

## **An interview with Aidan McGlynn on his paper: How pornography works: Pornography as undermining propaganda and freedom of speech.**

**With Jackie Thompson and Francesca Rossi.**

**Jackie:**

Hello, and welcome to *Forward Thinking*; a monthly podcast from the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, where once a month, we talk to our academics about the fascinating research ideas and projects they're currently working on.

My name's Jackie Thompson and today my fellow podcaster Francesca Rossi is talking to Dr Aidan McGlynn. He's a lecturer in philosophy here at Edinburgh, and has worked on a wide range of philosophical topics. This year Aidan is also teaching Feminism (with Joey Pollock) and his interests in this area have led to the paper we're discussing today. The paper's called 'How pornography works: pornography as undermining propaganda and freedom of speech.' Here's Aidan to explain all.

**Francesca:**

Hi Aidan, thanks for joining us today. You have recently written a paper called 'How pornography works: Pornography as undermining propaganda and freedom of speech.' Can you tell us what this paper is about?

**Aidan:**

The paper is an attempt to explore the idea associated with Susan Brownmiller who wrote a very important book on sexual violence against women a while ago. An idea associated with her is that some pornography acts as a kind of misogynist propaganda, and the way I try to explain it in this paper, is to take some ideas from the feminist lawyer and legal theorist and philosopher Catharine MacKinnon- to take some of the things she's written about pornography and attempt to describe a mechanism – the way in which some pornography could act as a kind of propaganda in this sense, so in particular I'm looking at the way certain pornographic images; so pictures and films, might act as a kind of misogynist propaganda. I also, towards the end of the paper, try to argue that the precise way in which I take MacKinnon to be suggesting pornography might work as kind of propaganda- it helps with certain worries people have had about an argument which MacKinnon herself has made and which the Philosopher Rae Langton has tried to develop in some detail. They try to argue that in a sense pornography silences women in a way which is incompatible with the right to freedom of speech, so I'm interested in trying to answer certain worries that people have had about this argument, to try to show that they can meet these objections.

**Francesca:**

Why are you interested in this topic in the first place as a philosopher? Because for many people it might not be an obvious topic for philosophers to study.

**Aidan:**

Philosophers have been interested in pornography as a kind of applied ethics issue for a long time. The particular approach that I'm interested in is one associated with Rae Langton, who I already mentioned. She's a philosopher now at Cambridge and she published a paper in 1993 called *Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts*, where she took as her starting point the claim that pornography is a kind of speech. That claim in itself seems kind of surprising, but she was looking at the liberal tradition which has tried to defend pornography from say, censorship, on the grounds that it should be

protected as a kind of free speech or free expression. So what she does is take that as her starting point and says 'well, let's run with the idea that pornography is a kind of speech, what kind of speech is it?' and she appeals to the philosopher J.L. Austin who in the last century developed or was seen as the grandfather of what's now called *Speech Act Theory*; the study of different kinds of speech, different acts that we can perform in speaking, and so she brings to bear distinctively philosophical work through J.L. Austin, and uses it to try to ask this question of 'well if pornography is speech, what does it say?' and in particular she wants to argue that it says things which are very, very problematic- that they are misogynistic and have bad effects for women.

**Francesca:**

It's very interesting what you've just said, because as in the title, you say that pornography is like undermining propaganda, and I think that it links to the fact that pornography is a kind of speech as you've just said. But what do you mean by 'pornography is undermining propaganda?' And how is pornography similar to politics? Because again it seems to me a very interesting but not at all a straightforward comparison.

**Aidan:**

There are various bits to that question. One thing is, you might be wondering what's meant by pornography here – and I should say I don't just mean everything that we might call pornography when we're talking every day. I'm restricting my focus to sexually explicit depictions of the subordination of women. I'm not suggesting this is what we really mean when we use the word pornography, this is just narrowing the focus down to the kind of pornography that is at issue in this discussion.

