

**PEDOPHILIA.** Pedophilia is sexual attraction some adults feel toward children that may lead to adult-child sex. The word is also used to refer to the practice of adult-child sex. In contemporary Western societies, the subject is highly contentious and fraught with strong feelings. The strength of the feelings is readily explained by concern for the welfare of children and for their healthy, unimpeded development. But it also reflects a set of stereotypes of pedophiles that for the most part are not borne out by the facts. These feelings are compounded by the distaste for and moral censure of **sexual perversion**. In contemporary Western societies, adult-child sex is both generally morally condemned and prohibited by **law**.

While there is considerable psychological and sociological literature about pedophilia, philosophers working in the philosophy of sex have given relatively little attention to the subject. As pedophilia is seen as a paradigmatic case of sexual perversion and is generally viewed with strong moral revulsion, it might have been expected to generate more philosophical interest. Yet only a handful of philosophers have discussed it in some detail (Ehman; Frye; Kershner; Primoratz; Spiecker and Steutel). The subject has received extensive coverage in the media since the 1980s. But most publicized instances of pedophilia have been cases of (alleged) sexual interactions between adults and children within families or in educational or child-care institutions. These cases of pedophilia are compounded by **incest** or by violation of a relationship of care, trust, or authority. Here we are concerned only with pedophilia as such.

The contentious nature of the subject is reflected in the loaded terminology employed both by advocates of pedophilia and by its opponents. Its advocates tend to refer to pedophilia with the terms "cross-generational sex" or "intergenerational sex," which erase the distinction between sex involving adults belonging to different generations and sex involving an adult and a child. This terminology is misleading, because the former need not raise any moral worries, while the latter is generally considered gravely morally wrong. On the other hand, those who think that pedophilia is morally unacceptable tend to use terms such as "child molestation" or "child sexual abuse." This usage does not facilitate, but rather forecloses, rational discussion about the nature and moral and legal status of pedophilia, since it assumes that all sex between an adult and a child is necessarily molestation and abuse, that is, morally wrong and harmful to the child. Both types of terminology are best avoided. If the issue is not to be prejudged, it needs to be couched in neutral language, such as "adult-child sex" or simply "pedophilia."

"Pedophilia" has a narrow and a wide sense. In its wide sense it means sex between an adult and a minor and accordingly includes pederasty and ephebophilia. These are varieties of male **homosexuality** but differ from the type dominant in modern Western societies, in which both parties are adults. Pederasty is sexual attraction of adult males to boys in their mid-teens and sex with them. A pederast is attracted to the transient, androgynous quality that boys display in their mid-teens and lose by the end of puberty, when (in biological, although not in psychological and social terms) they reach manhood. An ephebophile, in contrast, is attracted to, and has sex with, postpubertal, sexually mature, highly virile youths.

In its narrow sense, "pedophilia" refers to sexual attraction of adults to prepubescent and pubescent children and sexual contact with them. Thus it includes pederasty but not ephebophilia; the end of puberty is the demarcation line. Obviously, given the differences in biological, psychological, and social development of prepubescent and pubescent children, on the one hand, and adolescents, on the other, even if ephebophilia gives rise to moral misgivings, they are not as strongly felt nor as widespread as those generated by pedophilia, narrowly understood. Our concern here is only with the latter.

In addition to terminological problems, discussions of pedophilia are often plagued by an array of factually inaccurate but widely accepted beliefs. (On these stereotypes of pedophilia, see Plummer, "Pedophilia"; Righton.) The pedophile is portrayed by the media and is imagined by the public to be a "dirty old man." He is envisaged as a stranger to the child who intrudes sexually on the child by means of force or deceit, the intrusion culminating in coitus. The experience the pedophile imposes on the child is assumed to be painful, frightening, and traumatic and to inflict serious and long-term psychological damage on the child. These stereotypes explain why pedophilia is "the most hated of all sexual variations" (Plummer, "Progress," 130). Yet, for the most part, they are not empirically confirmed. Most known pedophiles are indeed men. They are not, however, always old men but are spread over the entire age range. Typically, they are not strangers to the children involved. They are more likely to be family members or other adults from the immediate social surroundings of the children. The sex act is rarely forced on the child. The act committed is rarely sexual intercourse; the most characteristic activities are kissing, touching, and fondling. As for the overall character of the experience for the child and its long-term effects, these are highly contested by researchers and professionals as well as by advocates of pedophilia and those who seek to provide a rationale for its moral condemnation and legal prohibition.

