

# What's Wrong with Hooking Up in College?<sup>1</sup>

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*College students are sometimes regarded as sexually promiscuous, and therefore egotistical and unethical, because they “hook up.” But the objectionable aspects of hooking up are unrelated to sexual promiscuity. Ethical practices of promiscuity can be defended within Millian consequentialism, Kantian deontology, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Nonetheless, ethical analysis using these frameworks reveals that existing campus hookup practices are poorly configured to promote good outcomes, respect for persons, or human flourishing. The problem is not sexual promiscuity, but rather that campus social power is unjustifiably hierarchical and a sexual double standard prevails.*

Hooking up has replaced dating as the social practice through which college men and women begin romantic and sexual relationships. Sometimes this is regarded as a sign that young people are egoists indifferent to moral standards, and that society is in moral decline. Yet, is the social practice of hooking up in college indeed morally wrong, and if so, why?

Let's begin with a description of the practice of hooking up in college. Then we consider that practice using three prominent secular ethical frameworks: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.<sup>2</sup> Though the practice of hooking up raises significant moral concerns, we ultimately find that they arise not from the sexual promiscuity that hooking up involves, but from the social power structure in which it occurs.

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<sup>2</sup>I am limited by space as well as by expertise. This inquiry can be expanded to other ethical frameworks, including non-Western, continental, and religious moral traditions, as well as other Western analytical frameworks such as contractarian and feminist ethics.

## Hooking Up in College

The factual assumptions for my analysis are based primarily on Kathleen Bogle's study of hooking up in college. Bogle used a qualitative methodology, which involved interviewing 76 college students and recent alumni (34 men and 42 women) from two institutions about "how men and women initiate sexual encounters and romantic relationships."<sup>3</sup> Interviewees were drawn from two American universities in different states: a small Roman Catholic university in the northeast, and an East Coast state university more than three times its size. At both institutions, most students reside on campus. Bogle's sample was predominantly white, middle to upper middle class, and heterosexual, reflecting the demographics of the institutions. It included students from different grade levels and majors, some more and others less connected to alcohol-centered social life. She interviewed alumni with different types of careers, and "spoke to hundreds of college students about these issues as well as many twenty-something singles."<sup>4</sup> Bogle prefers the qualitative methodology because she believes inviting students to describe their experiences in their own words yields the most accurate and complete picture.<sup>5</sup>

As Bogle explains, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1980s, the dominant social script<sup>6</sup> for

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<sup>3</sup>Kathleen Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5. Bogle's sample included 51 undergraduate college students and 25 alumni aged 23-30 who lived no more than a two-hour drive from campus.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup>Details about Bogle's methodology and her reasons for using it can be found in her Methodological Appendix, *ibid.*, 187-90.

<sup>6</sup>*Scripts* are cultural norms about what is acceptable in certain social situations and relationships. They serve as models for individual behavior, and change over time. Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 7-8.

how “men and women initiate sexual encounters and romantic relationships”<sup>7</sup> was the dating script; since about 1990, hooking up has taken its place. The predominance of hooking up does not mean that everyone participates in it, even in college. Heterosexual white students are the ones for whom it dominates, although the practice shapes the social environment for all students.

The term ‘hook up’ is intentionally vague, encompassing behavior from kissing and sexual touching to oral sex and penile-vaginal penetrative sex. The vagueness allows participants to declare that they hooked up and hearers to draw their own conclusions. Some participants want to leave the impression that an encounter went further than it did; others use the term to obscure how far it actually went.

A hookup is typically initiated toward the end of a party, when students have been drinking alcohol. A student might initiate a hookup with an acquaintance or previous hookup partner, or with someone the student just met that night. The encounter can begin with talking and flirting and end with kissing at the party, or it may continue after the hookup partners leave the party together for one of their rooms or apartments. Participants learn to read behavioral cues to determine a partner’s interest in hooking up, and to indicate their own, without explicitly communicating respective intentions. Students vary as to whether they prefer to sleep over (or have a partner sleep over) after a hookup. A hookup does not imply that partners will have an ongoing friendly or romantic relationship, or any future contact at all, after they separate.

Bogle identifies environmental factors that she believes contribute to the hookup culture on college campuses: students view college as a time to experiment, have fun, and “party”;

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 5.

usually they live walking distance from one another; they are demographically homogeneous and typically share friends and acquaintances; and frequent alcohol consumption provides a social lubricant. The hookup script appears to attach to the college environment more than to students as individuals, since after graduation young alumni adopt a relatively traditional dating script.

Although during the first year men's and women's attitudes toward the hookup script appear similar, by sophomore year most women say they are tired of it, while men generally express continued satisfaction with it. Bogle attributes this divergence, in part, to men's and women's expressed preferences regarding the ideal age to marry: for women before age thirty, and for men no earlier than thirty. Part of the explanation, according to Bogle, might also be that many men indicate a preference for the company of other men outside the hookup scene, while more women say they desire a relationship that includes companionship as well as sex. A third possible explanation concerns uncertainty about the hookup script's rules and the sexual double standard.

Students cannot articulate the rules, usually claiming that choices about hookups are personal choices based on individual value systems. Yet much of the hookup script is enacted publicly, while critical eyes scrutinize the parties' behavior. Actual standards for judgment are set by the behavior students believe is normal for their peers. Researchers have discovered these beliefs to be inaccurate, however. Students mistakenly believe that others have significantly more hookups, and go much further sexually, than they do. This can influence students to engage

in behavior they otherwise would not to keep up with their peers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, unlike the dating era, the hookup era lacks any expected correlation between sexual intimacy and commitment. In fact, some students are willing to go furthest sexually with partners in whom they are least interested because less is at risk.

Though rules are unclear for both men and women, a sexual double standard sets the cost of being perceived as transgressing them higher for women, whose behavior receives by far closer scrutiny and harsher judgment. College men and women told Bogle that men can hook up whenever the opportunity arises without damaging their reputations, which frequent hookups can even enhance. Conversely, after making costly mistakes during their first year or witnessing the consequences of others' mistakes, women learn to monitor their behavior carefully. A reputation for being forward or promiscuous can ruin a woman socially. Men who regard their own behavior as acceptable still may not regard women who are equally, or even less sexually active, as potential relationship partners. Female and male peers punish women for behaving like men in their sexual lives by labeling them 'slut.' Bogle notes that this creates a double bind for women, who risk getting a bad reputation if they hook up, but are excluded from social life and have difficulty meeting college men if they refuse. As Bogle points out, one way out of this

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<sup>8</sup>Besides her own interviews, Bogle cites a 2005 study by Kristen Scholly et al., published in the *Journal of American College Health*, which discusses "how college students' misperceptions of their peers' sexual behavior can encourage engaging in 'risky' sexual behavior to conform to what they mistakenly believe is the norm." Ibid., 201, note 9. Bogle also appeals to quantitative studies that confirm "students tend to overestimate their peers' level of sexual involvement and number of partners." Ibid., 89. Michael Kimmel also acknowledges this phenomenon. Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 209-10.

double bind is to have a boyfriend, but given the role men play in the hookup script, the chances of finding one are remote. A related double bind Bogle observes is that while women are punished for sexual behavior regarded as appropriate only for men, they are also punished for behavior expected of women. That is, if a woman attempts to coax a relationship out of a series of hookups with the same person (instead of continuing to pursue commitment-free sex), not only her partner, but other men, will likely avoid her because they perceive her as too susceptible to emotional attachment.

