

# Is Masturbation a Betrayal to Your Beloved?

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## 1. Introduction

This paper will argue that when the case of solitary masturbation essentially entails a lover's sexual desire on someone else; and that such sexual desire is an essential, defining feature of erotic love, this case of solitary masturbation in effect signifies a challenge, if not betrayal, to one's beloved, in respect of one of the crucial features of erotic love: exclusivity. I shall argue, firstly, that when a masturbator is having fantasies towards another person, it means that the masturbator is actually having sexual desire towards that person, and the very action aims at a fulfillment of his/her sexual desire. Secondly, such action and mindset signifies erotic love<sup>1</sup> on that another person. Thirdly, given the former two claims being valid, I shall further argue that masturbation of this kind contributes to an erotic love relationship. However, when a lover commits masturbation with fantasies not on the beloved but on another person, such behavior challenges the love relationship of the couple.

I will also reply to the following plausible critics, namely: That a masturbator's looking for fulfillment of sexual desire does not necessarily entail that s/he is having sexual desire on *anyone*; that having sexual desire on someone does not imply love on that person; and that having sexual desire on someone does not entail betrayal to one's beloved.

At the end of this discussion, I want to summarize the arguments and see whether these arguments can shed lights on the ethics of casual sex.

## 2. A scenario of solitary masturbation

Before I discuss the possible moral problems of masturbation with regard to one's erotic love relationship, I want to limit my scope of this study to, first of all, solitary masturbation<sup>2</sup>; second, the masturbator has an (erotic) lover; and third, when the masturbator performs, s/he is deliberately having fantasy towards any object -- human or non-human, but not towards the person s/he is in love with.

Having such a confined scope of study is necessary in the light of the position I want to defend. I want to substantiate and defend the claim that *when a lover*

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<sup>1</sup> Here I define the meaning of erotic love as that necessarily involves sexual appeals, so that when a person has erotic love over another person, s/he necessarily has sexual appeals towards his/her target(s). In this paper, I use 'love' and 'erotic love' interchangeably; yet this kind of love is to be differentiated from other kinds like parental love, brotherly love and patriotic love, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Soble argued that there are cases of masturbation, where the concerned persons either masturbate for one another, or that there is at least one person who does nothing but only enjoys masturbatory treatments from his/her partner(s). (Soble, 1996: 62)

*masturbates with fantasies on the one(s) other than his/her beloved, such behavior of masturbation brings challenges to the love relationship between the lover and the loved: Lovers' masturbation, even if approved by or unknown to the beloved, can be bad sex.* All other kinds of sexual behavior that may broadly be categorized as masturbatory are thus not the cases I want to discuss here. In this paper, I would like to stick to an understanding of the act of<sup>3</sup> solitary masturbation offered by Alan Soble,

*The person who, by pressing the sensitive areas, causally produces the pleasurable sensations is the person who experiences them; the rubber is the rubbed. Masturbation...looks logically reflexive (Soble,1996: 62).*

Having said that, in the scenario of solitary masturbation for this paper, whilst the sex of the masturbator is male or female, the very act of masturbation is known or unknown, approved or disapproved by others – and even the way to masturbate are not essential; what is essential is that during the course of solitary masturbation the lover concerned must have fantasies in place.

### **3. Masturbation, fantasy, sexual desire, and erotic love**

#### **3.1 Masturbation & fantasy**

It is commonly conceptualized by scholars that the behavior of masturbation necessarily involves fantasy (Scruton, 1986: 317-9; Soble, 1996: 59-86; Neu, 2002: 133, 136-9). Fantasy here simply means wishful imaginary scenario(s) out of the mind of the fantasizer (Neu, 2002: 135-6, n.1). Fantasies can be derived from tangible materials like pictures, texts, scenarios of movies, etc; it can also be from something intangible, such as memory of past experience or just pure imagination. Alan Soble, in his comment on Alan Goldman's analysis of masturbation, argues that even though the masturbator does not have any contact with anyone else, the fantasy at work offers a kind of 'virtual' contact. So fantasy in masturbation is, according to Soble, crucial, in that it denotes "a mental act of imagining contact" during the course of masturbation, thus makes the behavior sexual (Soble, 1996: 71).