According to the popular view of pedophilia, it is an unnatural or perverted sexual inclination and behavior. Nevertheless, in discussing its moral and legal standing, the topic of sexual perversion may be put aside. On some conceptions of sexual perversion, perverted acts are immoral, while other conceptions strip the term of its moral connotations. In the context of the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of sex as geared to procreation, adult-child sex appears unnatural and perverted, and therefore also wrong, because it is not of the sort of sexuality that, under normal circumstances, can be procreative. But this understanding of sexual perversion is plagued by the oft-canvassed difficulties of ascribing a natural purpose or function to sex (Priest, 363–67). Moreover, most of those who hold pedophilia morally unacceptable do so for reasons that have nothing to do with its being non-procreative.

For example, for **Roger Scruton** sexual perversion is any deviation from **sexual desire** that is directed at another human being as the embodied person he or she is. Because it fails to relate to the full personality of the other, perverted sexuality is "morally contaminated." This applies to the pedophile, whose sexual interest does not focus on the body of a mature person but rather on the body of "the prelude to the person" (Scruton, 295–98). However, as Scruton's critics have argued, his account of human sexuality is best presented as an ideal rather than a sexual norm. As a result, sexual inclination and behavior that falls short of this (or any other) ideal is not plausibly depicted as perverted nor fairly judged with the severity a moral conception of perversion calls for (Primoratz, 30–31, 54–55).

On the other hand, if sexual perversion is understood in nonmoral terms—as only a statistically abnormal sexual preference (Goldman, 284–87) or as deviation from prevailing sexual tastes (Margolis, "Perversion"; "Question," 297–300)—then the classification of pedophilia as a perversion is irrelevant to the question of its moral and legal standing. The same is true of the classification of pedophilia as a **paraphilia**, the concept that has replaced "sexual perversion" in contemporary psychiatry, precisely because it is free of the moral connotations usually associated with the latter. (On pedophilia as a "paraphilia," see the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association, 527–28.)

There are several arguments advanced by advocates of pedophilia and meant to repeal or significantly circumscribe its moral condemnation and legal prohibition. One argument

harks back to the "Greek love" of boys and similar phenomena in other cultures (see Eglinton). The argument ascribes great educational value to the relationship between an adult male and the boy he takes under his wing and steers from childhood immaturity and dependence to maturity and adult responsibilities. Because this relationship is deeply personal and is meant to initiate the boy into a range of adult practices, including adult sexuality, it also involves a sexual component. But the educational value of such a relationship may be doubted, in particular in contemporary Western societies. Whereas the educator's involvement with a young person is other-regarding, for the sake of the good of the young person, the involvement of the pederast is self-regarding, for he seeks to satisfy his own sexual desire (Spiecker and Steutel, 335). Be that as it may, this line of argument relates only to pederasty and is therefore of less interest than those arguments that apply to pedophilia in general.

Another line of argument focuses on child sexuality. Contemporary opposition to pedophilia is said to be based on the view of prepubescent children as asexual. This view, which leads to denying children any sexual experience and excluding them from all discourse about sex, is not mandated by the intrinsic nature of childhood, nor is it valid universally, for all societies and all historical periods. This view of childhood sexuality is, instead, a relatively recent development in Western society. Defenders of pedophilia draw on the work of Philippe Ariès on the history of childhood. Ariès claims that medieval and early modern Western societies had no "idea of childhood," that is, no conception of childhood as marked by a group of characteristics that set children apart from adults and enjoined their social segregation. On the contrary, children mingled freely with adults and took part in most areas of adult life. Nor were children sheltered from adult sexuality or denied sexual interests and activities of their own. It was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the West "discovered" childhood as something different from adulthood, meaning that children were in need of separation from the social world of adults and of protection from many types of adult experience. In particular, children came to be seen as sexually innocent—lacking knowledge of and interest in sex—and in need of protection from exposure to adult sexuality (see Ariès, pt. I, chap. v).

