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A Horny Dilemma: Sex and Friendship between Students and Professors

Andrew Kania

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Pat and Sam

Few people would think it odd if they saw Pat, a philosophy professor at a small liberal arts college, having lunch in the dining hall with Sam, an undergraduate student in one of Pat’s classes. Many might pause for thought, however, if they saw Pat and Sam having dinner at a fancy restaurant downtown. And if they found out the next day that the couple had gone back to Pat’s place and made love all night long, most would be scandalized. To be told that it was not a one night stand, that Pat and Sam were in a long-term relationship, would do little to allay most people’s concern. What is it, though, that people find scandalous about sexual relationships between professors and their students? Are these reasons *good* reasons, or merely prudish prejudice?

In this essay, I will argue that in confronting these issues we are faced with a dilemma. If we want to condemn sexual relationships between professors and students we must also

condemn friendships between them. On the other hand, if we want to allow such friendships, we must condone (some) professor-student sexual relationships. My main reasons for this conclusion are, first, that the differences between close friendships and sexual relationships are more subtle than most people think—there is no clear boundary between the two—and, second, anything that would concern us about the latter should concern us about the former. I will argue, further, that though there may be reasons to avoid such relationships, there is nothing about *the student-professor relationship in particular* that should lead us to condemn *all* such relationships.

I should note that my interest here is primarily in the *ethics* of such relationships, in whether there is anything morally wrong about them. I will not discuss at all whether it is *prudent* to engage in such a relationship for the student or professor, and I touch only briefly at the end on the implications of the moral question for institutional policies.

Who Are We Talking about?

I will be talking only about relationships between undergraduate students and the faculty who teach them. I suspect that most people who find intimate student-professor relationships problematic find these ones most problematic, for reasons I will return to near the end of this essay. But it may well be that most of the reasons people give against such relationships have even more force in the graduate school setting, given the greater influence professors have over their graduate students' futures.

Unlike many people who have considered this topic, however, I will not restrict myself to relationships between male professors and female students. In her essay on this topic, Deirdre Golash notes that she adheres

throughout to the male professor-female student example, not merely for simplicity but also because, as a result of social attitudes too well known to require recital, this is by far the most common occasion for a sexual offer. My observations would, I think, apply to other gender combinations, at least insofar as the same imbalance of power obtains.¹

I do not adhere to this paradigm because I do not think that Golash's reasons support it. First, she explicitly mentions "sexual offers" here, but she discusses many other situations throughout her piece, such as friendships and loving sexual relationships, and it is not so obvious that all of these are most common between a male professor and female student. I am particularly interested here in comparing friendships and sexual relationships, so it is unnecessarily restrictive to consider only relationships between male professors and female students.

Second, though it may be true that most intimate student-professor relationships are between female students and male professors, this might be for reasons other than those "too well know to require recital." For example, as a result of a pervasively sexist history, most college professors are men. Thus, there may be more male-professor-female-student relationships even if female professors are *more* likely than male professors to enter into relationships with their students. To discuss exclusively male-professor-female-student relationships for this reason is like exclusively using the masculine pronoun to refer to doctors, since most doctors are in fact male. This may reinforce sexism more than anything else.

Things That Are Just Plain Wrong

Some sexual relationships between students and professors are just plain wrong. A few examples will help illustrate what it is to consider the morality of student-professor relationships *per se*.²

If Pat and Sam enter into a consensual sexual relationship, but one of them thereby cheats on a spouse, the spouse has been betrayed. This betrayal, though, is no better or worse than that of any extra-marital affair.

If Pat sexually assaults Sam, Pat is to be condemned, just as any sexual assailant is to be condemned. A professor may be open to greater censure than another sexual assailant if he or she uses his or her position of authority over a student to coerce the student's compliance, though the issues here are difficult since any assault implies coercion. But it is not obvious that the *academic* relationship between assailant and victim makes the assault worse than it would otherwise be.

