

I would like to approach the question of domination and kink from a couple different angles.

INTRO

Worthwhile recalling some passages from the beginner's guide to [BDSM](#):

- Characteristics of the dom and sub.
- Purpose of the relationship.
- Punishment and humiliation.

Also, the (disturbing?) [post](#) by gingergoodness on reddit.

IN DEFENSE OF BDSM

Contractarian/liberal/libertarianism (henceforth: "CL")

- Morally defending BDSM is easiest from the CL position. The dom and the sub clearly consent, the sub has a safe word, the relationship is embedded inside a larger legal and moral context that allows the sub to leave or stop when she wishes to. Domination is essentially *play*: just as kids can play cops and robbers (violence) or adults play medieval games (non-democratic systems), kinks can engage in BDSM morally (master/slave relationships, which would be wrong if "real").

Sex-positive feminism

- Sex-positive feminists hold in essence that BDSM passes CL muster, and they think that saying women shouldn't do this or that consensual act is itself anti-feminist. They think that feminists should say that women get to express and explore their sexuality as they see fit, and that this in itself is empowering. See [here](#) and [here](#).

OBJECTIONS TO BDSM

- Obviously, many critiques from the direction of what I have called "therapeutic culture" can be expected (for instance, what "Gingergoodness" is up to is unsafe).
- Criticisms from traditional and religious grounds are also obvious (perversion, etc.).
- Kantianism: do BDSM relationships use people as means only? Do they "degrade" human dignity by "playing-acting" master-slave roles, merely for pleasure?

I will focus on feminism.

- Feminists against BDSM are not "sex negative"---that would be untrue. So let's call them "BDSM-critical" feminists, or "critical feminists" for short.
- Why do critical feminists think poorly of BDSM? Check out this [manifesto](#), and this [scathing critique](#).

Can we summarize the BDSM-critical feminist position? It's easiest to do by considering how they would reply to this CL argument in favor of BDSM.

1. If some sexual practice is consensual, it is morally permissible.
2. BDSM practices are consensual.

3. So BDSM is morally permissible.

Some people bring up harm-based reasons more appropriate for therapeutic culture: some sexual practices are consensual, but morally evil, such as love cannibalism cases.

Suppose this is right. Even so, the BDSM advocate can revise:

1. If some sexual practice is consensual *and safe*, it is morally permissible.
2. Some BDSM practices are consensual and safe.
3. So those BDSM practices are morally permissible.

What do BDSM-critical feminists say to this argument? Essentially, they think premise (1) is false, since, even if particular BDSM acts are consensual and safe,

- a. Often that “consent” is superficial.
- b. Often that “consent” is attributable to false consciousness (female Stockholm syndrome).
- c. Most doms are men, most subs women, and doms are the more “masculine” in homosexual BDSM relationships. So BDSM is just an attempt to legitimize female subordination.
- d. It is likely that people who “play” this way will live their lives more this way, too.
- e. It is likely that observers will take this as evidence that women really want to be subdued and tamed.

How might BDSM advocates reply?

- RE: (d) and (e): Many of these BDSM-critical feminists appeal to armchair psychology. Is there *evidence* that subs/doms will let their play affect their real life dealings with other people? Is there *evidence* that BDSM is making people think that subduing women is a good idea? Until there is, we shouldn’t assume such effects. .
- RE: (a) and (b): Some self-described feminist subs say being a sub helps them be *more* assertive in real life.

Being dominated can be relaxing. You heard me, relaxing—especially for a strong, independent, in-control woman. Being an adult is hard. Sometimes being assertive can feel like work. Sometimes in our play time we want a vacation from it. Having a partner tell you what to do, take control, and dominate you is like a vacation from the constant state of having to guard against being dominated that many of us women exist in. For some women (and men) being dominated can actually feel freeing. (“Six Myths...”)

- If this blogger is correct, the *reverse* of what BDSM-critical feminists assume may be true: maybe BDSM practices make people less likely to seek out sub/dom roles in real life.
 - Compare with the evidence that rape porn and simulated child porn decrease sexual assault and child predation. It may be that letting off steam, and compartmentalizing certain impulses in play/fantasy, drain them out of real life.
- Re: (a) and (b): Furthermore, just because consent is *sometimes* superficial doesn’t mean it *always* is. And anyway, no BDSM-critical feminist is in a better position to judge whether some particular woman’s desire to be dominated is the product of patriarchy than that woman herself is.

I would like to take a fresh approach to the question, focusing on the BDSM-defense that it is “play.”