Masturbation is *a lot* more than mere fantasy. The significance between having mere fantasies without any corresponding action and fantasies during masturbation is crucial. Such difference is like an imagination of food and an imagination of eating the food; for the latter entails the appetite whilst the former does not necessarily have this entailment. Similarly, fantasy during masturbation does not merely mean that there are sex-arousing scenes in the masturbator's mind; the bodily action is the

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<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed in next section, masturbation as *a behavior* necessarily involves the mental movement of fantasy.

pursuit of satisfaction provoked by the fantasy. The bodily action of masturbation is a fulfillment of sexual desire.

### 3.2 Fantasy & sexual desire

Having mere fantasy may not mean a person has sexual desire, because, as will be illustrated below, having mere fantasy without responsive action does not denote that a person's sexual desire is aroused. Such mere fantasy is no difference from (day) dreaming. But when a person masturbates, and masturbation necessarily involves fantasy, then it is argued here that masturbation entails sexual desire upon the object(s) one has fantasy on. Fantasy during masturbation signifies that the very action of stimulating the body of the masturbator is to aim at an imagined, paired encounter (Soble, 1996: 86). Goldman acknowledged that such behavior is "an imaginative substitute for the real thing." (Goldman, 1977:270)<sup>4</sup> The idea of substitution-for-the-real-thing is important, for the masturbator is aroused by the image in mind; s/he does not want to have sex with the image, but the object(s) that are represented by the image (Scruton, 1986: 318). In other words, if a person has fantasy with Marilyn Monroe when s/he visits *Madame Tussauds*, it does not (necessarily<sup>5</sup>) mean that when that person masturbates s/he wants to have sex with the wax model; it should reasonably mean that the masturbator wants to have sex with Marilyn Monroe.

Now we are talking about the desire of the masturbator is towards the object of the fantasy, not the object's representation. Although while I masturbate I am looking at a photo, it does not mean that I want to have sex *with the photo*, but the object captured by the photo. But do I really want to have sex with the object, or do I just want to have sex with myself? What I am doing in masturbation is, after all, having sex with oneself (thereby the recognition of masturbation as 'solitary sex' (Laqueur, 2003).) If a lover, despite masturbating with fantasy on another person, does not mean to have sexual desire towards that person, such masturbation does not constitute, in this regard, any sense of infidelity to his/her beloved.

At this point two accounts of sexuality should be addressed: Unitary and Binary (Soble, 1996: 80-4). A unitary framework does not regard sexuality as anything interpersonal. Sexual desire simply refers to the pursuit of pleasurable sensations for oneself. So while I am having sex with a lady, this does not mean I have sexual desire

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<sup>4</sup> Soble in his *Sexual Investigation* pointed out an inconsistency of Goldman's view. On the one hand Goldman defines sexual desire as purely "desire for contact with another person's body", and sexual activity as "activity which tends to fulfill such desire of the agent", and judged masturbation not sexual, because it does not fulfill contact of another body; on the other hand Goldman admits that being a substitution of real sexual contact, masturbation can be understood as a fulfillment of the masturbator's sexual desire. See (Soble, 1996: 69-70).

<sup>5</sup> Here I am not going to discuss fetishism.

towards that lady. Although I, during the course of sexual intercourse, obtain sexual pleasure, such pleasure is not due to the touch of that lady but the satisfaction of my want to be touched: Sexual desire is understood as the desire to be touched, not the desire to be touched *by others*. According to this unitary framework, when I have sex with another person, I have my want to be touched satisfied by another person – “*qua* an extension of myself” (Soble: 89). Sexual intercourse is no difference, *in effect*, with masturbation. Whether the object of the agent in mind is another person or the image captured in a picture is not important at all, because one’s sexual desire does not hinge on to any object (Soble: 84). In other words, there is no way to suggest that by having fantasy towards another person other than your beloved during masturbation you are committing infidelity, because even if you are making love with your lover you are pursuing sexual satisfaction for yourself; thus there is never the idea of sexual desire towards anyone else.