Another kind of case that has been discussed by some philosophers is the "blatant sexual offer," that is, a professor suggesting sex to a student outside the context of even a friendship.³ In such a case the power a professor has over a student will usually transform the "offer" into a case of coercion, but, again, the wrongness of the act does not depend on the fact that we're considering a student and professor, as opposed to an employer and employee, or any other two people on different sides of a power imbalance.

What I am considering here, then, is not cases like these, where the morality of the act would be unchanged whether or not the people involved were a student and professor. Rather, I am asking whether there is anything morally questionable about relationships between a professor and a student precisely because they are a professor and student.

A more specifically academic kind of case is what was called, when I was a student, “A’s for lays”—the exchange of grades for sex. This is a case that relies on the people involved being a professor and student. Even if you have no moral objection to prostitution, you should condemn such arrangements, for grades are not like money or goods. They function as an objective measure of a student’s academic abilities. To an extent, then, to offer grades for sex (or vice versa) is similar to selling an honor, such as an Academy Award. But given the role grades play in contemporary society, namely, significantly influencing people’s early careers, such arrangements are even worse, since they constitute a serious injustice to other students.

I will not discuss any of these obvious moral wrongs here. Instead, I will investigate the morality of genuine friendships and loving sexual relationships between students and professors. This does raise the question of whether a student can freely enter into a friendship or sexual relationship with a professor. I believe the answer to this question is that a student can. How? The answer is the same as the punch line to the old joke about how two porcupines make love: very, very carefully. As several writers have pointed out, there are serious obstacles to clear and honest communication at every stage of the development of such a relationship; but those same writers agree that these obstacles can be overcome.⁴ To the extent that these obstacles rely on a context in which “a trade [of sex for grades] is not seen as utterly fantastic”,⁵ we might hope that as universities discuss these issues more openly, and become less sexist, some of these obstacles will be reduced.

Friendship and Sexual Relationships

Deirdre Golash has provided perhaps the best arguments that close friendships between students and professors are less morally problematic than sexual relationships. A number of considerations lead her to this view. She argues for the following claims:

1. There is no clear line between being merely acquainted and being close friends.
2. There is a clear line between being close friends and being in a sexual relationship.
3. There are goods to be gained by both parties from a student-professor friendship that outweigh the possibility of resulting injustice.
4. Any further goods to be gained by escalating such a friendship to a sexual level are outweighed by the possibility of resulting injustice.
5. Therefore, while student-professor friendships are acceptable, student-professor sexual relationships ought to be avoided.

I will argue that claims 1 and 2 cannot both be true. The degree of clarity of the lines between acquaintance and friendship, on the one hand, and friendship and a sexual relationship, on the other, is about the same, though it is unclear whether the lines are sharp or fuzzy. I will also argue that one cannot maintain both claims 3 and 4. Whatever dangers lurk in a sexual relationship between professor and student, they appear before the relationship becomes a sexual one; and those dangers do not seem to increase more than the value of the relationship as it is transformed from a friendship into a loving sexual relationship.

Most people think there's a clear line to be crossed between a non-sexual relationship and a sexual one. Golash doesn't say where she thinks that line lies, but one obvious possibility is that it's the line between *not* having had sex and *having* had sex. (For instance, at one point she asks the reader to "[c]ompare the feelings that one has for a lover before, as opposed to after, the first few sexual encounters."⁶) But where exactly is this line drawn? Perhaps the answer that

comes first to mind for most people is “at the penetration of a vagina by a penis.” But putting it this bluntly raises all sorts of concerns. For starters, this is clearly a hetero-normative conception of sex. Neither two women nor two men can ever have sex according to this conception, and that’s enough to reject it as obviously false. To retreat to a conception of having sex as the penetration of any one of some delimited set of bodily orifices by any one of some delimited set of bodily parts is more likely to promote ridicule than agreement. In her excellent essay on this topic, Greta Christina prompts us to test our intuitions about what counts as ‘having sex’ against the following acts:⁷