BDSM practitioners call it “play,” and suppose it is properly classified as a type of play. Is that sufficient for making it morally permissible? If so, that would be a good strategy for its apologists. Let’s consider some principles and see if they hold up to scrutiny.

NON-MORALIZED PLAY: If some behavior b is play, then, as long as it’s safe and consensual for all concerned, it’s morally permissible.

- Is this principle true? How about slave-play? Would it be immoral to engage in BDSM “slave play”?
 - In class, some said slave play can be immoral, even if consensual and safe. Depending on the roles, it could be wrong, because (e.g.) white on black slave play reinforces various negative patterns in society.
 - Objection: What does “reinforce” mean when you get down to it? Maybe it makes people less likely to attempt these things in real life (“blows off steam” idea again). If that’s the case, then is it really “reinforcing”?
 - Note, if this reasoning serves to condemn BDSM slave play, given how slave play reflects various negative patterns in society, then this seems to suggest that the BDSM-critical feminists have a point in condemning standard BDSM.
 - In class, some said slave play isn’t immoral: It’s just play; keeping slaves in real life would be bad, but *playing* “master and slave” is not bad.
 - Objection: This seems somewhat counterintuitive. It seems like we do actually condemn certain sorts of play among children, because we feel play reflects in some way what sort of views the players will hold about reality generally. It may be that we think play motivated by immoral desires or fantasies is bad play. Here’s the argument:

BAD FANTASY ARGUMENT

1. BDSM is a type of play motivated by desires and fantasies.
2. A type of play motivated by bad desires and fantasies would be bad.
3. BDSM is motivated by desires and fantasies that are morally bad.
4. So BDSM is morally bad.
 - Premise (2) assumes that some desires and fantasies can be bad. Is this true?
 - Example: desiring and fantasizing about killing and raping babies.
 - REPLY: But killing babies is bad, because it’s non-consensual and harmful!
 - RESPONSE: *Actually* killing and raping a baby is non-consensual and harmful. But *fantasizing about* or *desiring to do so* is not. However, it still seems morally condemnable to have this desire and to entertain these fantasies. So some desires and fantasies are morally condemnatory.
 - REPLY: This seems intuitive. But maybe it’s not true—maybe we’re used to condemning desires and fantasies only because *usually* they translate to action. But if we know such desires and fantasies will not result in actions, they’re not morally bad to have.
 - This is a tough issue. Perhaps even if we say if fantasizing certain things and having certain desires isn’t in *itself* immoral, it can reflect negatively on a person’s moral sensibility and his/her character.
 - Let’s turn back to BAD FANTASY.
 - Premise (1) is true.
 - Is premise (2) true?
 - Is premise (3) true?
 - Here’s an argument from analogy for premise (3): It would seem that *desiring* to rape/kill a baby is bad because *actually* raping/killing a baby would be bad. So if *actually* dominating someone, or being dominated by someone, would be bad, then the same principle holds—it would be bad to *desire* to be a dom or sub. It is wrong to actually dom/sub another, so it is wrong to *desire to be* or *fantasize about being* a dom/sub.
 - This seems to suggest the following principle:

MORALIZED PLAY: If some behavior b is moral play, b must be moral to do in real life.

- MORALIZED PLAY seems false: it seems okay to *play* cops and robbers, even it's not okay to *be* a robber.
- Moreover, it may be that the dom doesn't desire to *actually dominate*. Rather, he desires to *play/pretend to dominate*. Likewise, the sub doesn't desire to *actually be submissive*, but to *pretend-submit*.
- Likewise, plausibly, a lot of people who consume rape porn do *not* desire to rape, but desire to *fantasize about* raping, or maybe desire to *play-rape* or *pretend-rape*.
- If these thoughts are right, then MORALIZED PLAY is false. MORALIZED PLAY is used to justify premise (3) of BAD FANTASY. So premise (3) of BAD FANTASY is unjustified, if not plain false.

Okay, it looks like the pro-BDSM side is winning so far. But can the BDSM critic rally?

- Suppose Jack and Joe both are doms, and are behavioral duplicates. However, Jack doesn't desire to dominate in real life. He just desires to *play-dominate*. On the other hand, Joe *does* want to dominate in real life. He uses BDSM because that's as close as he can get to actually dominating others sexually, to actually having sex slaves and so forth. Yes, Joe respects all the rules and courtesies, because if he doesn't, he'll lose his playmate. But unlike Jack, if he could, he'd own slaves, control and dominate unwilling people, etc.
- The above defense of BDSM doesn't seem to morally protect Joe's BDSM. So maybe Jack's BDSM is okay, but not Joe's? That suggests:

MODERATE MORALIZED PLAY: If some behavior b is morally permissible play otherwise, but b would be immoral in real life, then b is permissible play only if players are motivated only by a desire to *play-b*, and not to b in real life.

