

The sexual norms of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy (fl. 350-275 BCE, fragments collected in G. Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, 1990 = *SSR*), in so far as we are able to reconstruct them, provide an interesting test case for the intersection of “sexuality” and “identity” in ancient ethics. These philosophers seem to aim at a focus on corporeal sensation, avoidance of emotional involvement, and an aloof or instrumental stance toward the partner. An anecdote about Aristippus, the notional founder of the school, may exemplify this ideal: when someone accused his favorite courtesan of not loving (φιλεῖν) him, he replied “that he didn’t think fish or wine loved him either, but he used both with pleasure” (*SSR* IVA.93; cf. IVH.20-30). If, *ex hypothesi*, this statement expresses an identity, what sort of identity is it, and what is the best approach to grasping it? The relatively open relation of this behavior to reflectively defended doctrines offers an initial line of inquiry. Contemporary philosophers converged on a search for the ultimate ethical good (τέλος), and generally agreed that, if known, it should guide action. Cyrenaics denied the existence of any single superordinate good and held that each corporeal pleasure was an ultimate goal; furthermore, they maintained that only private experiences (πάθη) were knowable, thus undermining the epistemic foundation (and hence the actionability) of larger or more interpersonal goods. These mutually reinforcing positions (hedonism and πάθος-scepticism) delineate what we might—borrowing from P. Hadot in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*—call an “existential option.” As a background for Cyrenaic sexuality, they provide a way of specifying how speech about or actions toward sexual partners—in this case courtesans—arise out of the tissue of self-creation. To take this self-creation as an act of the autonomous will, however, would be to ignore constructivist accounts of sexuality. Cyrenaic anecdotes strongly recall the discourse of “masculine” and “masterly” self-control outlined by Foucault (and critiqued/modified by numerous successors) as when Aristotle Cyrenaicus (no relation to the Stagirite), supposedly being the only man to resist the legendary courtesan Laïs, fulfilled his promise to “take her back to Cyrene” by including an image of her in his luggage (*SSR* IVE.2). From what we can tell, these performances of exemplary “sexuality” are in line with the Cyrenaic reception of contemporary ethical concerns and practices (what Foucault would call the “ethical substance,” “modes of subjection,” etc.). On the other hand, Cyrenaic ethics is at the fringe of the contemporary philosophical community: where others attempted to transform ἥρωες (Plato, Aeschines, Old Stoa) or agreed with the Cyrenaics in rejecting it (Epicureans), the Cyrenaics went further than other philosophers in calling into question the desirability and existence of such dominant philosophical vectors of other-concern as φιλία and εὐεργεσία (*SSR* IVA.172.46-7, IVE.3, IVF.1.3-5, IVH.13.11-3). When approaching Cyrenaic sexual behavior, then, we can both use constructivist theory to appreciate how it possesses a sort of “normalcy” within its socio-cultural milieu, and explain what we intuitively perceive as its “abnormalcy” by reference to the doctrinal system and “existential option” chosen on the boundaries of that milieu.