

HPHP6901

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Assessment 2

Prostitution.

**Do Moral and Ethical Considerations
Impact the Profession?**

Ethical and moral considerations can shape the way in which a society recognises and behaves toward a particular profession. Helping professions for example, such as nursing, dentistry, teaching and midwifery, are generally viewed positively for the way in which they aid another individual in need. Other professions, such as banking, retail, and engineering, although very useful and somewhat necessary, are not held in the same esteem as they are secondary to basic needs.¹ Prostitution as a profession seems to lay somewhere in-between, not vital for survival, but still addressing what could be considered a need for some,² or a desire for others, whilst also being dismissed by many as unnecessary and ‘wrong’.³ Morals and ethics vary dependent upon a number of factors such as location, economics, tradition and religion, each of which are also subject to change as the world develops technologically and economically.⁴ In order to understand how ethics and morals may affect the profession, we will examine how sexuality has been perceived over time, and how morals and ethical standards have developed as a result. A qualitative examination of the profession from the perspective of a sex worker will also be included.

The Perception of Prostitution and Sexuality Over Time

Defining sexuality has become an increasingly difficult task, with the use of the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ being somewhat interchangeable depending upon whom you ask, which can lead to confusion in understanding the term ‘sexuality’. For the purpose of this examination, female and male will refer to the biologically born state, with the sexuality of each being defined on this basis unless otherwise stated, and will primarily focus upon female prostitution.

One of the first accounts of prostitution can be found as early as 2400 BCE. This was a sacred practice, which took place in the temples of Sumeria. The beliefs that promoted the practice included hospitality to foreign visitors, fertility rituals, and ceremonial intercourse.⁵ There was even a goddess named Ištar, who was attributed to extramarital sex.⁶ The practice, far from being morally corrupt, appears to have been revered.

Accounts of sexuality can be found in the Bible, where a clear distinction is made between male and female and their expected forms of sexuality as a result. However, upon close examination of some of the texts, it appears that there are indeed examples of homosexuality,

¹ Valerie Bryan, Scott Sanders, Laura E. Kaplan, *The Helping Professional's Guide to Ethics: Theory in Practice* 2nd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p.28;43;45.

² Jerrold S. Greenberg, Clint E. Bruess, Sarah C. Conklin, *Exploring the Dimensions of Human Sexuality* 4th edition, (Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Publishers International, 2010), p. 669.

³ Immanuel Kant, ‘The Philosophy of Law’, translated by W. Hastie, in *Morality and Moral Controversies*, 3rd edition, ed by John Arthur (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), p.254.

⁴ Tobias Rose-Stockwell, *Outrage Machine: How Tech Amplifies Discontent, Disrupts Democracy – and What We Can Do About It*, (London: Piatkus, 2023), chapter 14, <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Outrage_Machine/qnX6DwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=do+morals+change+over+time&pg=PT220&printsec=frontcover> [accessed 29 December 2025].

⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.131.

⁶ Charles River Editors, *Religions of The World: The Religion Of Ancient Mesopotamia*, (South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), p.133.

which was not uncommon for its time. As many religions suggest, the only union accepted and blessed by God is that of a heterosexual union, or at least, that is how the interpretations of the texts report. Women in the Bible, in as early as Genesis, have been portrayed as 'secondary' to men, with the common practices within marriage reinforcing this position. Prostitution however, did not have to adhere to the conformities of marriage, and as such, blurred the lines between the imbalance between male and female. The sexuality of a female prostitute, and that of a married woman could therefore have the potential to be very different from one another.

It is unclear whether the morally negative view on prostitution originated with men or women, or equally from both. From a religious viewpoint, prostitution was morally corrupt, as God considered sex before or outside of marriage as sinful (Heb. 13:4). From a simple gender perspective, it is not so easy to deduce. Did men fear the loss of power within the dynamic, therefore portraying prostitutes as bad? Did women follow this opinion as dutiful wives, whilst secretly holding very different opinions? Did men portray this negativity as a form of control? The distinction of ethical understanding between men and women is discussed by Butler, when she discusses Irigaray's 'ethical relation between the sexes', which suggests the 'masculine language' differs from that of the female, resulting in an unbalanced conclusion.⁷ The reasons behind the early condemnation of the profession may have been subjective, with no moral origins, growing in acceptance for varying reasons, but the overwhelming consensus, for whatever reason, was that prostitution was morally corrupt.