Bogle explores why men seem to control the social environment, hookup rules, and intensity of heterosexual relationships, even though women are the majority of students on campus. She posits an asymmetrical gendered power dynamic unrecognized by most college men and women, which explains why although both men and women are expected to participate in a practice with remarkably unclear rules, only women are punished for being “too active” within it. This dynamic also explains why women are afraid to raise issues that men prefer not to discuss, such as progressing a series of hookups into a relationship.<sup>9</sup> Bogle hypothesizes that more significant than men’s interest in marrying later, preference for male companionship, or relative freedom to hook up whenever they please, could be the scarcity of men on college campuses. Because men comprise about forty percent of college students, women get “the impression that college men have plenty of women from whom to choose, while college women are stuck competing for a scarce resource.”<sup>10</sup> Conversely, Bogle notes, men have sexual access

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<sup>9</sup>Similar reluctance to negotiate satisfaction of needs with a male partner is a well-known symptom of wives’ gender inequality within heterosexual marriage. Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 101.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

to numerous women without much work or any commitment on their part, so they tend to view women as a fungible resource.

Bogle acknowledges that women could, in principle, opt out of the male-controlled hookup script. However, many don't seem to view the hookup script as a social institution. Even if they dislike the consequences of most hookups, they tend to attribute outcomes to their own choices or bad luck without viewing the hookup script itself as problematic. And those who find the script problematic nevertheless usually want to be social, fit in, and interact with college men. Since hooking up is the dominant script for doing that, Bogle regards most women as disinclined to opt out of mainstream social life.

Students who hook up do so partly to "fit in," according to Bogle, and to have engaging subject matter for conversations with friends. If they observe a friend chatting up a hookup prospect at a party, or see the two leave together, they expect to hear details about the encounter. Friend groups also speculate about which people outside their group hooked up, and with whom, on a given night. Thus, engaging in hookup-related gossip is a primary means of bonding for many friend groups. In fact, Bogle and sociologist Michael Kimmel both maintain that the attraction of hooking up may be more closely related to peer bonding than to sensual pleasure, since students tend not to find hookups sexually satisfying. For example, Kimmel reports that the rate of orgasm is low: 19% of women and 44% of men polled reached orgasm during sex in a recent hookup. During penile-vaginal sex, men said that their partners reached orgasm 58% of the time, but women reported reaching orgasm 34% of the time, confessing that they sometimes

fake orgasm to please their partners or “to end it” because they are bored.<sup>11</sup> Men acknowledge performance anxiety that arises from fear of being compared to other partners.<sup>12</sup> And participants apparently are not always present to a sexual experience. Students attest to wearing “beer goggles” and doing things they would not have done if they were not intoxicated; frequently they forget what occurred.<sup>13</sup> In what is perhaps an extreme example, a male junior divulged to Kimmel: “When I’ve just got laid, the first thing I think about . . . before I’ve even like ‘finished’ - is that I can’t wait to tell my crew who I just did. Like, I say to myself, ‘Omigod, they’re not going to believe that I just did Kristy!’” He acknowledges that Kristy probably will ask him not to tell anyone, but he does not intend to honor the request because he looks forward to high-fives from his friends.<sup>14</sup>

Now that we are familiar with the practice of hooking up on college campuses, we can turn to our central question: Is hooking up morally wrong, and if so, why? Let’s consider the practice from the standpoint of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.

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<sup>11</sup>Kimmel, *Guyland*, 210.

<sup>12</sup>Kimmel corroborates much of Bogle’s data, including the deliberate vagueness of the term ‘hooking up,’ that students recognize no mainstream social alternatives, college men are in power and college women face many risks and few (if any) benefits from hooking up, demographic homogeneity and alcohol use within the college environment are conducive to hooking up, few nonwhite students participate in hooking up, and men control the intensity of relationships while women are afraid to raise the subject with them. *Guyland*, Chapter 9: “Hooking Up: Sex in Guyland.”

<sup>13</sup>Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 64.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 206.



### Consequentialism: John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is the moral view that the rightness or wrongness of human actions depends only on their consequences. Versions of consequentialism differ regarding the types of consequences that are desirable and how best to promote them, so they can yield different moral prescriptions. A familiar version of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which holds that the ultimate good consequence that morality requires us to maximize is happiness. To evaluate the moral status of hooking up, we adopt the version John Stuart Mill defends in *Utilitarianism*.<sup>15</sup> On this view, human happiness must be the objective of morally right action because all humans ultimately desire and seek happiness, which consists in pleasurable experiences (positive utility), and freedom from painful experiences (negative utility). Human happiness is maximized when the balance of total human pleasure over pain is as great as it can be. Mill begins with the basic moral criterion known as the *greatest happiness principle*: “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”<sup>16</sup> This principle provides a decision procedure for ranking possible actions morally according to how much aggregate happiness they produce. *Individual net* happiness is the sum of all pleasures minus all pains, weighted for the quality and intensity of each, across each individual’s lifetime. *Aggregate* happiness is determined by adding together all amounts of individual net happiness. Of all the possibilities, the *morally ideal* action receives the highest rank because it promotes the

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<sup>15</sup>John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, vol. X of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.

greatest amount of aggregate happiness.

The view that pleasure is the only intrinsic good for humans, and is what happiness consists in, is known as *hedonism*. Hedonism is sometimes criticized for failure to recognize human dignity, since non-human animals are also capable of pleasure. Non-human animals have happy lives if their needs are satisfied and their experiences are generally pleasant, but a happy human life seems to require something more. Consider how a pet cat can have a wonderful life napping in the sun, batting around toy mice, and eating gourmet cat food. For many people, a perfect day might involve lounging on the beach, splashing about in the cool ocean, and sipping frozen drinks, perhaps the human equivalent. But whatever our perfect day of sensual pleasure, it would lose its appeal if lived day after day for a lifetime. After a certain amount, humans tire of sensual pleasure.<sup>17</sup> Yet people can spend their lives engaged in distinctively human activities, such as conducting scientific research or writing literature, and live happy, rewarding lives.

Although hedonistic, Mill's conception of happiness recognizes the important distinction between sensual *lower* pleasures and distinctively human *higher* pleasures. Higher pleasures include "pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments,"<sup>18</sup> and are *qualitatively* more valuable than sensual pleasures, which is why we don't tire of them. Mill believes that since humans typically have sophisticated cognitive abilities, the surest way to produce the most high-quality pleasure is for them to develop their higher

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<sup>17</sup>Women say they tire of hooking up by sophomore year, and men don't remain satisfied with it indefinitely, since most seek monogamous relationships after graduation. Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 136-38.

<sup>18</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 210-11.

capacities as fully as possible and then enjoy exercising them. When people recall life's best moments, many speak of meeting or marrying a partner, or the birth of a child, which involve moral sentiments such as love. Others reminisce about achieving important professional or personal goals. Rarely are life's best moments constituted by passive, merely sensual experiences. For humans, exercising higher capacities produces more high-quality pleasure than sensual experiences, and thus contributes more to individual and aggregate happiness. In fact, Mill maintains that those who fill their lives almost exclusively with lower pleasures usually lack access to the resources for developing higher capacities, or to sources of higher pleasure.