- Is MODERATE MORALIZED PLAY true? Possible counterexample: My son Leo plays a game he calls "Hulk smash," and I bet he desires not only to *play* Hulk Smash, but *actually* to smash buildings and wreak havoc if he could. So is Leo like Joe? Is *his* play immoral too, because he desires to do bad things, not just to pretend to do bad things? Intuitively, we want to say no—condemning Leo's play would, after all, condemn most children's rough play.
- However, maybe Leo's play is morally condemnatory to some degree, but excusable because he's a little kid, just as many bad things he does are excusable. It would be wrong, maybe, for an *adult* to have the desire to wreak havoc, and play motivated by that desire might be wrong in an adult, too, for that reason.

We seem to be at an impasse. I leave this discussion of fantasy with one final puzzle: if it's wrong to have a desire to dominate, be dominated, and be raped, why is it okay to desire to *play-dominate*, *play-submit*, and *play-rape*, even if you have no desire whatsoever to *actually* do those things?

Consider this final argument from analogy:

RACIST JOKE

1. Someone who thought racist jokes are hilarious, who sought out racist joke sites and racist joke-telling friends, etc., would have, at least in this regard, a morally bad character, even if he never did anything racist.
2. Finding it fun, exciting, and arousing to play-dominate or play-submit is morally no different to finding racist jokes hilarious, seeking out racist joke sites and racist joke-telling friends, etc.

3. So anyone finding it fun, exciting, and arousing to play-dominate or play-submit has, at least in this regard, a morally bad character.

CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM

I would also like to introduce you to another perspective that comes from political philosophy, but might inform this discussion.

Classical republicanism = the political theory claiming that genuine freedom shouldn't be understood as the mere ability to do as you please ("freedom as non-interference"), but rather requires having the power to resist domination (freedom as non-domination").

Main idea: Suppose you live in a benevolent dictatorship. The dictator lets you do as you please, but if he changed his mind, he would be able to dominate you. So it would be better if you and the other citizens were powerful enough to keep him from dominating you *even if he wanted to*. Moreover, it is somehow morally deficient, maybe, not to want to have a hand in the rules you are to live under, even if the rules won't interfere with your desires whether or not you have a role in saying what shape they take. Compare a person who moves to a country she's happy with, but has no say in its laws because she's not a citizen, to a person who is a citizen and helps determine the laws he lives under. Classical republicans think the second person is *freer* than the first.

Psychology: this moral view (like any moral view) implies that a certain sort of psychology is morally superior. You're not supposed to want to be dominated. You're supposed to view your freedom as sacred, as the source of your dignity, and thus whatever is necessary for guaranteeing that freedom as very important, and as very bad whatever threatens your ability to defend your freedom, or undermining people's desire to be free.

To see how classical republicanism butts heads with CL, imagine that you were offered a lot of money to be a slave. You would be treated well, but couldn't vote, couldn't decide where to live, you'd have to do easy but servile work (polishing shoes, etc.). However, you'd be paid millions in a lump sum that you could use help a lot of people out (say, send family members to college or pay for much-needed medical expenses). Would it be wrong of you to give up your freedom for all these advantages? Classical liberals have actually spent a lot of time worrying about the question of whether people have a right to sell themselves into slavery precisely because it seems as though CL would say it's *prima facie* permissible, but it seems intuitively wrong to do (even to classical liberals). This intuition is in favor of classical republicanism.

I think you can appreciate how this applies to BDSM. To desire to be dominate, and especially the desire to be dominated, is bad. To allow oneself to get into a place wherein one is sexually turned on by this, or is put in dominating positions that affect one's larger personality (?), is all symptomatic of a morally bad sensibility.

One nice thing about this view is that it isn't "feminist"---it isn't concerned about BDSM vis-à-vis any particular gender. It also doesn't concern itself with social context, gender norms, or a number of other complicated social factors. It allows us to cut straight to the question of BDSM's moral goodness or badness on the basis of a moral principle about what sort of relationships people should stand, and want to stand, in with regard to each other.

CONCLUSION

It seems to me that it's going to be difficult to make a convincing case for BDSM's morally impermissibility. However, when it comes to the question of whether people engaging in BDSM have morally inferior sensibilities or character, the accusation becomes more plausible. There *seems* to lots of people (from feminist, classical republican, Kantian, and even classical liberal perspectives) who find something morally "problematic" about people who are aroused by, fantasize about, and pretend to do acts which would be wrong to do in real life.