Even though the act of prostitution is reported as being against God, in such verses as Lev.19:29 'Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, that the land not become prostituted and full of depravity', the Bible also has accounts of prostitutes whom they portray kindly. The story of Rahab, a prostitute who helped two Israelites hide from the King of Jericho, shows a heroic act, yet Rabbinic writings portray her instead, as an innkeeper, seemingly taking exception to her being a prostitute.⁸ Christos Yannaras writes, 'When the truth of the person is undervalued or ignored in the realm of theology, this inevitably results in the creation of a legalistic, external system of ethics'.⁹ This is a good explanation of how ethics surrounding prostitution can also be subject to cognitive dissonance, as a result of accepting an authoritative viewpoint. We would probably like to think that the Rabbinic interpretations were not what God had intended, and may applaud Yannaras for sharing a monologue by Marmeladov, 'And then Christ will say to us, "You too come forth. Come forth, you drunkards, come forth, you weak ones, come forth, you children of shame!"'.¹⁰

During the middle-ages, prostitution appears to have been viewed with more acceptance than that of Biblical times. The morality and ethical standpoint seems to have shifted to one of acknowledging its usefulness.

It was accepted as fact that young men would seek out sexual relations regardless of their

⁷ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p.152.
<<https://www.scribd.com/document/387773765/Butler-Senses-of-the-Subject>> [accessed 15 December 2025].

⁸ Carol Meyers, Rahab, Harlot, Heroine and Ancestor to Christ, *Carpediemdona.com*, (2013),
<<https://carpediemdona.com/2013/10/05rahab-harlot-heroine-and-ancestor-to-christ/>> [accessed 4 December 2025].

⁹ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p.26-27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.48.

options, and thus prostitution served to protect “respectable” townswomen from seduction and even rape.¹¹

There was a need however, to distinguish prostitutes from women in general, and the emergence of suitable apparel was introduced. Prostitutes were required to wear only specific garments in order to identify them, and if found prostituting wearing anything else would incur punishment. It was during this time that municipal brothels were set up, imposing restrictions in relation to brother management. The economic acknowledgement of prostitution had begun, foreshadowing any moral considerations, and was now even recognised by the church.¹²

Moving forward from medieval times into the seventeenth century, prostitution and open sexuality remained a part of everyday life. ‘At the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had little need of secrecy.’¹³ Then came the emergence of the middle classes, families and individuals who had made the most of industrial growth and trade; not extremely wealthy, but not poor, they carved out a specific lifestyle, which included adopting a moral high-ground in relation to open sexuality and prostitution. Foucault’s idea of attachment of ideology, principles and practices to classification appears to be present in this; distinguishing acceptances based upon a class system.¹⁴ During this time ‘Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home.’¹⁵ Acts such as prostitution now became so repressed that its existence was often denied. The moral standards of the bourgeoisie had demoted prostitution to a profession with extreme limitations, and ill repute.

As time passed, more and more restrictions were imposed upon the profession, which often led to unforeseen problems. During the 1700s, Berlin had purged the profession a number of times since its reformation, due in part to the problems with widespread venereal diseases; these purges sadly resulted in ‘...desertion of infants, adultery, abortions, and clandestine prostitution’.¹⁶ The criminality imposed on the profession, forced the authorities to re-open the brothels, as the jails could not accommodate the volume of women being arrested. Now, three centuries later, many of the moral and ethical issues remain the same, however, the frameworks surrounding the profession have improved, which in turn have reduced some of the moral arguments against prostitution. The introduction of human rights and autonomy, health screening availability, better contraception and protection from sexually transmitted diseases, and even worker’s rights have all played a role in removing stigma, and alleviating much of the moral dilemma surrounding prostitution. This of course, varies from place to place and country to country.

¹¹ Prostitution in the Middle Ages, *Decameron Web*, p.1, <<https://webhelper.brown.edu/decameron/society/sex/prostitution.php>> [accessed 23 December 2025].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p.3.

¹⁴ Angus Slater, ‘Sex, Sexuality and Gender’ Unit 2, [PowerPoint Presentation], (2022).

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p.3.

¹⁶ William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered In Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, In London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns. With Proposals For The Control And Prevention Of Its Attendant Evils*, 2nd Edition, (London: John Churchill and Sons, 1870), p.139.

Laws surrounding prostitution can be complicated, and vary greatly depending on where in the world you are. In general however, there are five legal models which oversee the profession, which have developed over time, considering the morals, ethics, beliefs and practices of specific places. The most accepting law of course would be 'legalisation', which is regulated by the government of the area. Then there is 'abolitionism', which legalises prostitution, but criminalises soliciting. Alongside this is 'neo-abolitionism', which legalises the selling, but criminalises the buying. 'Decriminalisation' legalises the profession, but has limitations and regulations. Finally, there is 'prohibitionism', which makes prostitution entirely illegal. The fact that there are so many different laws surrounding the profession, speaks to the dilemmas faced in its practice. Angus Slater discusses Foucault's 'truth effects', and that governments decide on a 'true and best way' to provide society with proper and appropriate regulations.¹⁷ The constantly changing laws regarding prostitution, again highlights the difficulties faced in regulating the profession, which in no small part is due to the opposing groups, driven by their moral standards, to irradicate the profession.