Though higher pleasures are qualitatively more pleasurable to humans with developed capacities, lower pleasures are still *good* and even necessary. Humans must eat, drink, and rest to survive. Enjoying these adds to the greatest aggregate happiness, and is good up to a certain point. But overindulging in sensual pleasures reduces aggregate happiness in at least two ways. First, a person might bring about a net sum of pain. For instance, a person who overeats may experience a stomach ache that causes more pain than the experience of eating caused pleasure. Since aggregate happiness is determined by adding together the net happiness of all individuals, if overindulging in sensual pleasure causes more pain than pleasure on balance, it detracts from the aggregate sum of happiness as well as individual happiness. Second, overindulging in sensual pleasure can reduce happiness by displacing higher pleasures. If a person spends ninety percent of her lifetime on lower-yield lower pleasures, she has only ten percent to spend on higher-yield higher pleasures. A person who does the reverse has a happier life, since filling one's days with more higher quality pleasures yields more pleasure overall in a lifetime.

Because every person's individual happiness (or unhappiness) is added to determine aggregate happiness, the happier individual people are, the greater the aggregate happiness is. But recall that an action is *morally right* according to the principle of utility just in case it conforms to the rule that can be expected to maximize *aggregate* happiness, not individual happiness. Utilitarian duty may require an agent to sacrifice individual happiness to promote aggregate happiness. Only where maximizing individual happiness *also* tends to increase aggregate happiness is it the best course of action, morally speaking.

From now on, Mill's version of the greatest happiness principle, which distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures, will be referred to as *the principle of utility*. Actions are right proportional to their tendency to promote the greatest sum of net *aggregate* pleasure, and wrong proportional to their tendency to diminish that sum, where higher pleasures contribute more to the sum than lower ones.

But how do we know what a contemplated action tends to promote? Outcomes can be difficult to predict, and we cannot consider, every time we act, the impact on the entire world. This is not a problem for Mill, however, since he defends a version of utilitarianism known as *rule* utilitarianism, rather than *act* utilitarianism. While an act utilitarian claims that a morally right action is one that maximizes aggregate happiness on a particular occasion, a rule utilitarian regards actions as morally right just in case they follow a rule justified by the principle of utility. A rule is so justified exactly when general observance of the rule leads to the greatest aggregate happiness. So, for example, suppose Alex is stopped at a red light at two o'clock in the morning. Would it be morally acceptable to look both ways and carefully proceed even though the light is

red? If it should increase Alex's happiness, and no one else should be affected, act utilitarianism would permit Alex to proceed. Rule utilitarianism would not, since aggregate happiness is best promoted when everyone feels protected by the rules, instead of anxiously doubting others can be relied on to follow them. Because the rule requiring Alex to stop is justified by the principle of utility, Alex should obey it, even though it does not result in a net balance of aggregate happiness on this particular occasion.

Now that we are familiar with Mill's theory, we can apply it to the hookup script. Does use of the hookup script to initiate sexual and romantic relationships in college promote the greatest aggregate happiness?

Hooking up might seem the paradigm of hedonistic behavior. It begins at parties, where alcohol is consumed sometimes to excess to enhance confidence and sense of well-being. It frequently involves sex, which can produce intense sensual pleasure. If hooking up consists of college students engaging in behavior that tends to result in a balance of pleasure for participants, and no one else is directly affected, the principle of utility appears to endorse it. The hookup script would be expected to contribute positively to aggregate happiness.

Though the pleasure experienced in hookups appears to be mainly lower pleasure, lower pleasures contribute positively to the sum of happiness, providing that, first, they don't crowd out higher pleasures because they take up too much time and energy; and second, any pain (including future pain) caused by the activity or experience is exceeded by the pleasure. Whether the first criterion is met depends on how hooking up is practiced. If students spent so much time at parties trying to meet partners, and hooking up, that it interfered with their

academic work, friendships or co-curricular activities (such as varsity sports or drama club), or if it displaced enrichment opportunities on campus such as guest lectures and poetry slams, then hooking up would leave a lot of higher pleasure potential unfulfilled. Since, according to Mill, higher pleasures are more valuable, their displacement reduces the total value of pleasure students might have had.

To meet the second criterion, the hookup script must generate more pleasure than pain on balance, in the aggregate. Distinct student demographics - female participants in the hookup script, their male counterparts, and the students who don't take part in the hookup script - report divergent experiences that affect aggregate happiness differently. Let's consider each to assess the type, amount, and magnitude of pleasure and pain each likely experiences, beginning with the last. Bogle finds that nonwhite, gay and lesbian, unconventionally gendered, and disabled students usually don't participate in the hookup script, and so are excluded from the mainstream practice for meeting romantic and sexual partners. Best case, the hookup script does not much affect these students, since they don't participate. Worst case, it not only reduces their social options on campus because it dominates the social scene, but it makes them feel like outsiders who don't really belong on campus. Thus, it probably does not generate pleasure for them, and it might cause them pain.

Next consider women who participate in the hookup script. During their first year, perhaps they find the hookup script exciting and fun. They might enjoy hookup sex, though data suggest it tends not to be very pleasurable. Possibly, they acquire interesting stories to tell friends. Perhaps hooking up yields a modest amount of pleasure for them. So what are the

likely sources of pain? One source is misreading the hookup rules, or letting their guard down, and incurring the ‘slut’ label. Being despised and rejected by peers is intensely painful, and hazy rules generate uncertainty and fear. Even if a woman manages never to misstep, the sexual double standard still subjects her to a type of pain that Mill regards as particularly acute and destructive.

To understand, let’s consider Mill’s *principle of liberty*,<sup>19</sup> which is an axiom of the principle of utility because its observance is necessary to achieve the greatest aggregate happiness. Mill argues that protection of liberty is essential for individual happiness and social progress. Because security is also essential, society may restrict individual exercise of liberty to protect others from harm. But the greatest aggregate happiness is only possible if individuals are free to undertake different experiments in living, any of which might yield happiness-improving knowledge or methods. So society may not justly impose coercive rules to prevent people from being displeased or offended by others’ self-regarding actions or choices. Mill’s principle of liberty defines the scope of society’s legitimate power over each individual: society may restrict individual liberty, coercively ensuring compliance with societal norms and laws, only when an individual’s nonconformity threatens to harm other people who don’t consent to the risk of harm

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<sup>19</sup>“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection . . . . [T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant . . . . Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, vol. XVIII of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 223. Sometimes this is referred to as the *harm principle*.

imposed. For Mill, not only the state coerces; society informally coerces whenever it treats people as outcasts for flouting majority preferences. Mill believes that people are happier when their ability to freely shape their own lives is protected, even if this requires them to renounce authority to shape the lives of others according to their own tastes and preferences.

Contrary to the principle of liberty, members of campus society act in concert to coercively enforce norms limiting women's sexual liberty. Even if sexually promiscuous college students harm themselves, or each other where each has consented to the foreseeable risks, society is not morally authorized to dispense punishment by making them outcasts, no matter who is offended. A woman who has penile-vaginal intercourse with a different consenting man nightly does not cause harm to nonconsenting others by doing so, and members of campus society are not justified in using social coercion to stop her. Slut-shaming is painful and violates women's moral rights. But even women *never* called sluts apprehensively remain on guard to ensure their behavior is acceptable to others so they can avoid that label, rather than expressing their unique and individual characters. Constantly managing one's image is painful, and suppressing individuality can deform a developing self, decreasing lifetime happiness. On balance, in the aggregate, the hookup script can be expected to cause female participants tremendous pain.

