Purity Balls: Virtue Ethics, Sexuality, and Moral Development

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Abstract: In this paper, I draw on the principles of Aristotelian ethics, the work of modern virtue ethicists, and previous feminist critiques of purity balls to interrogate the effects of this practice on moral development. I argue that purity balls discourage young women from making autonomous, informed, and virtuously motivated decisions regarding their sexuality. While most critiques of purity balls are rooted in the explicitly patriarchal structure of these events, my analysis emphasizes the negative impact they have on moral agency. I conclude that purity balls are unethical because of the detrimental effects they have on the becoming of virtuous agents.

Introduction

Although chastity may be thought of as an "old-fashioned virtue,"[1] the emergence of what some term "new virginity"[2] and others the "virginity movement"[3] makes it clear that this virtue has not died out in modern society. As practices such as abstinence pledges and purity balls gain popularity and attention, it is necessary to explore their ethical basis and the moral effects they have on those who participate. The purity ball, a practice that ostensibly centers on the virtue of chastity, is a topic that has remained largely unexplored, particularly on an ethical basis. The few analyses that do exist utilize feminist approaches to argue that purity balls unfairly limit and devalue female sexuality.[4] While feminist evaluations offer important insight into the damaging effects of purity balls on female sexuality, additional analyses are necessary in order to identify the effects of such practices on females' overall moral development and ability to develop moral agency.

In this essay, I will argue that sexuality is inherently linked to morality in order to illustrate the effects that purity balls can have

[1] David Carr, "On the Prospects of Chastity as a Contemporary Virtue," *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue and the Good Life*, ed. Raja Halwani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 90.
[2] Ibid., 99.
[3] Jessica Valenti, *Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009), 23-60.
[4] Ibid.

on ethical development as a whole. I will then evaluate purity balls under a virtue ethics framework to conclude that purity balls are not an ethical practice insofar as they prevent the growth of sensible virtuous agents. Given the lack of both breadth and depth of ethical analysis on purity balls, this article provides crucial insight into the potentially harmful effects of this practice, particularly the effects that it has on the young women who are at the center of it all.

Purity Balls

The first purity ball was held in 1998 by Randy and Lisa Wilson[5] as an event in which a father signs a pledge to "cover [his] daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity," and the daughter lays down a white rose as a symbol of her "commitment to purity."[6] According to Lisa Wilson, by signing the pledge, fathers commit to serve as models of purity in order to guide their daughters' physical, moral, and emotional purity to "'help them enter marriage as pure, whole persons.'"[7] In a culture that Randy Wilson states "lures them into the murky waters of exploitation,"[8] purity ball supporters place the responsibility of protecting girls on their fathers' shoulders.

However, in an increasingly sexualized culture, taking the responsibility of one's sexuality from these young women may have negative consequences on their ability to act as moral characters in their own lives. This concern necessitates further evaluation of how this practice prepares or fails to prepare daughters to live moral and good lives. Virtue ethics provides a valuable framework for doing this because it sets up guidelines on how to become an ethical person, with the underlying notion that practicing certain virtues facilitates moral development.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics emphasizes various virtues, or sets of ideals, that are necessary for moral development.[9] According to virtue ethicists,

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[5] Ibid., 66.
[6] Randy Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball*, http://generationsoflight.com.
[7] Ovetta Sampson, "Broadmoor Formal Aims to Reinforce Importance of Father-Daughter Bond," *The Gazette* (March 2001), accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.generationsoflight.com/html/news.html.
[8] Neela Banerjee, "Dancing the Night Away, With a Higher Purpose," *The New York Times* (May 2008), accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/us/19purity.html?_r=0.
[9] Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Fall 2013), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/.

moral development requires people to continuously perform acts that a virtuous person would do in order to cultivate a disposition towards virtue.[10] Practiced over time, virtuous choices and actions become integrated into one's character and result in ethical development. Virtue ethics is, therefore, not focused on individual acts, but on the becoming of virtuous agents and the motivations that influence their disposition toward acting virtuously.