penile-vaginal intercourse	“talking dirty”
penile-anal intercourse	participating in a sex party (in any of a number of capacities)
oral sex (fellatio, cunnilingus)	engaging in some of these activities without pursuing your own pleasure
digital/manual-vaginal/anal intercourse (fingering/fisting)	engaging in some of these activities without anyone pursuing their own pleasure
toy-vaginal/anal intercourse	engaging in some of these activities with a sleeping partner
manual genital stimulation (to orgasm?)	sado-masochistic activity without genital contact
nipple stimulation (manual or oral)	
kissing (with tongue?)	rape
masturbating in one another’s presence	

One conclusion Christina draws from such considerations is that there is no clear line between having sex and not having sex. This does not mean there is *no* line. If you’ve have penile–vaginal intercourse, you’ve had sex, and if the only interaction you’ve ever had with someone is a brief kiss on the lips, then you haven’t had sex with that person. But whatever the

boundaries of the concept of ‘having sex’ are, it seems clear that this is not the relevant concept for figuring out whether one is in a sexual relationship in the sense relevant to our topic. For if Sam and Pat spend office hours behind closed doors, kissing, talking dirty, and masturbating together, whatever concerns one has about the situation will be independent of whether one thinks any of this strictly counts as ‘having sex.’

What we need, then, is a less stringent conception of being in a sexual relationship, one that is going to capture more of the cases that seem likely to worry those concerned about the ethics of student-professor sexual relationships. From now on, I will be using such a concept when I use the term ‘sexual relationship.’ I will not attempt to delineate this concept, since it is likely to be at least as vague as the concept of ‘having sex’ (though it is not the same concept). Instead, I want to illustrate this vagueness in order to cast doubt on Golash’s second claim: that there is a clear line between being in a close friendship and in a sexual relationship.

Recall the last time you entered into a loving sexual relationship. At some point you were not in the relationship—before you met the person, for instance. At some later point, you were in the relationship—the first time you were having sex with them, for instance. At what point did your relationship change from being non-sexual to being sexual? Even if you think that penile-vaginal intercourse is the only kind of sex there is, your relationship became sexual before the first penetration. When you were both undressing before the intercourse, for instance, your relationship had clearly entered the sexual stage. But it most likely entered that stage much earlier—perhaps with some earlier sexual acts, but before that with some kissing or hand-holding. What about *before* the first time you held hands, though? At any point when holding hands is a live possibility, it seems to me, you’re in a relationship of the sort that we’re interested in, that is, one that some people are uncomfortable about students and professors entering into.

And this doesn't require having had any physical contact. In fact, it seems possible to enter into this kind of relationship *at first sight* (though that ain't love), given the right people and circumstances. Moreover, we usually hope that sexual relationships will develop out of close friendships, rather than being based purely on physical attraction, say.

If all this is right, then there are two ways Golash might go. She might withdraw the claim that there is a clear line between close friendship and a sexual relationship but maintain that, nonetheless, sexual relationships between professors and students are wrong. If she goes this route, then it seems that she will have to disapprove of close friendships between professors and students, since they fall into a gray area where it is impossible to separate them from sexual relationships.

Alternatively, Golash might hold on to the idea that there is a clear line between a sexual and non-sexual relationship, claiming that the discussion above can help us to specify where that line falls, namely, much earlier in the development of a relationship than we might at first have thought. This route leads to the same practical consequences, though they follow from the classification of most cases as falling into the category of sexual relationships, rather than the gray area between close friendship and sexual relationship.

In fact, it seems that someone with either of these views cannot even encourage casual (non-close) student-professor friendships, since such friendships are likely in some cases to develop into close friendships (of the sort we have just seen they must condemn), and the line between the two kinds of friendship is at least as fuzzy as that between close friendships and sexual relationships. Furthermore, whichever response Golash gives, there will be some odd consequences. For if it's right that one can enter into the kind of relationship that concerns Golash *at first sight*, that is, without doing anything, then it is odd to condemn such relationships.