Do male participants derive more pleasure than pain from the hookup script? Interview data suggest this, since most express satisfaction with the script. Men might enjoy hookup sex to some extent, and perhaps above all, if Bogle and Kimmel are right, have a good time impressing their friends with stories. Their hookup behavior is not subject to close scrutiny or harsh



judgment. Best case, male participants gain more pleasure than pain from the hookup script. But this is not necessarily so. Although according to Bogle heterosexual white men control campus social life, individual such men might feel disempowered and constrained by it. Kimmel describes what he calls *the guy code*, whereby young men police each other's behavior and punish whoever displays emotion or weakness. Living up to the code is supposed to establish male superiority and entitlement to male social power. Guys who fail to live up to the code are marginalized. To object to poor treatment of women is to show empathy, break the guy code, and risk losing friends and status. Solidarity and silence are also part of the guy code.<sup>20</sup> Thus, guys may be unwilling to voice objections to the hookup script, if it represents a masculine ideal by ensuring commitment-free promiscuous sex with women. Bogle notes that college men who prefer romantic relationships usually can find them, but this may disregard social pressure to endorse the hookup script. Moreover, even men who regard the script as appealing can find themselves at a frustrating competitive disadvantage. For example, Bogle remarks that fraternity men and athletes are more deeply involved in the hookup scene and have an easier time finding hookup partners regarded as desirable. Kimmel discusses men's discomfort and insecurity when they imagine women comparing them with other hookup partners and judging them inadequate. Since only a small percentage of men approach the masculine ideal,<sup>21</sup> that ideal and its embodiment in the hookup script could cause more pain and frustration than pleasure for many or even *most* male participants.

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<sup>20</sup>Kimmel, *Guyland*, 44-69.

<sup>21</sup>Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," in *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. Estelle Disch, (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2004), 103-09.

Additionally, a significant source of displeasure for both men and women is poor decision-making. Conditions of the hookup scene undermine students' ability to accurately assess the risks, costs and benefits of their decisions. Intoxicated, students sometimes hook up with people they otherwise would not, or go further sexually than they otherwise would. Besides alcohol consumption hampering deliberative capacities,<sup>22</sup> students are also misinformed. Many believe that fitting in means keeping up with other students in number of hookups and partners, and how far hookups proceed sexually. Incorrect beliefs that others are hooking up more, with more people, or are going further sexually *themselves* cause pain, then lead to misinformed decisions that can cause even more pain.

On balance, the existing college hookup script cannot be expected to promote the greatest aggregate happiness. Only a subgroup of male participants - a minority of students - appears likely to derive more pleasure than pain from it, and the amount and intensity of pleasure they gain seems highly insufficient to counterbalance the amount and intensity of aggregate pains suffered by themselves and others.

Nonetheless, the hookup script could promote greatest aggregate happiness if rewritten. Not only could much of the pain be eliminated, but the script could facilitate higher quality sex, leading to more pleasure. Sexual encounters, even without relationship commitments, can

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<sup>22</sup>During 2015, 30% of a large national sample of undergraduate students reported having done something they regretted while under the influence of alcohol during the past 12 months. American College Health Association, National College Health Assessment II: Undergraduate Students Reference Group Data, Report Fall 2015 (2016). Accessed July 21, 2016. [http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/NCHA-II%20FALL\\_2015\\_UNDERGRADUATE\\_REFERENC E\\_GROUP\\_DATA\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/NCHA-II%20FALL_2015_UNDERGRADUATE_REFERENC E_GROUP_DATA_REPORT.pdf).

generate higher as well as lower pleasures. Sex can involve exercise of higher faculties by fostering honest, valuable communication in sexual encounters as well as other domains of life.<sup>23</sup> Sex provides a chance for personal expression, self-discovery, appreciation of beauty, and increased responsiveness to others, and sexual promiscuity allows for a diversity of experiences. Because people can develop their character and a relational orientation to others through promiscuous sex, it can generate higher pleasure and contribute significantly to aggregate happiness.<sup>24</sup>

From the perspective of Mill's utilitarianism, then, when people who enjoy promiscuous sex engage in it, while observing other moral rules generated by the principle of utility, such as those prohibiting coercion, lying, and promise-breaking, promiscuous sex tends to contribute positively to aggregate happiness, providing that it's not so frequent as to displace other valuable activities. The hookup script as currently written, however, produces a balance of aggregate pain. The problem is not that it involves promiscuity, but that it involves a sexual double standard that harms women, and rigid gender expectations that perniciously constrain both women and men. Additionally, it operates under conditions where young and relatively inexperienced people are susceptible to making bad judgments about likely outcomes and taking imprudent risks under the influence of alcohol and social pressure. Social stratification and exclusion, because heterosexual white students socialize in a different world than students belonging to racial and sexual minority groups, also contribute disutility through the hookup

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<sup>23</sup>Frederick Elliston, "In Defense of Promiscuity," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Sex and Love*, ed. Robert M. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 153-54.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 152-53.

script. A more egalitarian, inclusive, sober hook-up culture - or a hookup option among other sexually promiscuous and commitment-oriented options - would promote aggregate happiness, rather than detracting from it the way the current hookup script does.

### **Deontology: Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative**

Let's now consider the moral status of hooking up from the standpoint of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, the most influential deontological rule in Western secular ethics. In deontological ethics, what is morally right is to conform one's behavior to one or a small number of fundamental rules, regardless of the consequences of following the rule(s) in general or in a particular case. Kant's categorical imperative is: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law."<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, one makes a special exception for oneself not granted others, which fails to acknowledge other humans as moral equals. For Kant, human beings are owed a special kind of moral respect because our capacity to reason enables us to recognize, and motivates us to follow, the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is an *imperative* because it's a command; and it's *categorical* because reason addresses it unconditionally to all rational beings, irrespective of their individual aims or intentions (which Kant calls *ends*). In stark contrast with utilitarianism, happiness is not an intrinsic good for humans, and is not the objective of moral decision-making, even though being happy is a common human aim. Reason should motivate us to follow the

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<sup>25</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak. 4:402.

categorical imperative whether or not it makes anyone happy, since human rationality is valuable independently of the consequences it produces.

In Kantian moral theory, every action a moral agent performs can be described using a principle called a *maxim*, which expresses the agent's reasons for acting. Kant offers this example: "when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know that this will never happen."<sup>26</sup> To be morally permissible, a maxim must conform to Kant's categorical imperative, which can be expressed in a variety of equivalent formulas. Kant's *formula of humanity* is arguably the easiest to apply to most moral questions: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."<sup>27</sup> To determine whether acting on this maxim is morally permissible using the formula of humanity, the moral agent must consider whether it uses any person as a mere means; that is, as an instrument to accomplish the agent's own objective, without proper respect for a person's ability to govern herself by her own maxims. Deceiving, manipulating and coercing people all *necessarily* treat others as mere means, and are always morally wrong.

We can consider Kant's own example to see why. If borrower Blair makes a lying promise to obtain a loan from lender Lane, Lane believes the maxim on which Blair acts is something like, "when I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money, promise to pay it back, and do so within a reasonable time." Were Lane not deceived about Blair's maxim,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Ak. 4:422.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., Ak. 4:429. This is also known as *the formula of the end in itself*.

Lane would never lend Blair the money. So it's *impossible* for Blair to act on such a maxim unless Lane is deceived. Deceived, Lane lacks the information needed to guide her behavior toward fulfilling her own maxims. Coercion and manipulation similarly undermine her ability to make rational choices by commandeering decisions that should be hers. Blair undermines Lane's plans to effect Blair's own, using Lane as nothing more than a tool to accomplish her purposes. Using Lane as a mere means violates a duty to always refrain from treating people (including oneself) as mere means.