Acting virtuously not only requires virtuous motivations, but also practical wisdom that enables the possessor of good intentions to act accordingly.[11] Practical wisdom, based in Aristotelian ethics, is understood in contemporary virtue ethics as the knowledge that allows people to identify the important moral features of a decision.[12] Virtue ethicists, therefore, stress the importance of moral education that instills virtuous motivations and provides developing moral agents with the practical wisdom necessary for making virtuous decisions.[13] From a virtue ethics perspective, purity balls can only be considered ethical if they provide daughters with the knowledge and experiences necessary for developing virtuous motivations and the practical wisdom to act on these motivations.

One Aristotelian virtue that particularly relates to sexuality, and therefore purity balls, is the virtue of temperance.[14] Although Aristotle does not include sexuality in his discussion on temperance, modern virtue ethicists often extend his ethical evaluation of bodily pleasures to include sex.[15] According to Aristotle, a temperate person desires the right objects in the right amount on the right occasion. This principle touches on the importance of virtuous motivations and desires that define a virtuous agent, a concept that Stramel also expresses in stating that "the right act is the choice endorsed by proactive wisdom informed by virtuous concern."[16] By this perspective, a virtuous agent is able to reach a decision based on the knowledge they have about the situation and the awareness they possess of their motivations for that decision. Stramel's point that virtuous agents "have a clear understanding of one's motivation for disclosing"[17] exhibits the virtue ethics focus on motivations rather

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Howard Curzer, "Aristotle's Account of the Virtue of Temperance in *Nicomachean Ethics* III. 10-11," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (1997): 5–25.
[15] Ibid.; Roger Scruton, "Sexual Morality," *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue and the Good Life*, ed. Raja Halwani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 77-88.
[16] James Stramel, "Coming Out, Outing, and Virtue Ethics," *Sex and Ethics*, 167.
[17] Ibid., 168.

than individual acts and stresses the importance of self-awareness. Both Aristotle and Stramel indicate a central motif that virtuous agents must be fully aware of their desires and motivations in order to act for the right reasons. Combining this idea with that of practical wisdom, virtuous decisions can only be made by a moral agent who is fully aware of and knowledgeable on the salient features of a particular decision.

Human flourishing, the ultimate goal of virtue ethics, is therefore achieved through the performance of virtuous acts based in virtuous motivations and guided by practical wisdom.[18] The concept of human flourishing extends beyond the more subjective concept of happiness, indicating that there are better and worse ways to live as humans. Flourishing is understood by virtue ethicists as practicing to become excellent people in order to live well.[19] Living well requires practices and social contexts that allow for the development of virtuous agents who are aware of their own desires and motivations, have obtained the practical wisdom necessary for acting on these desires, and are able to practice the virtues that lead them toward a virtuous disposition. In evaluating purity balls through a virtue ethics framework, it is therefore necessary to consider whether this practice provides young women with the information and experiences necessary for making virtuous decisions about their sexuality based in full knowledge and understanding of the various factors influencing these decisions. A practice that fails on any of these accounts is at risk of preventing virtuous becoming and hindering human flourishing.

Sexuality and Moral Development

In *Sexuality and the Unity of the Virtues*, Jacobs presents virtuous development as "complex and integrative,"[20] rather than "an aggregate of dispositions." He warns against defining virtues as specific only to certain contexts; maintaining that recognizing the integrative nature of moral agency is central to the "realization of human good overall."[21] Rituals, such as purity balls that compartmentalize sexuality by focusing on a very specific aspect of development, run the risk of misconstruing the role of sexuality in overall moral development in one of two ways.

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[18] Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."
[19] Ibid.
[20] Jonathan Jacobs, "Sexuality and the Unity of the Virtues," *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue and the Good Life*, ed. Raja Halwani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 65-76.
[21] Ibid., 74.

First, as Valenti discusses, chastity pledges, purity balls, and other movements and events that are centered on female sexuality result in the conflation of sexuality and morality.[22] According to Valenti, "idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters."[23] In the context of virtue ethics, this would imply that one's overall disposition toward acting virtuously is solely based on the decisions one makes about their body, bodily pleasures, and sexuality. However, according to Jacobs, "grasping the good of one virtue in the agent's life cannot be done in isolation; the agent needs to see how the various goods in her life are related and adjusted."[24] Any practice that solely focuses on one aspect of development fails to make its participants aware of the impacts their decisions and actions within other realms of development can have on their overall virtuous disposition.