A binary framework of sexuality seems, however, to suggest otherwise. It puts forwards the idea that sexuality refers essentially to paired sex. The definition of sexual desire and sexual activity offered by Alan Goldman in his *Plain Sex* is one good illustration of this framework,

“*Sexual desire is desire for contact with another person’s body and for the pleasure which such contact produces; sexual activity is activity which tends to fulfill such desire of the agent.*” (Goldman, 1977: 268)

According to Goldman, who premised paired sex as the essence of sexuality, sexual desire is not merely a desire to be touched, but *to be touched by others*. His understanding of sexual activity is based upon this idea of sexual desire. From this point of view, masturbation is, as discussed above, a surrogate for the ‘real thing’, in the sense that it – during which fantasy operates – is actually an imagined contact with another person’s body and for the pleasure which this kind of contact brings. This binary account thus construes masturbation as it should entail sexual desire upon the object(s) one has fantasy on, for the act aims at the fulfillment of desire, which is to be touched by others, by means of a surrogate touch by oneself.

Which account of sexuality is more convincing? The unitary model seems to suggest that all sexual behavior is crucially individualistic, whilst the binary model interpersonal. Note that the definition of sexual desire offered by both models though different is not necessarily mutually exclusive: Sexual desire can mean both desires for pleasure as well as for touch by others. More importantly, the unitary account of sexuality cannot fully explain the substance of the fantasy taking place during the course of masturbation. For one thing, it claims that one’s sexual desire does not hinge on to any object; but why do people fantasize about a particular object?

Remember in the case of masturbation (and actually all other kinds of sexual behavior), people fantasize deliberately; they are free to think about this not that. If so, how can we explain why certain masturbators choose to fantasize about the same (kind of) object? The contingency argument held by the unitary model seems not as convincing as the attachment argument by the binary model, for the latter acknowledges that the object arouses the agent's sexual desire. Had it not been for the object, the agent would not have got any sexual desire at all.

To use an analogy of food and appetite, the unitary model suggests that an agent's appetite is created by oneself; even if there is no food, when the agent is hungry s/he would desire for food. The binary model suggests an interactive dialogue between food and appetite. When food comes to the mind of the agent, s/he is aroused by the food in mind thus has appetite. Now it may seem strange to see that food or the image of food causes a person hungry. Here comes the difference between the nature of having masturbation and having food. A normal, physically healthy person would be hungry even if no food has come into mind. Rather, it is more natural to understand that in the first place a person is hungry, and then s/he may think about food. The desire for food is endogenous. But in the case of masturbation, the masturbator is in control of what or who s/he would like to fantasize. Fantasy comes in hence arouses the masturbator's sexual desire. The desire for sex, in this regard, should be exogenous. In other words, it sounds more reasonable to understand that masturbation (fantasy involved) entails sexual desire upon the object(s) one has fantasy on.

### **3.3 Sexual desire & Erotic love**

Assuming that masturbation entails sexual desire upon the object(s) one fantasizes; does it also entail erotic love towards the object(s)? Here the questions are (1) Whether love can be expressed through sexual behavior, including masturbation; and (2) Must there be expression of love in all sexual behavior (Or: Can there be plain sex, or plain masturbation?). In the following, I will first discuss an argument that denies a relationship between sex and expression of love; then would like to discuss the limitations of this view, and argue that the more convincing view should be that there exists a positive correlation between sexual desire and erotic love: The more a person  $x$  has sexual desire over another person  $y$ , the more  $x$  loves  $y$ .

Russell Vannoy is of the position that mere sex by all means cannot express love. He thinks that the only expression of love is "the totality of the experiences two persons share through whatever time their love endures." (Vannoy, 1997: 248) All other activities, sex included, cannot express love. And when sex can express some other qualities, like "trust, tenderness, generosity and intimacy" (Ibid. p.249); these qualities can also be revealed in sexual *and* non-sexual activities done by non-lovers.

In brief, Vannoy's claim is that in a case of a pair of non-lovers, because they don't have erotic love between them, whatever they do, even having sex, do not and cannot express love. Lovers have sex does not mean that people having sex must be lovers. (Affirming the consequent) Sex does not and cannot 'make it happen'. This view also explains why actors and actresses of hard-core adult movies do not automatically become lovers, albeit how massive is their sexual behavior. At its best, Vannoy concedes, sex reveals "love for a body", which is distinctively different from "love with a person" (Ibid. p.256).