In Kantian ethics, although one must never treat a person as a *mere* means, it is morally permissible to treat a person as a means and at the *same* time as an end. For example, hailing a taxi and using the driver to reach a destination does not treat the driver as a mere means because the transaction is consistent with both the driver's and the passenger's maxims: the driver aims to make a living, the passenger to reach a destination. These are compatible endeavors, and it's possible for each to consent to her role in the transaction. But didn't Lane consent to loan Blair money in the earlier example, where Blair used Lane as a mere means? Exactly what sort of consent is required to avoid using someone as a mere means? Onora O'Neill provides an account that facilitates use of the formula of humanity to morally evaluate particular actions and practices.<sup>28</sup> For O'Neill, to treat another as an end in herself is to ensure the possibility of her morally significant consent to your treatment. To treat a person as a mere means is to fail to treat her in a way consistent with the possibility of her morally significant consent. The possibility

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<sup>28</sup>Onora O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 252-77.

that P can give morally significant consent to Q depends on satisfying all the following: (1) P can consent to the material aspects of Q's proposal, (2) any conditions for consent that are created by the particular circumstances of the situation are met, and (3) there is a genuine opportunity for P to refuse.<sup>29</sup>

The first aspect of the formula of humanity is the negative duty<sup>30</sup> not to use persons as mere means; the second is the positive duty to treat people always at the same time as ends in themselves. On O'Neill's interpretation, this entails treating people not just as fungible rational beings from whom consent to a proposal might be possible, but as unique individuals with particular capacities and ends that we should, when possible, try to share. Duties to share others' ends (when possible) are duties of *beneficence*. Sharing ends with others involves more than refraining from interfering with them; it means actively supporting and assisting them.<sup>31</sup> It's impossible to share everyone's ends all the time, if we are to advance our own morally permissible ends. Some of others' ends are incompatible with ours, and since time is limited, there are only so many ends we can effectively pursue. "Nevertheless there are occasions when action of a specific sort is required: there are contexts and relationships to others in which to do nothing would be sufficient evidence that the underlying action or principle is unjust or lacking in respect or nonbeneficent."<sup>32</sup> Beneficence may be "unavoidably selective," but "this does not

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 258-60.

<sup>30</sup>A negative duty obligates us to refrain from acting a certain way, while a positive duty requires us to perform an action.

<sup>31</sup>O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," 264-65.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 266.

mean that when we act on these maxims we can neglect all the central projects of lives with which ours are closely involved.”<sup>33</sup> Applying her reasoning to situations of sexual intimacy, O’Neill observes that because people are closely involved there are greater possibilities than in most other interpersonal relationships to share *or* frustrate each another’s ends.<sup>34</sup> To see how, consider each of O’Neill’s three requirements for morally significant consent in the hookup context.<sup>35</sup>

O’Neill’s first criterion for morally significant consent is the possibility for potential hookup partner Pat to consent to the *material aspects* of a hookup proposal by the person who initiates it, Quinn. Pat must know enough about Quinn’s proposal to make an informed decision about whether to consent. O’Neill believes that sexual relationships present a greater opportunity to treat partners as ends in themselves, and a greater danger of using them as mere means, partly because communication in sexual encounters is usually implicit.<sup>36</sup> Hookup script etiquette generally forbids participants to ask one another specifically to hook up, or to engage in

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 270.

<sup>35</sup>Kant himself believed that sexual desire is a powerful and dangerous force that impels a person to treat a sexual partner as a mere means to fulfilling it, instead of as an end in herself. For Kant, sex is only morally permissible within marriage, where partners recognize one another as persons in the full context of their relationship through the marital commitment. Immanuel Kant, “Of Duties Toward the Body in Respect of Sexual Impulse,” in *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath & J.B. Schneewind, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Ak. 27:384-85, 27:388. I regard Kant’s beliefs about sex as idiosyncratic, and favor interpretations that honor the spirit of Kant’s moral philosophy, but cohere better with contemporary beliefs about human sexual interaction.

<sup>36</sup>O’Neill, “Between Consenting Adults,” 268-69.



particular hookup activities. Since it might be unclear what a partner has in mind, careful attention must be paid to nonverbal cues. Although people tend to be adept at reading implicit behavioral cues such as expressions and gestures,<sup>37</sup> alcohol consumption and wishful thinking can interfere. To avoid treating Pat as a mere means, Quinn must take extra care to read cues accurately, and if there is doubt, obtain explicit confirmation. Furthermore, if Quinn is aware that Pat lacks material information - information that would be important to Pat's decision-making - Quinn must divulge that information to avoid using Pat as a mere means. For example, if Pat is a first year student who does not realize that hooking up with a fraternity brother of a relatively recent hookup partner is taboo, or that Quinn qualifies as such a person, Pat does not understand a material aspect of Quinn's hookup proposal. Similarly, each partner must be aware of the kinds of information that will be shared with the other's friends in conversation, since this might affect decision-making. Uncertainty and vagueness surrounding the hookup script's rules make it particularly important for an experienced partner to ensure that a less experienced partner is equally aware of the relevant rules and likely outcomes. And as in any other human activity, deception, coercion and manipulation are morally impermissible.

Second, the possibility of morally significant consent requires that any conditions for consent created by the particular circumstances of the situation be met. O'Neill specifically mentions how asymmetrical gendered power complicates morally significant consent in sexual situations.<sup>38</sup> Sexual power is asymmetrically gendered because men are socialized to use some

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<sup>37</sup>Melanie Beres, "Sexual Miscommunication? Untangling Assumptions About Sexual Communication Between Casual Sex Partners," *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 12 (2010): 1-14.

<sup>38</sup>O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," 268-69.

forms of manipulation, pressure, and deception to have sex with women, while women are inundated with two cultural demands that pull in opposite directions. First, they are supposed to be submissive to men (as demonstrated by women's reluctance to bring up the subject of commitment, or other subjects men don't wish to discuss). Second, women are forbidden to accept men's sexual advances immediately and eagerly, even if they want to, or they will incur the label 'slut' and future rejection as "not girlfriend material." Often it's impossible to meet both demands simultaneously. Men's dominance in the hookup arena creates a special obligation to be sensitive to their partners' ends and to ensure that female partners' consent and participation are wholehearted and free.

O'Neill's third criterion for the possibility of morally significant consent is the existence of a genuine opportunity for Pat to refuse. If either partner believes that participation is necessary to avoid something worse, the possibility of morally significant consent is foreclosed. This applies to the opportunity to decline participation both in a particular sexual encounter and in the hookup script altogether. If Pat hooks up with Quinn because Pat believes that refusal to do so will make Quinn angry, or not want to see Pat anymore, or will result in Quinn making embarrassing or untrue statements about Pat, Pat doesn't have a genuine opportunity to refuse.<sup>39</sup> Quinn would be manipulating Pat into doing what Quinn wants, and that's wrong because it uses Pat as a mere means.