Defenders of pedophilia point out that this view of childhood as different from adulthood in many important respects, and in particular as characterized by sexual "innocence," is at odds with what we have learned from **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) and his followers and from numerous empirical studies of human sexuality, including those conducted by Alfred Kinsey ([1894–1956]; see Ehman, "Adult-Child Sex"; O'Carroll). Those who oppose pedophilia may be captured by this dated notion of childhood innocence as well as by traditional morally derogatory approaches to sex: "[T]he [negative] attitude toward adult-child sex is the last unquestioned bastion of sexual puritanism" (Ehman, "Adult-Child Sex," 433). The dated notion of childhood as an asexual stage denies children experiences they seek and enjoy and choices they should have a right to make; it can be seen as another aspect of the oppression of children in our society. The view also hampers the normal sexual development of children: "Far from needing to be mature before having a sex life, an unthwarted sexual development helps lead to full sexual maturity" (O'Carroll, 154).

Perhaps some still adhere to the pre-Freudian notion of childhood as a sexually innocent stage in life and therefore think of pedophilia as deeply wrong because it prematurely initiates a child into sex, thus spoiling its natural, wholesome innocence. A variation of this view has been endorsed by Scruton. He does not claim that children *are* innocent, or at least not that they are entirely so. But he ascribes to adults a desire that children be innocent, which makes adults think of children as if they were innocent. Adults do not want

children to be introduced into the world of sex before the “age of innocence” has expired and accordingly lay down a strict prohibition of adult-child sex (296–97). However, one need not subscribe to the view of children as asexual or, in Scruton’s terms, as incapable of sexual desire, to reject pedophilia. Rejecting pedophilia is compatible with acknowledging childhood sexuality, the benefits of starting **sex education** early, and adopting a fairly permissive stand on the sexual play, exploration, and pleasure of children. There is an important distinction (which is obfuscated when “pedophilia” is replaced by terms such as “cross-generational” or “intergenerational sex”) between sexual play and exploration among children and sexual interaction between children and adults. Opposition to the latter does not entail opposition to the former.

Advocates of pedophilia claim that, rather than being harmful to children, pedophilia is beneficial to them, or could be but for the unreasonably negative stance of parents and society. The widespread belief that pedophilia is harmful, and seriously so, to a child’s psychological well-being and development is ascribed to stereotypes and flawed studies. Research on pedophilia tends to be based on clinical and legal data. But cases of adult-child sex in which the child needs medical attention and those that reach the courts are cases in which the child is likely to have been harmed. It is not surprising that research drawing on such cases confirms the view of pedophilia as harmful to children. The results of such research cannot be accepted as valid for the entire population of children who have been sexually involved with adults. This problem is compounded by the failure of pedophilia research to differentiate clearly, if at all, between cases in which the adult used force or put pressure on the child and cases in which no force or pressure was exerted. Yet it is likely that whatever harm is caused by adult-child sex is going to be caused in cases of the former type, while cases of the latter type may be harmless. Finally, research does not distinguish clearly, or at all, between the direct harm of pedophilia, that caused by the sexual encounter or relationship itself, and the indirect harm brought about by the harsh condemnation of pedophilia by society’s morality and its laws and the drastic reaction of parents and others to the child’s sexual involvement with an adult. If pedophilia is to be morally condemned and legally prohibited because it harms children, the argument should be based solely on direct harms. To prop up the argument against pedophilia by invoking indirect harms is to make it circular. For these reasons, defenders of pedophilia fault the vast majority of existing adult-child sex research. They also cite studies that lead to a different conclusion, that in cases of adult-child sexual involvement in which (1) the child had no negative feelings toward the adult to start with, (2) the adult did not use force or coercion, and (3) there was no trauma of discovery or a shocked response by parents or society, the relationship was evaluated as positive by the child and did not seem to have caused significant, long-term harm (see Burton; Tsai et al.).

Critics reply that many studies that defenders of pedophilia appeal to are also flawed. Since they are based solely on cases of ongoing adult-child relationships (see Sandfort), the results of these studies are not representative of the relevant child population. In an ongoing relationship that is not maintained by force or coercion, it is not surprising that the child should describe the relationship in favorable terms and should not show signs of being harmed by it. However, not all research that fails to support the claim that pedophilia is harmful to children is limited this way. A critical review of over forty studies of the effects of adult-child sexual encounters on children points out the methodological limitations of those studies and reaches the “somewhat muted” conclusion that the widespread belief that adult-child sex has long-term harmful consequences for the child is not borne out by

evidence (Powell and Chalkley). The issue of harm can apparently not be settled either way at this stage and must await further empirical research.