If this position is valid, then masturbation with fantasy on any person does not make the masturbator falling in love with that person, even when masturbation is understood as an expression of sexual desire on the person in fantasy. Then there will be no point of suggesting that masturbating with fantasy of someone other than my wife constitutes anything wrong.

This view has however some weaknesses. First, as commented by Edward Johnson, Vannoy's assumption of the only expression of love (i.e. "The totality of the experiences two persons share through whatever time their love endures") is not sound (Johnson, 1997: 259). For one thing, if this assumption is true, then there is not such a thing called love letters, not to mention the 'I love you' declaration from a lover. In fact I think Vannoy may have confused expression of love and expression of a love relationship. My declaration to my would-be lover in an unrequited love, though rejected, is hardly not my expression of love. Second, even if sex is a vehicle that can carry meanings like "trust, tenderness, generosity and intimacy" that a pair of non-lovers can feel; this does not mean that sex is not an expression of love – Lovers can feel the same too (Ibid. p.260). Third, as will be discussed in next paragraph, while Vannoy seems to infer that love for the body is essentially different from love with a person, he may have overlooked the interconnection if any between these two kinds of love.

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, for example, argued the interdependency between (sexual) desirability, praiseworthiness and appealingness in the discourse of love<sup>6</sup> (Ben-Ze'ev, 1997: 3-32). In a psychological perspective, he notes from empirical observation that the more a person is appealing, the more the person is praiseworthy (Ibid. p.6), and praiseworthiness is often derived from appealingness (Ibid. p.8). *Love of a body* may spark *love with the person*. People form a schema of an ideal lover; and when we encounter someone who turns our schema on, such person needs not fulfill all aspects of our schema; a few would be enough. And more than often, an appealing

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<sup>6</sup> Ben-Ze'ev used "romantic love" in his work to refer to love between erotic lovers. So, I assume in this essay that romantic love is just the same as erotic love.

appearance may be enough to turn us on, hence the saying “love at first sight.” (Ibid. 10)<sup>7</sup>

Sexual desirability and appealingness has a similar correlation. Again, experimental evidence suggests that the more familiar partner is to a person, the less sound is the sexual response that person has (Ibid. 19). Ben-Ze’ev cites David Bush’s finding that the longer a couple stays together, their sexual intercourse tends to be less frequent (Ibid. p.20). This phenomenon can be explained by how crucial fantasy plays in sexual desire: New objects bring novelty; and novelty brings sexual desirability.

How do all these apply, and what do they imply, to masturbation? In terms of the application to masturbation, as masturbation is understood as a surrogate for the real thing, and an imagined sexual contact with the object in the fantasy, it should also be the case that the more appealing the object is to the masturbator, the more desirable the object is. Moreover, the more the object is familiar to the masturbator, the less sexual pleasure, thus the lower sexual desirability the masturbator has towards the object.

In terms of the implication, the initiatives a masturbator holds in terms of what or who should appear in fantasy should be crucial. Fantasies in the mind of a masturbator are a “private theater” (Neu, 2002: p.133) in which the masturbator controls its content. As such, what a masturbator fantasizes and how often a masturbator fantasizes the same object relates to how much erotic love s/he has over it. As discussed just above, the longer a person is being with her partner, the less her partner is sexually desirable to that person. If a masturbator only thinks about an object for the sole purpose of his novel, sexual pleasure, and such object is thus independent of his sexual desire (as what the unitary account of sexuality suggests), then the phenomenon that a masturbator fantasizes repeatedly the same person cannot be not properly explained. Rather, a more plausible explanation is that in addition to sexual pleasure, the masturbator has attached something more than appealingness of his object, which should be the object’s praiseworthiness. In this regard, then, as suggested by the binary account of sexuality, the sexual desire over the object of fantasy indicates the masturbator’s erotic love over it. Roger Taylor’s description is in support of this view,

*“If a man’s love is to be wholly explained by his sexual desire for someone, then it must be that his sexual desire is more constant and demanding than that of the man who just sexually desires. Surely we would have no hesitation in affirming that the person who constantly*

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<sup>7</sup> This line of argument, of course, by no means denies the possibility that love can happen without sexual desire (Ben-Ze’ev, 1997: p.10)

*sexually craves, and is sexually concerned with another, is in love with the other.*" (Taylor, 1980: 72-3, cited in Vannoy, 1997: 248)

At this point, I do not intend to ascertain where such praiseworthiness over the object of fantasy is from; nor is it important to claim a positive correlation between sexual desirability over the object and the masturbator's erotic love over it.