A second potential consequence of isolating sexuality as an independent aspect of development is conveying the message that ethical actions regarding sexuality only influence one's sexual agency, rather than one's overall character as a virtuous agent. This consequence is equally as detrimental as the first because it could lead people to disregard the ethical ramifications of the decisions they make about their sexuality on moral development at large. As Jacobs states, "a virtue is incomplete if confined to just one or another context."[25] Given that virtuous development involves an integration of dispositions, sexuality should not and cannot be treated as an ethical entity independent from all other dispositions. However, it is important to note that this connection between sexuality and morality holds only for individuals for whom sexuality is an important part of their identity and existence, and therefore individuals who do not experience sexual attraction are equally as capable of moral development as those who do. These characteristics of sexuality warrant a virtue-centered approach because it allows discussions of ethics to move beyond defining individual acts as right or wrong, instead focusing on the dispositions and motivations that become integrated into a virtuous agent's character. When analyzing purity balls using a virtue ethics framework, it reveals the effects of this practice not only within the the narrow lens of sexual morality, but also the larger context of overall moral development.

[22] Valenti, *Purity Myth*, 24.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Jacobs, 69.
[25] Ibid.

Virtuous Decisions

Although virtuous acts are important to human flourishing, virtue ethics focuses on the motivations behind the decision to act, signifying that an ethical practice promotes virtuous acts through equally virtuous motivations.[26] Additionally, it is the virtuous agent that must make these decisions for their own sake[27] based on the relevant ethical features of a situation.[28] Making a moral decision for oneself requires the moral agent to be informed, aware of the reason behind, and attentive to the value of their decision. [29] Therefore, a decision is virtuous when the individual acknowledges and appreciates the worth of that decision and the influence it has on their moral development. Purity balls fail on all of these accounts: by preventing girls from making informed decisions for their own sake, for the right reasons, and on the right occasions.

Some might object that purity balls are guided by virtues such as integrity and commitment to honor and therefore enable girls to make morally-guided decisions. From this perspective, purity balls facilitate the development of ethically responsible individuals by empowering girls to live virtuously according to these principles. However, upon further examination, purity balls inhibit girls from establishing virtuous dispositions by leading them to act on motivations that do not reflect the inherent value of acting virtuously.

In her discussion of virginity pledges, Valenti argues that purity balls and the virginity movement "shame women into being chaste."[30] Purity balls appear to discourage girls from making moral decisions for the right reasons because fear of being shamed is not a reason in which a virtuous person should base a decision. Badhwar touches on the importance of making decisions for the right reasons in his discussion of the "insensible lover,"[31] who lacks the "knowledge specifically of bodily goods and the ready ability to take the right means to one's own good."[32] Girls who participate in purity balls appear to give up the power over their own bodily desires for some greater good as they "commit to live pure lives before God,"[33] an indication of Badhwar's insensibility that he asserts results in devaluation of bodily desires. As Valenti discusses, "if virginity is a

[26] Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."
[27] Neera Badhwar, "Carnal Wisdom and Sexual Virtue," *Sex and Ethics*, 139.
[28] Jacobs, 73.
[29] Ibid., 66.
[30] Valenti, 24.
[31] Badhwar, "Carnal Wisdom and Sexual Virtue," 144.
[32] Ibid., 135.
[33] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball*

gift, or something 'worth saving,' that means that those who don't save it are somehow lacking- or, even worse, sullied."[34] Purity balls perpetuate this idea that female sexuality is a commodity that should be sacrificed, rather than a pleasure that should be enjoyed. This further discourages girls from making moral decisions for the right reasons because shame, rather than knowledge of the bodily desires, becomes the primary motivator behind decisions concerning their sexuality.

