
It is a pleasure to read a book that delivers what it promises. In *Just Love* we are presented with a very contemporary approach to sexuality offering a thoroughly modern outlook on issues such as pre-marital sex, divorce, homosexuality, masturbation and contraception. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all sexual activity is considered permissible and that religious tradition falls by the wayside. As we might expect, Farley engages in a serious and challenging critique of the Christian, especially Roman Catholic, tradition and its Scriptures. Moreover, as the title suggests, Farley’s guiding principle in her discussion and conclusions on all sexual issues is justice: what would constitute justice in any given situation of sexual activity?

In chapter 1, Farley explains that her aim is to consider culture and history, to analyse the meaning of embodiment and sexuality, to seek individual and social well-being and to promote virtue (p. 15). Consequently, chapter 2 focuses on historical perceptions of sexual ethics, chapter 3 looks at sexual perspectives cross-culturally, chapter 4 focuses on issues of gender and the body and chapter 5 examines Christian Scripture and tradition. It is not until chapter 6 that Farley sets out her own ‘framework for a sexual ethic’, which is fleshed out in the final chapter through specific applied contexts within, for example, marriage and homosexuality.

Perhaps the most important points to come out of the early chapters are the reminders: that historical accounts are selective and open to interpretation, in particular ‘Women’s experience, beliefs, values are largely unrecorded and, until recently, almost wholly inaccessible’ (p. 17); that the purpose of describing diverse traditions is to critique one’s own; that ‘the revaluation of women’s (and men’s) bodies tends to reinforce gender stereotypes, however much its aim is against this’ (p. 135); that ‘sexuality’ encompasses physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual aspects as opposed to referring only to acts of genital sex.

With these provisos in place, Farley is well placed to examine the connections between justice and sexual ethics. She notes that, while Catholic sexual ethics have progressed in favour of self-liberation and happiness, an overemphasis on procreation is still at large. Similarly, she praises feminist ethics for its criticism of sexual violence and coercion and its stress on pleasure and mutuality, but also notes that the concept of justice has been uncomfortably absent from the feminist approach. Before mapping out her own proposal, Farley examines the Christian sources maintaining that, as a living tradition, its sources can be challenged by contemporary experience. She insists that historical perceptions of sexual evil, based on historical socio-cultural milieux, cannot be maintained; rather, our interpretation of ethical sexual activity must be coherent to our current cultural awareness. In Scripture, she contends, the command to procreate and the patriarchal model of the family are immediate stumbling blocks, and yet ‘moral guidelines for every sphere of human life, including the sexual, are to be gleaned from an overall command to love God and neighbour’ (p. 184).
recourse to the command to love is not new, Farley insists that love alone is insufficient as a guide to sexual morality. It is here that Farley relies on a somewhat Kantian notion of just love, whereby persons are loved as persons (and not as things). Similarly then, the notion of justice (‘rendering to each her or his due’, p. 208) in sexual relations is bound up with the extent to which autonomy, relationality, free choice, thoughts and feelings are respected and affirmed.

Consequently, the overriding principle in Farley’s notion of just sex is that of doing no harm, which, she points out, includes physical, psychological, spiritual and relational harm. In other words, while harm clearly includes paedophilia, rape and violence (which includes at least some forms of pornography and prostitution), it also includes taking advantage of vulnerability, engaging in unsafe sexual activity and betrayal of other persons. In addition to the principle of non-harm, Farley lists six further norms, grounded in an understanding of persons as autonomous and relational: free consent, which extends beyond free choice to include not being lied to; mutuality, where both parties (whether heterosexual or homosexual) are active and receptive; equality, such that there is no abuse of social power and status; commitment, so that sexual intimacy may be sustained through a shared life that respects the other party as an end; fruitfulness, which includes responsible reproduction and may include the use of reproduction technologies, but may mean nurturing others rather than bearing children; social justice, such that ‘Whether persons are single or married, gay or straight, bisexual or ambiguously gendered, old or young, abled or challenged in the ordinary forms of sexual expression, they have claims to respect from the Christian community as well as the wider society’ (p. 228). Just love, Farley argues, includes extending community and security to all persons, so that the well-being and social acceptance of humans is not conditional upon sexual status.

It is not clear how the concept of commitment fits with Farley’s recognition that one-night stands are not without value; likewise, the perception of fruitfulness without children seems a little strained. Nevertheless, Farley’s recognition of the realities of contemporary expressions of sexuality is commendable. Moreover, her emphasis on social justice extends to the consideration of third parties in a number of challenging ways. In addition to taking responsibility for children, lovers and public health, Farley argues that just love and just sex include the obligation to halt injustices caused by sexual stereotypes (found in culture and religion) and to address the disproportionate burden placed on women by AIDS, reproductive technologies, contraception and even Viagra. Furthermore, Farley suggests that her framework might improve sexual activity amongst teenagers; that is, by educating teenagers about justice and non-harm, it might be possible to eradicate sexual taboos (including, for example, masturbation and the shame and guilt that may go with it) and to address the harm and distortion of sexual relations that result from child pornography and sex trafficking.

In her final chapter, Farley focuses more specifically on marriage, divorce and homosexuality. She acknowledges that marital practice has evolved substantially in recent years, but asserts that claims of a crisis are overstated. Moreover, Farley insists that the