#### **4. Enhancement / Challenge on love relationship**

If the above is valid, then a lover's masturbation is, argued here, a double-edged sword with regard to a couple's love relationship. When a masturbator, who is a lover, fantasizes his/her beloved; then such masturbation should enhance their love. When the object of fantasy is persistently another person, then the behavior should be a challenge. Whilst it may be argued that even if a lover fantasizes other persons when s/he masturbates, and even if such behavior counts as expression of erotic love over someone else, this does not mean the lover caresses, as a result, less over the beloved. But this view ignores one crucial feature of erotic love, namely exclusivity.

Exclusivity means a person's falling in love over another person excludes all love over all others. Alan Soble suggests there are timeless and timed exclusivity (Soble, 1998: 133). Timeless exclusivity means once I love a man, that man is to be my only love throughout my whole life, so that before I met this man as well as after he dies I loved and will love no one else. Timed exclusivity means I only love one person at one time, so that when I am in love with a lady, logically I am not able, and morally I should not, love anyone else, until either the lady passes away or my love with her comes to an end. While timeless exclusivity seems not meaningful, for most if not all people do not just only love one person (father or mother or...?) in their whole life; timed exclusivity seems more plausible. Of course there are critics, like those raised by Soble, of whether there should be time gaps between different loves and, subsequently, whether time is a matter at all (Ibid. p.134). But exclusivity may also understand love as a zero-sum game, so that when I love a lady by 100%, it means a logically and morally perfect exclusive love that I cannot love anyone else; and when my love over that lady by 75%, my love is only 75% exclusive, thus leaves 25% vulnerable to loving others.

Exclusivity understood as a zero-sum game not only can help replying to the critics over the length of time, but also help explaining the enhancement as well as challenge with regard to the cases of masturbation performed by a lover. As discussed above, a masturbator's persisting fantasy over the same person denotes not only sexual desire but also erotic love over that person. If the object of the fantasy is the masturbator's beloved, then it is reasonable that such behavior will only enhance the

relationship of the couple, because of the expression of love revealed by the masturbating lover. By the same token, masturbation of a lover becomes a challenge to the couple's relationship should s/he fantasizes someone else; because such masturbation is evidently an expression of erotic love towards the others.

## **5. Conclusion: And how about Adultery?**

Commonly assumed that a lover has, however implicitly, promised wholehearted love to the beloved, the answer to the title-question is then 'Yes!' I have argued that (1) Masturbation, fantasy involved, reveals sexual desire to the fantasized object; (2) A masturbator who persistently fantasizes the same person reveals not only sexual desire but also erotic love over that person; (3) Given the assumption of love as a zero-sum game, when a lover fantasizes the beloved in masturbation such behavior enhances their love relationship, whereas in the case the fantasy is on someone else it becomes a challenge. Note that throughout the whole discussion whether the beloved has realized or approved the lover to fantasize someone else when s/he masturbates was never a concern. If a behavior is, argued in this paper, detrimental to a relationship, whether it is known or approved by the victim it is still problematic.

One further implication for lovers may be of interest with regard to casual sex with partners other than one's beloved. Unlike masturbation that is an imagined sexual encounter, casual sex the real thing. The debate here is whether a person's sexual desire towards another person denotes erotic love. It is my argument in this paper that only when fantasy over the same person persists and is accompanied by responsive sexual acts it shows there is love. From this point of view, if a lover takes part in casual sex, whose partner is not the beloved, yet the lover does not stick to the same partner; then arguably such behaviors show no love over others; because this lover is attracted by others' appealingness rather than praiseworthiness. However, in a case a lover has adulterous relationship with the same (sex) partner; this can be understood as expression of love towards the partner, which subsequently suggests a betrayal to the beloved.

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