O'Neill also argues that in an intimate relationship, respect for the other "requires us to

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<sup>39</sup>This should not be understood as a claim that Quinn's behavior meets a legal definition of sexual assault, or of any crime. The claim here is that it violates Kant's categorical imperative.

take account not only of the particular interlock of desires, dependencies, and vulnerabilities that have arisen in a given relationship, but also that we heed any wider social context whose modes of discourse and received opinions may systematically undermine or belittle the other's ends and capacities to pursue them."<sup>40</sup> Not just the actions of individual moral agents, but also the operation of social institutions, can express a maxim.<sup>41</sup> We can meaningfully ask whether it's possible for participants to give morally significant consent to participate in the institution itself. To demonstrate, O'Neill considers the Marxist claim that it's not possible for workers to consent to the employment terms of capitalism. If Marxists are right, the maxim underlying capitalism is something like, "Workers will be paid for less than the value they produce so that capitalists can profit from their labor." Workers, of course, would never freely agree to such a bad bargain.<sup>42</sup> So they are either deceived as to the maxim capitalism expresses or coerced to take the bad bargain because it's the only way to survive. Either way, workers are used as mere means, and are treated unjustly by the institution of capitalist employment relations.<sup>43</sup> Were workers' self-government not undermined, they would pursue their own ends and receive a wage equal to the value of their labor. On this view, capitalist employment practices reflect a kind of "systematic disregard" for workers' maxims that disrespects them as persons.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," 271.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 274.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 275.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 276.

Bogle maintains that women generally hook up to meet and establish relationships with men, while men usually hook up to have sex (or stories about it) and avoid relationships with women. Assuming that's true, men and women have different ends and maxims related to hooking up. What maxim or principle underlies the practice of hooking up as an institution? Perhaps: "Students will have sexual encounters without expectation of commitment so that men can have a variety of partners and experiences to share with their friends." If women usually have a maxim that involves hooking up to meet a boyfriend who will provide companionship, the underlying principle of hooking up undermines their ends. Risk of being viewed as "not dating material" for failure to meet others' vague expectations further frustrates women's ends. The principle that underlies hooking up permits men to view women as fungible commodities with which they can avoid emotional connection, rather than as fellow students and ultimately persons. Thus, it assists men's ends, but college women cannot possibly give their free consent to it because it undermines their ends.

Even if women's ends are identical to men's - to have commitment-free sex with a variety of partners and stories to share, for the purposes of enjoyment - the hookup script frustrates these ends for women, while advancing them for men, because the sexual double standard undermines women's enjoyment and status as moral equals. The double standard facilitates men sexually using women (intentionally or not). Catharine MacKinnon suggests that part of the reason the pornography taboo persists is that many of its (male) users regard pornography as more exciting *because* it's taboo. Likewise, even consensual sex might seem

less sexy to men if it came easily, rather than presenting an opportunity to dominate women.<sup>45</sup> Why else would men who wanted sex rather than domination discourage women from eagerly agreeing to sex at every opportunity? If the underlying principle of a sexual double standard is to magnify men's enjoyment of sex by preserving its forbiddenness, while shifting the costs onto slut-shamed women, then the double standard is a paradigm case of using others as mere means. Whether or not this is the underlying principle of the sexual double standard, that standard contributes significantly to an asymmetrical gendered power dynamic that undermines the possibility of women's morally significant consent in intimate heterosexual relationships and other domains. Avoiding treatment of women as mere means, and treating women as ends in themselves, requires abolition of the sexual double standard.

A woman who recognizes that the hookup script or its double standard undermines her ends might still regard social exclusion as too great a price to pay for refusing complicity, and submit to use as a mere means. This enables college men to take advantage of constraints on women's choices and use women as instruments for men's purposes. Individual men might not recognize the exploitation involved, but indifference to the maxims that one's actions express does not excuse a person for failure to treat others respectfully and beneficently. And beneficence is morally required when people's central projects are closely involved, as when students share a college campus and social life, and are sexually intimate with one another.

Kant's standard for assessing a practice's moral impact is not its tendency to promote

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<sup>45</sup>Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure Under Patriarchy," *Ethics* 99 (1989), 320-22.

social good. Instead, we assess whether individual maxims of action embody moral respect for persons. Nonetheless, some social conditions make it easier than others for individuals to do what the categorical imperative commands. The underlying principle of hooking up, and the risks of deceit, coercion, and manipulation that arise in its practice, make it doubtful that college hookup culture consists in or is conducive to morally commendable, or even permissible, behavior. The hookup script creates occasions and fosters dispositions to use oneself and others as mere means. It invites participants to view people instrumentally, as opportunities to satisfy sexual desires or cravings for peer admiration. Social pressure to participate inclines people to treat themselves as mere means for achieving others' ends. Deliberate intoxication involves using oneself as a mere means, because it disables the rationality that makes humans special and worthy of respect, to achieve ends that are much less morally important. Because every moral agent has a positive duty to place herself in a good position to do what she morally ought, she has a duty to avoid situations that make it difficult for her to conform her conduct to the categorical imperative's requirements. A related duty of beneficence calls on moral agents to assist others in removing obstacles to their morally permissible ends, including their ends as rational agents to follow the categorical imperative. Thus, every college student, as a rational being, has good moral reason to work with others to reform the hookup script. To foster mutual respect, establishing the same standards for men and women should be a reform priority.

Notice that the moral hazards of the current hookup script are *not* intrinsic features of sexual promiscuity. Any college student could, in a sex-equal environment, have promiscuous sex and avoid these moral risks by communicating frankly with partners and respecting their

choices, feelings and ends with moral sensitivity. Practically, given our current institutions and practices, the barriers to this are enormous. But that does not show sexual promiscuity to be intrinsically morally impermissible. It instead shows that some ways of practicing it - such as the college hookup culture that currently exists - tend to be filled with incentives to commit moral wrongs independent of the promiscuous nature of the practices.

### **Virtue Ethics**

While consequentialism and deontology focus on rules of right action, such as the principle of utility and formula of humanity, virtue ethics concerns itself with the development and exercise of character virtues. These virtues are excellences necessary for people to live flourishing, characteristically *human* lives.<sup>46</sup> Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle presented virtue ethics in a fully worked out form.<sup>47</sup> Although he referred to flourishing as *eudaimonia*, sometimes translated “happiness,” *eudaimonia* is nothing like what a utilitarian means by happiness. Rather than being constituted by subjective experiences of pleasure, it consists of objective conditions that are healthy and proper for human beings. What causes humans to flourish can be discovered by inquiring into the nature of human beings.

Within virtue ethics, virtues can be understood as stable qualities and dispositions to act, feel, and think in certain positive, admirable ways. They include traits such as honesty, courage, beneficence, and generosity. Vices, the opposites of these traits, are qualities and stable

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<sup>46</sup>Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>47</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross.

dispositions to act, feel, and think in certain negative, unworthy ways. They include dishonesty, cowardice, selfishness, and stinginess.

According to virtue ethicists, virtues and vices are cultivated through habits that people develop over time. Society and parents attempt to cultivate virtues, and eradicate vices, when rewarding and punishing children. They punish lies, selfishness and ingratitude, and teach children to be honest, considerate, helpful, and grateful. Ideally, they model the good behavior they want children to adopt. Children learn to share, to say please and thank you, to be truthful and to help others in distress. At first children behave correctly to avoid punishment. But for the most part, correct action becomes stable habit by the time they reach young adulthood and begin to understand, gradually, why the actions are correct. Bad habits are also reinforced with practice, even if those engaging in them recognize them as bad. According to virtue ethicists, cultivating virtues by habitual practice is essential if a person is to flourish. An ideally virtuous person - an aspirational ideal, since actual people tend not to be perfectly virtuous - responds emotionally and behaviorally “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way.”<sup>48</sup>

The virtuous person is habituated to feel the appropriate amount of pleasure or pain in response to particular situations. Excessive pleasure or pain responses reveal a lack of appreciation for a situation’s moral features. Like feelings, actions can be excessive or deficient compared to what is appropriate, sometimes because the agent lacks the self-control - “continence” - to act as she realizes a virtuous person would. Although not all virtues involve

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., II.6, 1106b:20-25.



steering a middle course between two extremes, Aristotle discusses many that do. For example, a virtuous person is brave, and so fears what she ought to fear exactly as much as she should. A coward is too fearful and quick to avoid danger, and a rash person too fearless and ready to take risks not justified by the importance of potential gains. Bravery is the *mean*, the proper response, of the virtuous person. It avoids the vices of deficiency (cowardice) and excess (rashness).

