

Sexual Desire: Some Philosophical Reflections *Christopher Hamilton*

Compared with many issues, philosophers have not written a great deal on the nature of sexual desire, and what they have written on it is has not always been very enlightening. One reason for this is that philosophical discussions of sexual desire have often been fairly heavily moralised. That is to say, philosophers and others have often presented a particular *moral* conception of sexual desire as if it were an understanding of sexual desire as such, thus distorting our understanding of this phenomenon (or series of phenomena) of human life. Certainly, it must be granted, I think, that it is doubtful that one can arrive at an account of sexual desire which is wholly free of moral concern, but this just means that if we are aiming to give an account of sexual desire that is honest and realistic we should aim to be very sensitive to the moral notions that we employ in doing so. In what follows, I discuss some key philosophical theories of sexual desire, in which theories moral concerns are present in differing ways, and then add some thoughts of my own.

In my view, the most profound philosophical account of sexual desire is that provided by Jean-Paul Sartre in *L'Être et le néant [Being and Nothingness]*. Sartre begins his discussion of sexual desire by dismissing the view that sexual desire is a desire for pleasure. He does so since he claims that, if such desire were a desire for pleasure, then it would be impossible to make sense of how it is that such desire could come to 'attach' itself to an object, that is, to another human being. Crudely put, if desire were desire for pleasure, why would masturbation not be enough?¹ What, then, according to Sartre, does one want in experiencing sexual desire? We can approach his discussion by considering his reflections on the nature of the caress. Such a caress - it may be a caress of the hand or the eye - constitutes, says Sartre, an attempt to *incarnate* the other.

The other, he says, is born as flesh under my caress, whence the idea that I want him or her to be overwhelmed by his or her body: 'Desire is the attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothing and to make it exist as pure flesh'.² If the other responds to my caress then this person will experience his or her arousal as 'troubling', as 'clogging' consciousness. Yet, at the same time, my experiencing my own desire is felt by me in the same way, and I, too, in responding to the caress of the other, am born as flesh for him or her.

We can put Sartre's account in this way. If I desire *you*, I do not desire your flesh. Rather, I desire you in *your flesh*. It is you I want to exist *as* flesh for me. I want to possess you, not as mere flesh, but *through and as revealed in your flesh*. For Sartre, this 'you' is your freedom, for Sartre identifies the self and freedom. But one does not have to accept that identification to see the power of Sartre's account. We are embodied creatures, and our consciousness of that is crucial to our life. When we share a meal, or walk together, or talk together, we can only do so in the way we do because we are embodied. But if we share a meal with each other, we are not interested in one another *as* embodied.

However, if I desire you sexually, then I *am* interested in you *as* embodied. This is why being the object of sexual desire can be so compromising: suddenly to be aware

that another desires one fills one with a consciousness of one's being an embodied creature. One is aware of one's flesh as revealing who one is, and as being the focus of the other's interest in one.

For Sartre, the fact that sexual desire has this kind of structure, i.e., that it is a desire for a person in his or her flesh, means that it is doomed to failure. Remember that, for Sartre, in desire I want to capture your freedom in your flesh. But if I manage to possess your freedom on the surface of your flesh, then you are, of course, no longer free. For if I possess your freedom, then I hold it captive, and, in holding it captive, it is clearly no longer free. Thus, if I achieve what I want in my sexual desire for you, namely, possessing your freedom, then I have thereby thwarted or frustrated my own desire. But you, too, are caught in the same process in your desire for me: if you capture me in my freedom, then I am no longer free, and you have failed to achieve what you want to achieve. This means that in our desire for each other, we are experiencing a conflict with ourselves and with each other. We can neither of us get what we want, and yet in our desire we struggle to do so. This is why Sartre claims that orgasm cannot be the aim of desire. Rather, orgasm signals the frustration of desire, since it is, so to speak, the point at which the failure to capture the other in his or her flesh becomes manifest.

Sartre's account, only the bare bones of which I have provided here, clearly captures something central about the nature of sexual desire. For even if we do not accept his identification of the self and freedom, there is, it seems to me, something right about the idea that sexual desire is doomed to a peculiar kind of frustration. Of course, all of our pleasures can fail to bring satisfaction: nothing is more common than to satisfy a desire and remain unsatisfied oneself. But the point about sexual desire goes deeper than this: sexual desire seems in a special or peculiar way doomed to frustration. But if that is not, as Sartre in his account proposes, because of the identification of self and freedom, why is it? Here is a suggestion. Sexual desire seems to be a deeply unstable desire. On the one hand, it is roving, largely indiscriminating about the individuals to whom it attaches itself, restless: one wants 'woman' or 'man'. On the other, it can be especially excited by, and become fixated upon, a specific individual. This lends sexual desire a strange fragility: for, in desiring a given individual, one also desires him or her as man or woman, as a representative of the male or the female sex. There accordingly seems to be a way in which what one wants in the sexual act is two things that one cannot have: one wants this individual man or woman and one wants all men or all women. That is, one wants *all* men or *all* women in and through this one individual. But this is impossible. And this is perhaps part of the explanation for the fact that sexual desire can be so imperious and desperate. It may also be the reason why one of the most recurrent sexual fantasies is that of not knowing who one's sexual partner is.