Yet another line of argument in defense of pedophilia focuses on the force or coercion purportedly employed by pedophiles and the corresponding lack of **consent** or willingness on the part of the children. Advocates of pedophilia argue that force or coercion is not typically used by pedophiles and that the child often willingly participates in the relationship. Children are not incapable of making choices about sex, of consenting or expressing willingness or unwillingness to participate in sex acts with adults (Califia, 20). To be sure, the consent or willingness children express may fall short of the “informed consent” standard (commonly employed in medical contexts). But that standard is unrealistically high: Sexual choices and acts of many adults, too, do not measure up to it. How many adults actually know all they should know about the biological, psychological, and social aspects of sex and have a deep understanding of the nature and the entire range of consequences of their own sexual choices and acts? (See O’Carroll, 153.) Since nobody proposes to condemn all cases of sex between adults that do not satisfy the informed consent standard, and since the vast majority of sexual acts between adults and children are not imposed by force or coercion, but engaged in willingly by both parties, defenders of pedophilia argue that such acts should not be deemed wrong. The laws relating to pedophilia should be overhauled, too: Age-of-consent laws should be abolished, and problems arising in adult-child sex should be regulated mostly by civil, not criminal, law. (For a detailed proposal of law reform along these lines, see O’Carroll, chap. 6.)

In response, it has been argued by opponents of pedophilia that a child’s willingness to engage in sexual acts with adults—which defenders of pedophilia propose as an alternative to consent—is, for several reasons, suspect. The fact that not all adults live up to the criterion of informed consent is not reason enough to conclude that it does not matter that children also fail to live up to it. Severely mentally challenged and psychotic adults aside, the sexual choices and acts of adults that are flawed according to a standard of informed consent are flawed contingently: An adult could have attained an appropriate level of knowledge of sex and a better understanding of his or her sexual options but has neglected to do so. But a child’s position is different. Because of a child’s limited experience and limited cognitive and emotional resources, a child’s knowledge and understanding of sex are inevitably very limited. Unlike a negligent adult, a child does not happen to have, but is bound to have, little knowledge and a poor understanding of the physical, psychological, and social aspects of sex. While only some adults are at a disadvantage in this respect, all children are. Hence the willingness of a child to engage in sex with an adult cannot be enough for such sex to be considered morally acceptable.

There are further reasons for treating a child’s willingness with caution. Advocates of pedophilia argue that the adult and the child can, and in many cases do, have a meaningful sexual relationship. They also claim that the relationship is often initiated by the child, not the adult, and that children act in seductive ways toward adults. But reports about such cases may indicate considerable misunderstanding brought about by a significant difference in the way the adult and the child understand the same interaction. Research on children who willingly participate in sexual contacts with adults suggests motivation for an interaction different from that of the adults. The child seeks sympathy, affection, and **love**, while the adult is seeking sex. The acts of the child are mere horseplay, or expressions of curiosity, but the adult construes them as (provocatively) sexual. In a study of boys participating in pedophile relationships with men, Michael Ingram concludes that “though there may well be a meaningful relationship between a loving man and an unhappy child,

and . . . a sexual act takes place within the context of this relationship, nevertheless, the act is sexually meaningful only for the adult, not for the child" (184–85).

Further, a child's willingness to participate in a sexual interaction with an adult is not sufficiently voluntary, since it is not sufficiently free. The willingness is solicited and then granted against a background of radical inequality of physical, psychological, and social resourcefulness and power. This inequality is acknowledged and reinforced throughout the process of a child's upbringing. As a result, children tend to defer to adults and find it difficult to assert themselves against adults and to rebuff their advances. It might be objected that there is much inequality of power between adults, too, yet we do not take that as making their **sexual activity** insufficiently voluntary. But again, while only some adults have to manage their sexual lives in a position of gross inequality in relation to other adults, all children are in a position of greatly unequal power in relation to virtually all adults. Any willingness to participate in sex acts with adults expressed under these circumstances is seriously compromised.