Additionally, information provided on Randy Wilson's website does not show evidence that girls are adequately prepared for the act of pledging their purity prior to the balls.[35]While "daughters symbolize their commitment to purity by laying down a white rose,"[36] they are not required to actually articulate or demonstrate their understanding of what a purity pledge signifies. Failing to ensure that girls are fully informed and aware of the implications of decisions regarding their sexuality is particularly harmful to their virtuous development because purity balls involve girls pledging their purity until marriage, which inhibits situational-based moral decisions even after the event itself. According to Jacobs, virtuous agents are not only informed and aware, but they are also able to take into account "the multiple features of situations and their ethical relevance."[37] From the time they take their pledge to the time they are married, girls who participate in purity balls would seemingly be unable to make situational-based decisions concerning their sexuality because they have essentially been given an ultimatum against sexual activity during this time. In this way, purity balls prevent girls from being able to develop into virtuous individuals with the ability to evaluate whether their desires are felt for the right objects and on the right occasion.

The Virtuous Agent

In addition to preventing girls from making informed decisions based on ethically relevant contextual features, purity balls also inhibit virtuous development by making girls passive participants in pledging their purity, consequently failing to teach the practical wisdom for controlling sexual desires. Given that "'the project of the moral life is to become a certain kind of person,' a

[34] Valenti, 32.
[35] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball*
[36] Ibid.
[37] Jacobs, 73.

virtuous person who, in Aristotle's language, knows how to act and feel in ways appropriate to the circumstances,"[38] an ethical practice must provide people with the knowledge, skills, and experience to make moral decisions in different situations. In his evaluation of sexual ethics, Dagmang states that "if ethics provides the direction and impulse toward building a setting or condition favorable for the formation of responsible persons, then such an ethics must be sound."[39] Therefore, the ethics of purity balls are largely dependent on the degree to which they create a social context that promotes personal responsibility and growth, and it is precisely this personal growth that leads to human flourishing.[40]

Content on the Wilsons' website indicates that girls do not take an active role in pledging their purity, providing grounds to reject purity balls as unethical because they do not encourage personal responsibility. While fathers sign a pledge to be an example of purity for their daughters, the extent of the daughters' role is that they "silently commit to pure lives before God through the symbol of laying down a white rose at the cross."[41] One girl is quoted on the Wilsons' website as saying, "'my father pledged to protect me and promised to lead a life of integrity and purity for me."[42] Not only do girls take a passive role in pledging their purity at the ball itself, but they do not seem to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions in the future as their fathers are the ones who hold the responsibility of leading a pure life *for* them.

Although an argument in support of purity balls is that a father serves as a role model for his daughter in his pledge to live a life of integrity and purity,[43] purity balls fail to move beyond this and encourage girls to be responsible for their own decisions and actions. According to Scruton's account of sexual morality, the transition from "minimal" to "maximal self," or what other virtue ethicists would term the becoming of the virtuous agent, "occurs when the minimal self ceases to be merely a vehicle for the transmission of impersonal forces and becomes instead an active subject."[44] Based on the Wilsons' explanation of purity balls, girls are not treated as active subjects either during the ball or throughout the remainder

[38] Michael Lawler and Todd Salzman, "Virtue ethics: natural and Christian," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2013): 442-473.
[39] Ferdinand Dagmang, "The Sociological Sciences and Sexual Ethics," *Asia Pacific Social Science Review* 6, no. 1 (2006): 19.
[40] Lawler and Salzman, "Virtue Ethics," 444-445.
[41] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball.*
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Scruton, "Sexual Morality," 79.

of their purity pledge. Additionally, a father's role in purity balls cannot truly be seen as role modeling due to the different standards of purity for a father and a daughter. While daughters pledge to be pure until marriage, the father's pledge to "be pure in [his] own life"[45] clearly involves different expectations given that he is already married and is not pledging his virginity. By preventing daughters from accessing the experiences and responsibilities to facilitate the personal growth necessary for human flourishing, the father's roles appears to be that of an enforcer, rather than a role model for his daughter.

The Virtues

Virtue ethicists stress the importance of virtues in guiding decisions. For example, Stramel identifies the importance of "other-regarding virtues" such as "respect for individual persons and their rights, autonomy, and dignity" and "self-regarding virtues of honesty, self-respect, dignity, and integrity."[46] From this perspective, an ethical practice is one that facilitates self- and other-respect and teaches moral agents to emulate these virtues. Considering the effects of society[47] and personal relationships[48] on behavior and development, an ethical practice must create a social context that facilitates the development of the positive relationships necessary for virtuous development.