But Sartre's account seems weak in one crucial way. He starts, as we have seen, from the idea that sexual desire could not be desire for pleasure since if that were so then we could not explain how desire attaches itself to another. But this seems mistaken. The reason for this is that the pleasure that comes from sex with another might simply be more intense or more varied than the pleasure that comes from masturbation. We could thus explain how desire attaches itself to another by saying that it is this intense or multifaceted form of pleasure that is wanted in desire, and that this can only be satisfied by actually having sex with another, whence desire attaches itself to another.

Roger Scruton would disagree with the last point. He has argued that any instance of sexual desire possesses an individualising intentionality. By this he means that sexual desire is founded upon the thought of the other as the specific individual he or she is.³ That is, there can be no sexual desire which exists and then ‘attaches’ itself to a specific individual. Hence, according to this account, if a man desires two women at the same time, he will be experiencing two different desires, each of which will be a desire for one of the two women. From this account it also follows that there cannot be any such sexual desire as an unfocused desire for no particular man or woman. Scruton considers the case of the sailor storming ashore with the thought ‘woman’ in his mind: he might be thought to desire a woman, but no particular woman. Scruton claims that this is not so: until the sailor actually meets a specific woman he desires, he desired no woman; he was rather in the condition of desiring to desire.⁴

Such a view of sexual desire has to find an adequate response to such phenomena as that of Casanova, described by Stefan Zweig:

His passion, flowing away at the purely erotic level, knows nothing of the ecstasy of uniqueness. We need have no anxiety, therefore, when he seems reduced to despair because Henriette or the beautiful Portuguese lady has left him. We know that he will not blow out his brains; nor are we surprised to find him, a day or two later, amusing himself in the first convenient brothel. If the nun C.C. is unable to come over from Murano, and the lay-sister M.M. arrives in her place, Casanova is speedily consoled. After all, one woman is as good as another!⁵

Scruton writes: ‘If John is frustrated in his pursuit of Mary, there is something inapposite in the advice “Take Elizabeth, she will do just as well.”’⁶ Not, apparently, if one is Casanova! It seems, then, that Scruton has two options. Either he could insist that he has provided a true account of sexual desire, in which case Zweig has totally misunderstood and misdescribed the case of someone like Casanova, and, indeed, that a lot of what looks like sexual desire where what is desired *is someone or other* is not really sexual desire after all since it does not display an individualising intentionality; or he could say that such cases display sexual desire all right, but in a perverted or otherwise morally unacceptable form. In fact, Scruton seems to waver between the two, for, although, as we have seen, he claims that in cases such as that of the sailor the man in question experiences no sexual desire until he comes into contact with the woman he desires, he also grants, at the end of his book, and looking over his argument as a whole, that ‘my analysis has included a large prescriptive component’.⁷ In other words, he seems to concede that his analysis is not an analysis of sexual desire as such but a moral view about the best form that sexual desire can take. It is, in other words, a moralised account of sexual desire.

I do not think, then, that Scruton’s account is wholly plausible as it stands. However, it seems to me clear that what Scruton is trying to do is to give an account of sexual desire that does justice to the fact that there can be deeper and shallower expressions of such desire. Indeed, it seems to be the case that many people long for their sexual desire to be provided with deeper forms of expression. But some accounts of sexual desire do not seem to be able to make sense of this. One such is that provided by Igor Primoratz, who has argued that sexual desire ‘is sufficiently defined as the desire for

certain bodily pleasures, period'.⁸ The reason that such an account of sexual desire makes it hard to see how such desire is capable of finding deeper forms of expression in human life is that it assimilates sexual desire to something like the desire to scratch an itch, and the possibilities of a deepened understanding of itch-scratching are severely limited, to say the least. This is not to say that only deepened forms of expression of sexual desire are morally legitimate, or anything like that: it is merely to say that any account of sexual desire must be able to make sense of the possibility of those deeper forms of expression.