When I say that it's a kind of *undermining propaganda*, I'm appealing to recent work by the Yale philosopher Jason Stanley, who's just written a book called 'How Propaganda works' (2015). My title is kind of a riff on his, and there he's interested in the idea that certain contributions to public political discourse are presented as the embodiment of a certain political ideal say the ideal of liberty, or autonomy and yet those very contributions actually tend to undermine that very ideal. So if you have a contribution to public political discourse which is presented as an embodiment of the ideal of autonomy, free choice, and yet which actually leads to certain people being unable to choose the things they want to choose in legitimate ways. And in suggesting the kind of pornography we're interested in is propaganda in something like that sense, there's something of a stretch in that claim, so it's very clear that pornography, most of it at least, is not presented as a contribution to public political discourse. So what Stanley has in mind is things like Donald Trump making announcements on CNN or Fox News or various other platforms from which people can make contributions to public political discourse. Pornography's not like that, people watch it in their bedrooms or wherever else, so I'm not suggesting that it's straightforwardly like the kind of cases that Stanley's interested in, but I do think there's a connection, even though people are watching this by themselves at home, is that I think that the kind of ideals which are involved in pornography are political ones, so one of the things I'm interested in in the paper is the ideal that you get from Catharine MacKinnon that some pornography presents itself as embodying the ideals of equality and autonomy. There's a particular example I've discussed and which other philosophers have discussed, *-Deep Throat*, which is sometimes presented as– the lead character Linda Lovelace, is presented as the embodiment of feminine sexual autonomy in some sense. she really is. That's what women would do if they could freely choose their sexual destiny, and yet we think that really isn't what's going on; that presentation of her as being fully autonomous actually masks a reality which is very different. So Linda wrote a biography where she described the, well the title's Ordeal!- the ordeal

that she went through in order to be forced to do the things which are portrayed in the movie. So this involved violence, threats of violence against her family, druggings, beatings, rape. This was not somebody who was autonomous at all in reality and yet she was presented as embodying autonomy. So that's the sense in which the political liberal ideal of autonomy seems to be playing a role here, pornography is being presented as embodying that ideal and yet it does so in a way which actually tends to undermine that very ideal, so that's the connection I see to Stanley's notion of undermining propaganda.

**Francesca:**

How do you think your research and this kind of research can have an impact outside of Philosophy?

**Aidan:**

It's actually, at the moment, controversial that it *can* have that impact. Certainly it's been the hope of people like Rae Langton and others that have worked on this, and it's my hope as well that it can have that kind of impact. So I hope that it has impact on issues about free speech as I've already mentioned one of the things I hope to contribute with this paper is to the argument you get from Catharine MacKinnon and Rae Langton that pornography silences women in ways that are incompatible with the right to free speech, and free speech is a topic not just of philosophical interest, it's of legal interest, and it's obviously of tremendous importance generally. And also this is a topic which you might think is of interest to anyone interested in what mechanisms are in place that make it the case that women are kind of worse off than men in general, in society, and in particular what mechanisms can lead to them being in danger of gendered violence. So again that's a topic which is absolutely not of sole interest to philosophers, it should be of interest to everybody. The reason I say it's controversial, is some people, in particular the philosopher Nancy Bauer, have suggested that despite these ambitions of these kind of philosophical discussions, including, I think, she would say mine, don't really manage to have that kind of general impact- that the work gets taken up and discussed by other philosophers, but it doesn't really have the kind of the general impact that it has hoped for. I hope that it will prove to have that kind of impact but I recognise that there's a discussion to be had there.

**Francesca:**

So do you have any plans to take this research further?

**Aidan:**

I do. This is really for me the first footsteps into new territory for me. I've generally worked on issues mostly in epistemology to do with knowledge, belief, justification and the relationship between these and various issues in the philosophy of language and mind, and it's only been in the last couple of years that I've started to turn my attention to more socially and politically charged topics within philosophy. This is one of my first attempts to try to say something new about these topics. I don't really have a clear sense of how exactly this fits into what will hopefully be a bigger research agenda, but certainly that's a direction I'm hoping to go in.

**Francesca:**

Fantastic! Well thanks Aidan for this very good research and for your time. This is an incredibly fascinating topic that we do hope, maybe also thanks to this podcast, will have a broader impact on non-philosophers, and good luck with it.

**Aidan:**

Thank you

**Jackie:**

A big thank you to Aidan for taking the time to talk to us today. Aidan's paper isn't quite ready to publish yet, but check back to the Forward thinking blog for updates. To find out more about Aidan and his work, follow the links at the forward thinking blog. And if you want to hear more podcasts you can subscribe to us there too.