The right response here seems to be that it is not *being in* such a relationship, but *acting on* the feelings one has, that is unacceptable. This will require quite a different argument, though, since it is precisely feelings rather than actions that are the basis of Golash's concerns about the consequences of such relationships, as we shall see below.

Harms and Benefits of Student-Professor Relationships

As I noted above, my interest here is in student-professor relationships per se. What kinds of harms or benefits can come from this specific kind of relationship? Two are discussed most frequently. First, there is the worry that there is an inherent imbalance of power in the relationship, and thus that the student may be coerced at some stage. As I argued above, though this is a serious concern, it is not something that distinguishes student-professor relationships from other relationships where there is a similar power imbalance. Second, there is the potential impact of such relationships on the academic careers of students.

Whether Pat and Sam are friends or lovers, it seems reasonable to expect, first, that Pat would spend more time discussing philosophy with Sam than with other students and, second, that Pat's assessment of Sam's work might be colored by their relationship (to Sam's advantage when the relationship is going well, or to Sam's disadvantage when it's going badly). On the positive side, some have argued that the benefits of the extra attention that Sam would receive are not unfair to other students. On the negative side are the potential or perceived injustice to other students of having their grades devalued by the illegitimate inflation of Sam's grades, and the potential effects a soured relationship could have on Sam.

Golash argues that there is more cause for concern in the case of sexual relationships, since the distorting feelings involved in such a relationship are much more powerful and harder

to set aside than feelings of friendship (claim 4), and that the benefits of the friendship, but not the sexual relationship, outweigh the potential injustice resulting from the relationship (claim 3).

I investigate these matters in the following three subsections.

Spending More Time

Is it a bad thing for Pat and Sam to spend more time discussing philosophy than they did before their relationship, or than Pat spends discussing philosophy with other students?⁸ Golash argues that more time spent on one student does not necessarily come at the expense of time spent on another. Though this is strictly true, the time *may* come at the expense of another student, depending on what other demands there are on the professor's time. At some point, one's office hours run out, and one can see no more students, nor offer comments on any more drafts before the paper is due. But even in these cases, spending time with one student at the expense of another is not necessarily a bad thing. A student who spends more time discussing work with her professor because she seeks him out during office hours is not a recipient of favoritism. Nor is a student who ends up sitting next to his choir director on the plane during the choir's European tour, and ends up talking about the material in the music history course the director is teaching. It is not obvious that being in a relationship with a professor is any different in principle from the latter kind of example. The professor is available to talk with this particular student at additional times, and probably for much more time, than other students—for instance, at the pub or in bed. This might give the student an advantage, but—unlike unfair grading—it seems more like a lucky break than favoritism.

In short, there are many different reasons why a student might end up spending more time discussing academic matters with a professor, and such extra time does not automatically count

as favoritism, even if it comes at the expense of time spent with another student. There are cases where such time *would* count as favoritism, for example, if one reserved one's office hours for one's friends, but it *need* not. Most important for my concerns here, though, is that these considerations apply equally to the time spent with a professor as a result of friendship or a sexual relationship.

Biased Assessment

Concerns about Pat grading Sam's work seem reasonable. There are two reasons I am skeptical of the claim that sexual relationships give *more* cause for concern here than close friendships, however. The first derives from the fuzzy border between these categories. One's feelings may be most powerful, most distracting, and so on, during the "high courting" period, when escalation to a sexual relationship is a clear possibility, but not a certainty. Whatever these distracting "sexual feelings" are, they don't necessarily depend on having had sex with the person, whatever that amounts to. The *desire* to have sex, and all that goes along with that, may just as easily influence one's judgment, and that desire can be at full strength before one has had sex. Indeed, again, it seems plausible that such desire can be pretty strong at first sight. Not everyone's emotions follow these patterns, of course, but they do not seem particularly uncommon, either.