Purity balls emphasize the importance of a strong father-daughter relationship and encourage fathers to be role models for their daughters and to guide their daughters' development.[49] It could, therefore, be argued that a father's commitment to protect his daughter and to live a life of integrity for her serves as an important example of respect for others. Where this argument falls short, however, is that "other-regarding virtues" require people to treat others as autonomous individuals capable of making their own decisions and acting for themselves, rather than (as is the case with purity balls) disregarding their autonomy and acting in their stead.

By not providing girls with the opportunity to take personal responsibility for decisions regarding their sexuality, purity balls fail to promote respect for others as autonomous beings. Valenti's

[45] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball.*
[46] Stramel, "Coming Out, Outing, and Virtue Ethics," 172.
[47] Dagmang, "The Sociological Sciences and Sexual Ethics," 5.
[48] Paul Amato, "Father-Child Relations, Mother-Child Relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-Being in Early Adulthood," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56, no. 4 (1994): 1032.
[49] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball*

feminist analysis of purity balls aligns well with my virtue ethics analysis because she provides important insight into the consequences of not teaching girls to be autonomous and perpetuating the idea that their sexuality can be owned[50]. A practice that perpetuates this idea discourages respect for other people's autonomy and dignity. Because purity balls place responsibility for girls' purity in the hands of their fathers, this practice disregards girls' autonomy, resulting in a social context that does not facilitate the development of "other-regarding virtues." [51]

Although an argument in favor of purity balls is that they enable girls to develop strong relationships with their fathers that promote self-worth and identity,[52] findings from psychological research combined with a virtue ethics perspective indicate that this practice does not facilitate flourishing. Research shows that closeness to one's father can lead to improved psychological well-being, but research has also shown that closeness to one's father does not significantly contribute to increased self-esteem.[53] While identity and psychological well-being may be important to happiness, virtue ethics does not focus on happiness, and "psychological studies repeatedly indicate that one of the greatest threats to healthy human flourishing is poor self-esteem."[54] Because self-esteem facilitates development of self-respect, practices that cultivate individuals with high self-esteem could be regarded as ethical. However, attempting to justify purity balls on the basis of the psychological benefits of a close relationship with one's father is not sufficient justification on the grounds that research shows that self-esteem is not a benefit of such a relationship. By failing to promote either other- or self-respect, purity balls again do not meet the ethical standards of virtue ethics.

Additionally, the apparent lack of involvement of the mother in purity balls combined with the central role of the father creates a gendered social context that also does not meet these ethical standards. Situating the father as the "high priest" of the family who is responsible for protecting and "covering" his daughter[55] devalues not only the daughter's individual autonomy but that of all other women as well. As Valenti argues, these traditional "gender norms

[50] Valenti, 67.
[51] Stramel, 172.
[52] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball*
[53] Amato, "Father-Child Relations, Mother-Child Relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-Being in Early Adulthood," 1031.
[54] Lawler and Salzman, 471.
[55] Wilson, *Father-Daughter Purity Ball.*

of ownership, dependence, and perpetual girlhood"[56] contribute to a social context that is "increasingly antagonistic to women."[57] In promoting this model of the passive female and dominant male, purity balls appear to be based in a framework that does not allow for the development of the virtues, particularly that of self- and other-respect, or the establishment of a society that is based in sound ethics.

Conclusion

Upon further evaluation of purity balls using a virtue ethics framework, this practice can be deemed unethical because it does not enable ethical actors to make informed and autonomous decisions, preventing them from becoming responsible virtuous agents and sustaining social contexts that fail to promote respect for self and for others. Because promotion of these virtues is necessary for cultivating people who are able to work toward human flourishing, purity balls are an obstacle to this goal. Given the inherent connection between sexuality and moral development, purity balls not only have negative effects on sexual development but on moral development as a whole. As purity balls gain attention from pop culture, it is necessary to promote awareness of the consequences they have not only on the girls who participate, but also on society in which such practices can negatively impact the ultimate goal of human flourishing.

[56] Valenti, 13.
[57] Ibid., 44.