

What is sex for?

It began with reports that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, over many years, used his power over aspiring actresses' careers to sexually harass and exploit them.

The allegations soon extended to other prominent men in the entertainment industry, then to candidates and elected officials of both major parties.

Now each day seems to bring a new story about sexual misconduct—usually by men, though occasionally by a female teacher — against those more powerless or vulnerable than themselves. Most disturbingly, some reports involve seduction of minors by adults.

Ironies abound. A few weeks ago, Time magazine published a special issue celebrating the career of Playboy founder Hugh Hefner after his death. Now it portrays Weinstein on its cover as “predator” and “pariah.” Yet Hefner also mistreated and demeaned women, and the view of sexual freedom he made a career of promoting encouraged the behavior that makes Weinstein a pariah.

The root problem here is a self-centered notion of freedom that “frees” individuals from respecting others, if such respect would get in the way of their own pleasure. That freedom, divorced from the truth about human dignity, never means freedom for everyone. It means, in the words of St. John Paul II, “the supremacy of the strong over the weak” (*Evangelium Vitae*, No. 23).

Such freedom is especially destructive when applied to sexuality, by which men and women relate to each other in the most vulnerable and intimate way possible.

The myth of the “sexual revolution” is that everything is acceptable if agreed to by mutual consent. But the people involved seldom have the same degree of control over the situation, so one is more “free” than the other to influence or manufacture that consent.

Certainly that is true of adults pursuing minors. And on college campuses, it seems

predatory males have found alcohol and drugs useful in making sure female students are not conscious or self-aware enough to say “No” — or to remember afterward exactly what happened. And so sexual “freedom” blurs into what is tantamount to rape.

Ready access to contraception, and then abortion, have also been seen as enabling full exercise of this freedom. Some women thought these would free them of anxiety over pregnancy and parenthood, equalizing the power in their relationships.

Instead they often place more power in the hands of callow men, who see their own responsibility as beginning and ending with the offer to pay for an abortion. Hefner understood this, and his Playboy Foundation made large donations to the “abortion rights” movement. Unplanned pregnancies still happen, unwed childbearing has increased and women have been left more alone than ever to cope.

Some secular feminists also understand this. Catharine MacKinnon, for example, has written that the “right of privacy” or “right to be let alone” the Supreme Court used to defend abortion is “a right of men ‘to be let alone’ to oppress women one at a time.”

As allegations, denials and recriminations continue, it is difficult to see where this will lead. It may create a climate in which men and women distrust each other more than ever.

Another alternative would be to remember the vision of sexuality the Catholic Church has taught for two millennia. In that vision, sex is about self-giving, not selfishness; mutual vulnerability, not power; commitment, not exploitation; fulfillment, not just pleasure. It is a powerful language that says: I will always be united in love with you, and with any children we may conceive together.

Having tried the opposite approach for decades, I wonder if Americans might take another look at a vision that is ever ancient, ever new.

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