The second reason I am skeptical of the greater power and tenacity of feelings in a sexual relationship as compared to a friendship is that it relies on a somewhat simplistic, and possibly sexist, view of emotions, including sexual feelings. The idea that emotions in general are to be sharply distinguished from reason, and cloud rather than aid one's deliberations, has a long history in Western philosophy, but, however strong Pat's feelings, it is implausible that Pat

would be *unable* to assess clearly the merits of Sam's philosophy paper. This is not to say that Pat *will* assess the essay fairly, but the claim that Pat is (even probably) *incapable* of doing so may appeal to an illegitimate excuse grounded in a contingent history of disavowing control over one's passions. I think it helps to get a sense of the sexist roots of this idea to test one's intuitions against cases involving various permutations of the sex of the professor and student. Compare the case of a male professor and female student with that of a female professor and male student. Are you more likely to think that the professor's judgment will be colored in one case rather than the other? Is this because you think the professor in that case is really incapable of controlling their judgment, or for some other reason?

To return to the distinction between feelings and actions: if you think that a professor can resist the temptation to act on sexual feelings for a student, then you should think that a professor can assess the extent to which those feelings are affecting his or her assessment of a student's work. So it will be difficult to defend *both* the claim that friendships are acceptable but sexual relationships are to be avoided, *and* the claim that professors in love (or lust) are incapable of grading fairly. Furthermore, as we will soon see, there are steps that can be taken to eliminate grading bias.

The benefits of friendship

What of the potential benefits to the student of a friendship with a professor, which Golash argues outweigh the dangers of favoritism? She mentions only the good of friendship itself, which she claims is great and rare enough in the normal course of events that restricting one's range of possible friends even further "seems intolerable."⁹ But most people would agree that if friendship is valuable and rare, loving sexual relationships are at least as valuable—and

rarer. This, then, fails as an argument for allowing student-professor friendships on the one hand but rejecting sexual relationships on the other.

Avoiding injustice

As several writers have noted, there are steps Pat can take to avoid the possibility of the kinds of injustice we have been considering. The grading of Sam's work can be checked, or simply performed, by someone else. Letters of recommendation standardly describe the writer's relationship with the student. Falsifications of this part of the letter, like any other, by act or omission, would be reprehensible, but there is nothing different here about friendship or a loving relationship. In fact, if anything, it may be that Sam will end up worse off as the result of an honest letter from Pat, since it would be difficult for any reader to assess the accuracy of the resulting evaluation. But students get letters of recommendation from more than one source, and the other letters should allow a prospective employer or graduate school admissions committee to contextualize the letter in question. Such measures should also eliminate the *appearance* of injustice, which some have given as a reason for prohibiting intimate faculty-student relationships.

One thing Sam can do is avoid taking classes with Pat. However, it is worth considering that those who find student-professor relationships scandalous are likely to find them so whether or not Sam is in one of Pat's classes. Why should this be? Two answers occur to me. The first is the power issue that has come up a couple of times already. To recap: though this is a cause for serious concern, it is not something unique to the student-professor relationship, nor is it an insurmountable obstacle to consensual relationships. (Anyway, professors have less power over other students at their institutions than those in their classes.)

The second is that students tend to be significantly younger than professors. This is overlooked surprisingly often in discussions of student-professor relationships, perhaps because it is not strictly a necessary feature of them. But imagine a world in which most people went to university only after ten or twenty years in the workforce. Even if this resulted in a correspondingly more aged faculty, I suspect that student-professor relationships would not be considered so scandalous in such a context. What this suggests is that it is the disparity in age between students and professors that is the source of a significant part of the concern about relationships between them. We may suspect that in such relationships the pure sexual attraction of the older partner to the younger is playing a disproportionate role in the relationship, mirrored, perhaps, in the attraction of the younger partner to a false sense of security older partner may convey. We may also think that the older partner's greater experience with relationships gives that partner more power over the younger. But these features are common enough in relationships outside of academia. Like the power imbalance between professor and student, such factors may be cause for concern, but they are no reason to condemn professor-student relationships in particular.