Sex workers perspective on prostitution

From outside of the profession there is a freedom to speculate on its morality and its place in society,¹⁸ a freedom which may not necessarily be afforded to workers within the profession. Citing the work of Fabre, Christopher Pierson writes that prostitution is not the greatest choice of profession, but that for some women, they feel it is their only choice.¹⁹ The morals generated from an outsider perspective may fail to distinguish between sex and sexuality when considering the profession, and perceive the sex worker's sexuality as deviant. David Halperin, when discussing the history of sexuality, examples historical accounts of sex as often being an act imposed upon a lower class or subservient individual, separate from the sexuality of the individual concerned.²⁰ This assists in clarifying the mis-guided assumption that the work carried out within the profession reflects the sex workers sexuality. Many of us find ourselves in professions which we would prefer not to be in, but our sexuality is seldom questioned as a contributing factor.

For the majority of sex workers, it is not their preferred choice of profession. Halperin also describes sexuality as, '...a positive, distinct, and constitutive feature of the human personality, to the categorical seat within the individual of sexual acts, desires, and pleasures...'²¹ As discussed earlier, prostitution is not for most workers within the profession, their sexuality. Prostitution is often not the 'chosen' profession for those who find themselves in the profession. Many sex workers choices have been driven by addiction to drugs, with prostitution the easiest and fastest way to finance the addiction. The addiction itself is also very often as a result of an attempt to erase a trauma from their mind, ironically also very often related to some kind of sexual assault. Another common entry into prostitution, born from having a parent or parents who use their children to pay for their addiction, where the children are 'sold' into prostitution to pay off a debt. These children then grow into adult prostitutes as it is the only life they

¹⁷Angus Slater, 'Sex, Sexuality and Gender' Unit 3, [PowerPoint Presentation], (2022).

¹⁸ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p.13-15.

¹⁹ Christopher Pierson, *Just Property, Volume 3: Property in an Age of Ideologies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.255.

²⁰ David M. Halperin, 'Is There a History of Sexuality?', *History and Theory*, Vol.28, No.3, (Oct., 1989), p.257-262.

²¹ Ibid., 259.

know.²² Conversely to this, ask a mother with a starving child if they would prostitute themselves to feed their starving child, and the answer will probably be ‘yes’. The examples given are just a few, but it appears that there are many circumstances which lead to prostitution where the individual’s morals are secondary to need. The nature of the profession prompts judgement, criticism, disapproval, superiority, denial, ignorance and lack of understanding. All of these qualities seem to be in opposition to what religion teaches and represents. The New Testament especially, through the messages presented by Jesus, suggest we try to understand each other, live harmoniously, and never pass judgement on another person before looking at ourselves, and any of our flaws first. The Bible and theology can be an excellent resource in viewing the development of moral and ethical understanding; not only in relation to the topic at hand, but for many issues that may arise in our lives. Yet still, the understanding gained is often subjective when considering the differences in interpretation. This is discussed by Foucault when he describes ‘changing systems’, and offers explanation to why subjectivity plays a role in understanding.²³

Christos Yannaras makes the point that,

We do not sin before ourselves or before others; sin is not a failure in our obligations, a violation of impersonal codes of behaviour. We sin before God alone, and in every case our sin is a relationship with Him – a relationship of communion and life through repentance, or else a relationship of rejecting the life He gives.²⁴

It would appear that morals and ethics play a major role in how prostitution is not only perceived, but also how it is regulated as a result. The issues surrounding the profession seem to be versions of the same problems, irrespective of the time period. Traditional religious beliefs also seem to heavily impact the morality of the subject, either for; as in ancient Sumeria, or against, as demonstrated through scripture and interpretation of the Bible. The questions that have arisen are of both a philosophical and religious nature and have theological considerations of how God portrays sin.

²²Mark Laita, *Peach; Charmain; Trophy; Amber@SoftWhiteUnderbelly*, <<https://www.youtube.com/@SoftWhiteUnderbelly>> [accessed 03 January 2026].

²³ Angus Slater, ‘Sex, Sexuality and Gender’ Unit 3, [PowerPoint Presentation], (2022).

²⁴ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), p.148.

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