

Having Fun with the Periodic Table: A Counterexample to Rea's Definition of Pornography

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Abstract In a paper from 2001, Michael C. Rea considers the question of what pornography is. First, he examines a number of existing definitions of 'pornography' and after having rejected them all, he goes on to present his own preferred definition. In this short paper, I suggest a counterexample to Rea's definition. In particular, I suggest that there is something that, on the one hand, is pornography according to Rea's definition, but, on the other hand, is not something that we would intuitively describe as being an instance of pornography.

Keywords Philosophy · Definition of pornography · Conceptual analysis · Counterexample

In a paper from 2001, Michael C. Rea considers the question of what pornography is.¹ First, he examines a number of existing definitions of pornography and after having rejected them all, he goes on to present his own preferred definition. Rea is of the opinion that pornography has essential features, and what he proposes is a 'real' definition of pornography: a definition that gives the metaphysically necessary and sufficient conditions for what it is to be an instance of pornography. The quest for a good definition of pornography is guided by the idea that such a definition must be non-revisionary. Rea (2001) formulates the idea like this:

I assume that there are commonly held views about what counts as pornography and what does not, and I assume that a good definition of 'pornography' will respect those views. I am not interested in providing a definition that *revises* our concept of pornography, and I will reject as poor any definition that seems to do so (p. 120).

¹"What Is Pornography?" *Noûs* 35:1.

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In this short paper, I suggest a counterexample to Rea's definition. In particular, I suggest that there is something that, on the one hand, is pornography according to Rea's definition, but, on the other hand, is not something that we would intuitively describe as being an instance of pornography.

Rea's definition is:

- Part 1: x is used (or treated) as pornography by a person S =DF (1) x is a token of some sort of communicative material (picture, paragraph, phone call, performance, etc.), (2) S desires to be sexually aroused or gratified by the communicative content of x , (3) if S believes that the communicative content of x is intended to foster intimacy between S and the subject(s) of x , that belief is not among S 's reasons for attending to x 's content, and (4), if S 's desire to be sexually aroused or gratified by the communicative content of x were no longer among S 's reasons for attending to x 's content, S would have at most a weak desire to attend to x 's content.
- Part 2: x is pornography = DF it is reasonable to believe that x will be used (or treated) as pornography by most of the audience for which it was produced (Rea 2001:120).

Consider now an island community where the majority of people (70%) are scientifically uneducated and have no desire to increase their knowledge in this area. The same 70% have a rather unusual sexual preference: they are sexually aroused by the communicative content of artefacts that are intended and produced for educational purposes only (textbook images of molecules, geographical maps, pictures of the solar system and recordings of whale-song are examples of such artefacts). The widespread existence of this particular sexual preference is well-known in the community. Fora exist that focus on this sexual preference, and it is easy for interested individuals to join and take part in the activities of these fora.

The remaining 30% of the population on the island have various degrees of scientific knowledge, and they are all interested in increasing their knowledge in this area. Furthermore, they all have a more 'normal' sexual preference: they are aroused by other adult human beings and sexually explicit images of them.

On the island, there is a woman (let us call her Julie) who has a Ph.D. in chemistry and who is interested in raising the general level of scientific knowledge among all the inhabitants of the island. Motivated solely by a desire to achieve this aim, she produces charts of the periodic table and distributes one such chart to each individual on the island.

Is Julie, in virtue of doing these things, involved in the production and distribution of pornography? Let us return to the second part of Rea's definition, and let us there substitute ' x ' with 'a chart of the periodic table produced for educational purposes only.' With this substitution in place, the right-hand side of the bi-conditional is true. It is indeed reasonable to believe that the chart of the periodic table produced for educational purposes only will be used (or treated) as pornography by most of the audience for which it was produced. This entails two things:

- (a) that Julie is involved in the production and distribution of pornography and
- (b) that the people who desire to educate themselves scientifically and who use the chart of the periodic table for educational purposes only are users of

pornography in the sense that (1) they attend to the communicative content of pornographic material and (2) they use the pornographic material in the way that the producer of the material intended it to be used.