While both philosophers (e.g., Primoratz) and psychologists (e.g., Finkelhor) have argued in favor of moral and legal prohibition of pedophilia along the lines sketched above, others have advanced alternative arguments. Robert Ehman, who once defended pedophilia (1984), no longer does so (2000). He still rejects the view that adult-child sex is illegitimate because a child cannot consent to it and the child's willingness to participate is seriously flawed. He agrees that the problem with pedophilia is that it is nonconsensual. But what matters, for Ehman, is not the actual consent of the child but the retrospective consent of the adult the child will become to the sexual interactions in which he or she is involved as a child. Adult-child sex is justified if the adult involved in the interaction has good reason to believe that when the child involved in it becomes an adult, he or she will retrospectively consent to that sexual encounter or relationship and will be justified in doing so because that consent will reflect his or her reasonable goals and values. If, when exercising mature judgment, the adult the child became finds the act or relationship unacceptable, that means he or she had been taken advantage of. Ehman's conclusion is that for the most part adults cannot make the case that children will give justified retrospective consent to adult-child sex when they come to consider it as mature persons. Therefore pedophilia is for the most part morally unacceptable ("What Really Is Wrong with Pedophilia?" 139).

Ehman, however, does not explain why for the most part adults cannot make the case that children will give justified retrospective consent. Indeed, it is not clear how such an argument is to be made. If the goals and values of the future mature person are sufficiently close to those of the present child, Ehman's proposed test of retrospective consent of the future mature person is in danger of collapsing into the test of consent of the actual immature person (a criterion that Ehman rejects). On the other hand, if the goals and values of the future adult are not of a piece with those of the child, but rather discontinuous with them, how can one predict what they are going to be?

A different argument in support of moral condemnation and legal prohibition of adult-child sex portrays it as exploitative. (On exploitation see Mappes; Wertheimer, *Exploitation*.) For Spiecker and Steutel, in sexual exploitation one party uses another in such a way that the sexual interaction is profitable for one but at the expense of the second, or the benefit for the second is disproportionately small. This outcome is made possible by the conditions in which the parties agree to the interaction: One takes advantage of the destitute circumstances or vulnerabilities of the other. Spiecker and Steutel argue that adult-child sex is always exploitative. The child either reaps no benefit or the benefit the child gets is

disproportionately small relative to that acquired by the adult. This occurs because the adult takes advantage either of the child's psychological vulnerabilities or the child's wretched situation, as happens in sex tourism to Third World countries (336–38). There are two difficulties with this position. One might not agree that all interactions in which one party gains much more than the other should be categorized and morally condemned as exploitation (Wertheimer, *Consent*, 190–91, 219–20). And even if the adult in most cases gains much more from the sexual act or relationship than the child, should we grant that adult-child sex is morally legitimate in the atypical cases in which there is no disproportion in benefits gained?

In another contribution to the philosophical literature on the subject, Stephen Kershnar rejects all the main nonconsequentialist objections to adult-child sex: the argument that this sex is invariably exploitative, the argument that children cannot consent and that their willingness is deeply suspect, and the retrospective consent argument. Kershnar sees sex as on a par with activities such as gymnastics and sports. If adults may legitimately participate with children in these activities, provided the children are not harmed, even though children cannot give valid consent to these activities and their willingness is expressed under the same constraints as their willingness to have sex with adults, why should sex be any different? If sexual activity cannot be shown to be different, then the moral and legal standing of pedophilia depends solely on whether it is harmful to the children. On this question the jury is still out. Yet even those who accept this view may want to adopt a presumption against adult-child sex as the best or safest policy. We do not know at present that adult-child sex as a rule inflicts serious harm on children. But neither do we know that it does not. We need to take into account that the psychological vulnerability of children is bound to enhance greatly any serious harm that *might* be inflicted on them. Therefore the most prudent and morally appropriate choice would seem to be to maintain our society's moral rejection and legal prohibition of sexual involvement of adults with children.

In spite of its theoretical and practical importance, pedophilia has not received as much attention from philosophers as it deserves. The issues of its moral and legal standing are far from settled and await further philosophical and empirical investigation. In particular, the question of harm requires more, and more methodologically sophisticated, research.

*See also* Bestiality; Bisexuality; Consent; Greek Sexuality and Philosophy, Ancient; Herdt, Gilbert; Incest; Paraphilia; Perversion, Sexual; Rape; Scruton, Roger; Sexology

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