Being virtuous is doing what the virtuous person would do, motivated by knowledge of what virtue requires rather than by immediate self-interest. Honesty is a virtue, and honest people don't merely tell the truth, but they do so "readily, eagerly, unhesitatingly, scrupulously, as appropriate. They hasten to correct a false impression their words have led you into which would be to their advantage; they own up immediately without waiting to see if they are going to be found out; they give voice to the truth everyone else fears to utter; they are concerned to make sure you understand what you are signing or agreeing to do for them."<sup>49</sup> They not only tell the truth, but cherish the truth.

Like medicine and navigation, Aristotle maintains, ethics requires particular judgments tailored to the case. For the virtue ethicist, ethics cannot be codified into rules such as the principle of utility or formula of humanity. Living well requires developing good moral judgment and practicing virtuous habits.

Now that we have a sketch of the virtue ethics framework, let's explore how the hookup script can contribute to or detract from a flourishing life.

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<sup>49</sup>Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 11.

A vice that the hookup script brings to mind is self-indulgence, which is opposed to the virtue of temperance. A temperate person enjoys bodily pleasures, including the taste of food and drink, and sexual sensations, as much as they merit. Someone who did not enjoy sensations of taste or touch at all would be deficient in feeling. What Aristotle recognizes as occurring far oftener, though, is that self-indulgent people take excess pleasure in bodily sensations. To the extent hooking up involves inappropriate bodily pleasure, it's self-indulgent. For example, someone who drinks excessively to enjoy what he wouldn't sober, or drinks to the point of sickness, incompetence, or memory loss, takes pleasure in what he shouldn't. Likewise, a person who takes pleasure in sex with a barely conscious or intermittently vomiting partner, or one who reluctantly consents to sex in the face of interpersonal or peer pressure, fails to value pleasure correctly. Such experiences are not pleasurable to a person living a good human life.

Is sexual promiscuity - sex with multiple partners in the absence of a relationship commitment - self-indulgent? Aristotle recognizes that enjoying sex is not intrinsically inappropriate. There is no obvious reason why enjoying sex without commitment is inappropriate, assuming pregnancy is prevented. If commitment-free sex with one person is appropriate to enjoy, then why would multiple partners make it inappropriate?

To think through this question, let's first explore the virtues of empathy, compassion, and kindness. An empathetic person regularly makes a genuine effort to occupy the perspective of others, and does so successfully. A compassionate person is moved by others' suffering and motivated to relieve it. Empathetic and compassionate people tend to be kind: disposed to help others for the sake of improving others' circumstances, and not for any advantage to

themselves.<sup>50</sup> Kindness, compassion, and empathy are opposed to the vices of selfishness, callousness, and cruelty. Selfishness is disregard for others' well-being, and callousness is indifference to others' suffering. Cruelty is the "infliction of pain for a purpose that does not justify it," regardless of whether the agent intended to cause the pain, or regretted causing it.<sup>51</sup>

Given the kind of beings humans are, we can't flourish unless we are kind, compassionate, and empathetic. Taking pleasure in promiscuous sex would be inappropriate if sexual promiscuity were instead selfish, callous or cruel. Is it? Although sexual promiscuity does not seem intrinsically vicious, in certain cultural contexts it could be selfish. Where romantic love and commitment are regarded as inseparable from sexual attraction and exclusivity, romantic love appears to entail sexual exclusivity and open promiscuity implies absence of love for any particular partner. In this cultural context, even honest promiscuity is selfish if it reflects indifference to partners' feelings and wishes. Honesty and kindness become difficult to reconcile. For example, suppose virtuous Harley has several sexual partners, and equally values the company of each. Harley doesn't want Gerry (or any partner) left with a false impression that Harley favors Gerry, or that their relationship has potential for eventual exclusivity. Sensitive to Gerry's feelings, Harley realizes that being explicit about this for honesty's sake will likely, given cultural norms, make Gerry feel unimportant and unloved. How can Harley, who is kind and cares about Gerry, be honest and kind to Gerry simultaneously?

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<sup>50</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II.7, 1385a-b.

<sup>51</sup>Rosalind Hursthouse, "Applying Virtue Ethics to Our Treatment of the Other Animals," in *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, ed. Jennifer Welchman (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2006), 144.

Virtuous promiscuity depends on the ability of partners to knowingly, intentionally, and willingly separate sex from emotional attachment. Thus, it's conceptually possible but practically difficult given the current cultural meanings of sex.

Demands of honesty and kindness might conflict less in the college hookup context than in society in general, if the cultural connection between sexual encounters and romantic relationships is severed or attenuated. But another obstacle emerges. Dubbing college social culture “guyland,” Kimmel explains how it “rests on a bed of middle-class entitlement, a privileged sense that you are special, that the world is there for you to take.”<sup>52</sup> People who believe this are self-important and lack proper humility. Proper humility is “an attitude which measures the importance of things independently of their relation to oneself or to some narrow group with which one identifies.”<sup>53</sup> The self-important regard their own interests and projects as intrinsically more worthwhile than other people's, because they overestimate their own importance. Aristotle maintains that those who incorrectly regard themselves as better than peers are vain, and those who mistakenly view themselves as less important than peers are unduly humble. Both are vices. The virtue, proper pride, entails treating equals as such. No self-respecting person organizes his life to please peers, unless he does so willingly because they are friends; otherwise he is servile, slavish. For Aristotle, undue humility is a worse vice than vanity. It's related to another vice, obsequiousness, which is exhibited by those “who to give pleasure praise everything and never oppose, but think it their duty ‘to give no pain to the people

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<sup>52</sup>Kimmel, *Guyland*, 10-11.

<sup>53</sup>Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments,” *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983), 219.

they meet’.”<sup>54</sup>

College hookup participants are remarkably homogeneous demographically: middle class, white, in their late teens to early twenties. They are peers, equals. But the dynamics of hooking up invite the conclusion that many male participants are self-important and vain, and many female participants are unduly humble and servile. For instance, some men say they would regard a woman as “dirty” if she had sex with the same number of partners they did. Judging by this double standard reveals lack of regard for women as equals, since it presumes that men’s interests in perpetual commitment-free sex with multiple partners are more important than women’s. Men who believe this are self-important and vain. Conversely, women carefully monitor their behavior, organizing their lives to win approval, mainly of men who are not their friends. They go to great pains to avoid being viewed as sluts or too emotionally attached, and obsequiously conform to men’s preferences, avoiding subjects that upset hookup partners, as if they had a duty to avoid causing trouble or displeasure. They fake orgasms to please, or avoid displeasing, partners. Rather than oppose unequal treatment, they accept it. Perhaps that further exhibits what Aristotle dubs “inirascibility,” a sort of slavishness exemplified by those who don’t become angry enough to defend themselves when others insult them or their friends.