Policing Pat and Sam

Where does all this leave us? I have argued that the fuzzy border between friendship and a loving sexual relationship, and the fact that we expect the latter (if it develops at all) to develop out of the former, suggest that whatever attitude we take towards the one, we ought also to take towards the other. In particular, it is difficult to see how we could clearly and consistently approve of the former while disapproving of the latter. Two questions follow: first, what attitude

ought we in fact take towards such relationships?; and second, should we develop policies to deal with such relationships?

In answer to the first question, I think my discussion of the harms and benefits of student-professor relationships has demonstrated that we should not condemn such relationships simply on the basis that they are between a professor and a student. However, there can be bad relationships between students and professors, just as there can be between all sorts of people, and there is a significant number of “risk factors” present in the typical academic environment. Thus, when considering a relationship, either from a third-party perspective or, especially, as a student or professor contemplating entering such a relationship, one should pay heed to the imbalance of power between the parties, the role any age difference is playing in the relationship, and the potential for unjust treatment of the student involved and other students.

As for the second question, judgments about the need for a policy here, as often elsewhere, will come down to whether the severity and likelihood of harm to others outweighs the great good of freedom (in this case to decide what kinds of intimate relationships to enter into, and with whom). What follows here from the vague border between friendship and sexual relationships is that any such policies should be directed at both kinds of relationship. That said, there is a range of possible policies, from more stringent ones requiring professors to declare any relationships they enter into with students, and to follow certain procedures, such as reassigning grading, and so on, to less stringent ones, emphasizing the potential dangers of such relationships and recommending certain procedures, without requiring anything.

It seems to me that the less stringent approach is more justifiable for a couple of reasons. First, there is generally very little oversight of how faculty assess students, whether through grading or writing letters of recommendation. This is not necessarily a good thing, though it is

too complicated an issue to address here. But if we want to ensure fairness in faculty assessment of students, we should ensure it across the board, not just in cases where a student-professor relationship is cause for concern. Faculty may be swayed just as easily, and more commonly, by sexism, racism, homophobia, favoritism, or overcompensation for any of these, as by being in a relationship with a student. To have a policy only about intimate relationships smacks of puritanism. Second, as I mentioned above, problems arising from student-professor relationships can be in part the result of more systemic issues such as sexism or a distorted view of the nature of sexual relationships. Campus-wide dialogue and education is probably a more effective way of solving these problems at the root than instituting policies that attempt merely to suppress their symptoms.

¹ Deirdre Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” in Alan Soble and Nicholas Power, eds., *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 449-458, here p. 458 n. 2. Nicholas Dixon focuses on male-professor–female-student relationships for similar reasons in “The Morality of Intimate Faculty–Student Relationships,” *The Monist* 79 (1996): pp. 519-535.

² Dixon makes a similar point in “The Morality of Intimate Faculty–Student Relationships,” p. 521.

³ See, for example, Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” pp. 450-452.

⁴ Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” pp. 452-453; Dixon, “The Morality of Intimate Faculty–Student Relationships,” pp. 522-525.

⁵ Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” p. 452.

⁶ Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” p. 454.

⁷ Greta Christina, “Are We Having Sex Now or What?,” in Alan Soble and Nicholas Power, eds., *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 23-29. Christina does not explicitly mention all of these acts, but she prompts thought about such a range.

⁸ Golash restricts her discussion at this point to graduate students, but the same issues seem to arise in connection with undergraduates, especially at small schools where faculty are expected to spend significant time with undergraduates on an individual basis.

⁹ Golash, “Power, Sex, and Friendship,” p. 454.