Clause (1) in (b) entails that the people who desire to educate themselves scientifically and who use the chart of the periodic table for educational purposes only are *not* users of pornography in the benign sense in which, say, people, who use a copy of *Hustler* as birdcage liner, are users of pornography. Moreover, clause (2) in (b) entails that such people are *not* users of pornography in the benign sense in which, say, a police officer, who examines a copy of *Hustler* to see if some of the featured models are under-age, is a user of pornography. The police officer does attend to the communicative content of pornographic material but he (or she) does not use it in the way that the producer of the material intended it to be used.

I suggest that a concept of pornography that entails (a) and (b) is revisionary.² Insofar as there are commonly held views about what counts as pornography, these views are inconsistent with (a) and (b). Therefore, if Rea's criterion for a good definition of pornography is accepted, then the definition that he has proposed should be rejected as poor.

What can Rea, or anyone sympathetic to his definition, reply to this counterexample? It does not seem to me that there is a way of making (b) less counterintuitive. With respect to (a), one can perhaps insist that Julie *is* a producer of pornography, but then go on to say that she is an inadvertent producer of pornography in precisely the way in which a certain kind of naive photographer, who intends to photograph artistic nudes for the purpose of increasing art appreciation among high-schoolers, is an inadvertent producer of pornography. Viewed in light of this analogy, (a) might not come across as counterintuitive.³

I do not find this reply convincing. The reason for this is simply that it is my intuition that a photographer of the above kind is *not* a producer of pornography. Of course, if Rea's definition is accepted, then such a photographer is a producer of pornography. However, this points to another reason as to why Rea's definition should not be accepted: namely that it makes it *impossible* that one should be a photographer of artistic nudes for the purpose of increasing art appreciation among high-schoolers and not be a producer of pornography. The kind of possibility involved here can be spelled out by saying that 'p' is possible (in the relevant sense) if and only if 'p' is true in at least one possible world in which the sexual drive and habits among high-schoolers are as they are in the actual world. In all such possible worlds, it is reasonable to believe that photographs of the above kind are treated as pornography by most of the audience for which they are produced. Such

² It should be noted that the argument presented here, as it pertains to (b), rests on a distinction between: (U) being a user of pornography in virtue of using x and (U*) using x as pornography (where 'to be using something as pornography' is understood in Rea's sense). With this distinction in place, it is clear that the people who use the charts of the periodical table for educational purposes only are not using the charts *as* pornography. They do not do this because they do not desire to be sexually aroused by the communicative content of the charts. Does this mean that (b) cannot be used to discredit Rea's definition? I do not think so. (b) is counterintuitive in itself, and the definition that leads to it is therefore revisionary.

³ In private correspondence, Michael C. Rea has suggested this reply to me.

photographs are therefore pornographic in all possible worlds, and it is therefore impossible to make them and *not* be a producer of pornography.

However, it does not seem to me that this is impossible. Consider, for example, the photo of Demi Moore on the poster for the movie *Striptease* (1996). Now, imagine the counterfactual situation in which this photo does not feature on a movie poster but appears in black and white in a printed catalogue containing other portrait photographs and photographs of natural scenery. Imagine, moreover, that the various photographers who have contributed to the catalogue all agree that it is important to increase art appreciation among high-schoolers. Motivated solely by a desire to do this they have created the catalogue and sent copies of it (free of charge) to a number of high-schools.

Now, the photographer who made the Demi Moore shot might be mistaken in believing that her photo will increase art appreciation among high-schoolers. Perhaps it is reasonable to believe that her photo will be treated as pornography by the majority of high-schoolers. However, even if such a belief is reasonable, I do not think that the photographer has produced anything pornographic. Assume that 10–15% of the students who see the photograph develop just a slight interest in photography as an art form and get to appreciate all the difficult aspects of black and white photography (light, motive, posture of subject, etc.). On this assumption, it seems that we should say that the photographer is doing something artistically worthwhile and that it is a misdescription to brand her as a producer of pornography. Rea's definition, forces us, however, to brand her as such a producer, and this is a reason for rejecting his definition.

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Reference

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