end on a serious note: I have tried to show that prostitutes live real lives, feel real feelings and make their own moral judgment about where they do or do not draw the line. Their morals may be different from yours but they are not absent. Prostitution is not an abstract act between two objects, but a way of relating between people with all its attendant joys, woes and exuberance.