Considering proper pride, Aristotle specifically mentions gossip as a pastime that does not reflect it, and is vicious for other reasons. First, proud people have healthy self-respect and don’t slavishly seek others’ approval. Vain people boast about their exploits because they care too much about their reputation and status, and overestimate their own importance. Some men

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<sup>54</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.5, 1126a:5-10.

who hook up boast because they are vain and want to impress others. Second, boasters tend to stretch the truth, which is dishonest. The term ‘hookup’ itself is designed to facilitate misrepresenting what occurred during a sexual encounter. Third, honorable people don’t scrutinize and criticize others’ behavior; they generously overlook faults rather than calling attention to them. Dwelling on others’ faults could hurt them, to gain advantage for oneself, and so is petty and mean. The scrutiny and harsh judgment aimed at (especially women’s) hookup behavior is certainly mean. Fourth, in addressing virtues and vices pertinent to leisure and amusement, Aristotle condemns those who strive for a laugh at any cost, even at someone’s expense, calling them buffoons. Surely hookup gossip sessions can involve buffoonery. But even when a laugh is not the objective, willingness to hurt people to entertain oneself and one’s friends displays the tastelessness that Aristotle regards as vicious.

In the hookup context, gossip sessions are fertile ground for feelings, such as envy and spite, that impede flourishing. These emotional states “are concerned with the pain and pleasure that are felt at the fortunes of our neighbours; the man who is characterized by righteous indignation is pained at undeserved good fortune, the envious man . . . is pained at all good fortune, and the spiteful man . . . rejoices”<sup>55</sup> in others’ misfortune. Given the vagueness of the term ‘hook up,’ gossip about hooking up fosters envy and spite. Research indicates most students believe that others are hooking up more often than they do, with more partners, and are going further sexually. This arouses envy in those who don’t want others to fare better than they do. Resenting others’ good fortune, they might seek to undermine it. Those who eagerly

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., II.8, 1108b:1-10.

publicize and magnify the missteps of others for their own amusement, or to make their own missteps appear less significant, spitefully rejoice in peers' misfortune. Spite impels the social ostracism that serves as a penalty for mistakes, and makes it necessary for women to carefully monitor their hookup activities.

Besides being vain, boastful, and mean, discussing sexual encounters in same-sex peer groups can be callous and cruel. Recall that researchers believe sharing stories and bonding with same-sex peers might be a more central objective of hooking up than experiencing sex. When someone trusts another enough to be sexually intimate, she places herself in a vulnerable position, particularly in a culture where women are ubiquitously sexualized and there is a sexual double standard. Yet, within hookup culture, that a partner prefers privacy is no impediment to sharing with friends details of sexual encounters. The gossip spread during these sessions can seriously damage students' - especially women's - reputations, and make their social interactions so uncomfortable that some peers won't speak with them, or they have to transfer schools.<sup>56</sup> These are known risks of gossip sessions, compelling women to keep their guard up. Students who subject peers to these risks for amusement exhibit selfish disregard for peers' well-being, and callous indifference to their suffering. Gossip sessions are cruel because they inflict pain simply for amusement, which is morally unjustified. Even if gossiping students don't intend to cause harm, or feel badly when they do, the practice is still cruel. Empathetic people don't engage in such gossip, or even listen to it, because they compassionately appreciate the suffering it causes. Kind, brave students would chide their friends for selfish gossip. And if enough

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<sup>56</sup>Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 113-14.

students regarded these stories as hurtful rather than entertaining, the motivation for telling them would disappear.

Once hookup-script participants become aware of the suffering it causes, are they cowardly, callous, or selfish for continuing to participate? The answer depends partly on what is risked and what can be gained by challenging the current script. Both men and women risk social exclusion and lowered status for criticizing the hookup script, and both stand to gain social options that are less adversarial, with more flexible norms, freedom for self-expression and experimentation, and opportunities for friendship and pleasure. For women, who face a significant risk of social exclusion and lowered status whether or not they participate in the hookup script, the gains clearly justify the risks. This also seems true for men disadvantaged or constrained by the script. Those who wish to reform the hookup script, but are excessively afraid to do so, are therefore deficient in bravery, since the gains are worth the risks. When participants who favor the hookup script realize the suffering it causes, they might be disinclined to challenge it because they believe it benefits them. Perhaps they fear losing the special privileges it confers. This is arguably a more vicious form of cowardice, motivated by selfish and callous indifference to others' suffering. And while it's not brave but rash to take risks when there's no hope of achieving the objective, students undoubtedly can reform their campus practices by uniting with like-minded others.

Aristotle warns that the person who cultivates a bad character is responsible for it, and responsible for action that springs from it, even if at some point the vicious habit becomes so ingrained it's nearly impossible to control or change. He asserts that people are morally



responsible for their voluntary ignorance, and when a person makes himself ignorant - a poor decision-maker - through intoxication, he is not excused but instead is more blameworthy for his bad decision. Because the current hookup script cultivates vices, students have urgent reason to revise it to make it more conducive to their collective flourishing.

College students view college as “a time to party” and expect their lives after college to be different. They expect to be adults with admirable attitudes and behaviors. Yet some underestimate the power of habit. Four years of cultivating vices during particularly formative years may permanently damage character by arresting the development of good moral judgment and establishing persistent habits of thought and action that are undesirable. Even if the damage is not permanent, good character development is nevertheless likely delayed. If, as virtue ethicists believe, virtues are necessary for a flourishing human life, cultivating vicious habits jeopardizes health and happiness. Taking such a risk with matters as important as one’s character and happiness, to gain something as unimportant as social status or pleasure, is rash. It indicates insufficient appreciation of the danger risked for a trivial gain.

The best case for a virtuous college hookup practice is one in which the objectives are pleasure and friendship (rather than fitting in or same-sex peer bonding), and where the virtues of honesty, kindness, compassion, empathy, proper pride, generosity, and bravery are all practiced on every occasion with every partner and with all others. Temperance with respect to alcohol, minimization of envy, and refraining from spiteful gossip, are necessary to create this possibility. It would indeed be virtuous to work toward transforming the college hookup culture to be more conducive to participants’ flourishing.

## **Conclusion**

I hope to have demonstrated that sexual promiscuity is not the most objectionable aspect of the practice of hooking up, nor is it intrinsically morally objectionable at all. Ethical practices of promiscuity can be defended within Millian consequentialism, Kantian deontology, and Aristotelian virtue ethics, but some contexts lend themselves better to ethical promiscuity than others. The college hook-up culture is poorly designed to promote good outcomes, respect for persons, or human flourishing. With cultural adjustments to how it's practiced, college hookups could be part of a good and moral life. Suppose, for example, that hooking up were one of several ways to meet compatible romantic and sexual partners, and that partners had truly equal power to negotiate sexual encounters and whether to progress relationships, because they respected each other as friends and equals. Ethical hookup culture would be inclusive of different student demographics, would not depend on the use of alcohol, and would respect privacy and avoid gossip.

Additionally, rescuing sexual promiscuity from the taint of moral wrongfulness would almost certainly contribute to the utilitarian happiness of women, who could express themselves sexually without becoming villains, and the happiness of both men and women, since better communication in sexual encounters enhances sensual and higher pleasure during sex. Sex on gender equal terms would promote conditions of mutual respect and would enhance women's autonomy. Moreover, social conditions would better conduce to human flourishing for all of the reasons just mentioned.

Sexual promiscuity, by its nature, does not undermine utilitarian happiness, respect for persons, or human flourishing. Hierarchical social power and the sexual double standard do.