In any case, Primoratz' account of sexual desire has some odd consequences. It leads, he argues, to the conclusion that any putative sexual act which is devoid of pleasure for the person engaged in that act is not, after all, a sexual act at all. Thus he claims that a prostitute who gains no pleasure from intercourse with a customer is not engaged in a sexual act (whereas the customer is). Further:

As for the couple who have lost sexual interest in each other but still engage in routine coitus, the less pleasurable it gets, the less valuable it is as sex. If, at some point, it becomes utterly bereft of sexual pleasure, would it be so odd to say that they were performing acts that for most people ordinarily involve at least a modicum of sexual pleasure, but that *they* were merely going through the motions, that *for them* there was no sex in it any longer?⁹

One might suspect that Primoratz is not, after all, just trying to tell us what sex is, but prescribing a particular form of it, that is, one through which one experiences as much pleasure as possible. For he clearly believes that the less pleasurable sex is, the less valuable it is. Still, leaving that aside, it does, surely, seem odd to suppose that the bored couple in Primoratz' example are not actually engaged in a sexual act. One might as well say that what it is to feel hunger is to have a desire for certain bodily pleasures so that if one eats something utterly bland which fails to fill the stomach (modern mass-produced strawberries, for example) one is not really eating at all.

In fact, I do not think that Primoratz need deny on his account that the prostitute or the bored couple are engaged in sex even if they get no pleasure from such acts. His view expresses a confusion between sexual desire and sexual acts. One is, after all, still eating if there is no pleasure in doing so. The prostitute might not, indeed, possess any sexual desire for her clients, but it does not follow from that that she is not engaged in sexual acts with them. The same may be the case for the bored couple. In the same way, I might for some reason have no hunger, no desire for food, yet still be eating.

So far, then, we have seen that three key philosophical theories of sexual desire have weaknesses, though I certainly would not deny that they each capture some part of the truth about some individuals' experience of sexual desire. But if we were to try to find some fundamental reason why they are not complete as accounts of sexual desire, why they do not do enough to open up a deepened understanding of sexual desire, then I think that we would have to note that central here is that none of them makes anything of the connection between sexual desire and procreation. And we can see that this connection is crucial by the simple reflection that a species of creature which had all our experiences of sexual desires but in whom sexual desire had no connection with procreation would have a profoundly different understanding of sexual desire

from the one we have. As so often in philosophy, the real problem is to find a helpful way of expressing this point.

At one point D. H. Lawrence writes:

Sex is the balance of male and female in the universe, the attraction, the repulsion, the transit of neutrality, the new attraction, the new repulsion, always different, always new. The long neuter spell of Lent, when the blood is low, and the delight of the Easter kiss, the sexual revel of the spring, the passion of mid-summer, the slow recoil, revolt, and grief of autumn, greyness again, then the sharp stimulus of long winter nights. Sex goes through the rhythm of the year, in man and woman, ceaselessly changing: the rhythm of the sun in his relation to the earth.¹⁰

It goes without saying that many, if not most, do not share this view of sex, wonderful though it is. And there are lots of ways in which one might pursue or develop or respond to the thoughts Lawrence articulates. For our purposes what is important is that Lawrence connects sex to the natural cycle of life, and does so in such a way as to express a sense of the wonder and mystery of sex. But if we ask ourselves how it is possible to see sex in this way, then I think that we shall not be able long to resist the thought that it is the fact that sex is related to conception and procreation that allows us to do this. For it is *this* fact about it which most immediately and forcefully connects it to the notions of corruption and regeneration and hence allows it to be brought into contact with our sense of the natural cycle of the seasons. And if, as we do, we can wonder at that cycle, at its utter familiarity together with the strangeness that each spring green shoots sprout from what looks like dead wood, we can also see why it is that we can wonder at sex, at the strangeness of a force at once so familiar and yet *unheimlich* - this incomparable German word, which means 'uncanny' or 'spooky' or 'frightening', captures the sense of something's not being like that which one meets with at home [*Heim*], that which is unfamiliar or upsets one's ingrained and habitual ways of dealing with things.

We could perhaps get at the significance of procreation for an understanding of sexual desire in another way. Many people experience a sense of wonder and mystery at the birth of a child. And this very sense can cast in a certain light the sexual act which directly led to this birth, can remind us of the strangeness and mystery of sex. But to speak here of a reminder is not to suggest that anyone might actually have forgotten anything, for we are all familiar with the fact that sexual desire has its own demands and needs which well up and grip us in ways we cannot fully fathom, and that it attaches us to people in ways we cannot properly comprehend. We all know that sex, where what is craved is so clear and yet weirdly elusive, seems at once completely natural and an intrusion from another world into our daily activities.

The issue is rather that of such knowledge becoming deeper and more alive as an object of wonder in a person, much as, say, suffering but surviving a dreadful accident might be said to remind one of one's mortality. Thus the connection with sex of reproduction and all it involves casts its shadow over sex in the kind of way that mortality casts its shadow over human life. And this is so even if a given person never thinks of procreation (except, perhaps, to prevent his or her sexual acts leading to conception), just as it is so even if a person never thinks of his own mortality (except

to suppress or ridicule the thought). For the kinds of thoughts I have said people have about the birth of a child and those that people have who have survived death form part of the collective experience of mankind, of the wisdom concerning what it is to be a human being and thus of our sense of who and what we are.

I am not claiming, of course, that reflection on the connection of sex with reproduction is the only way in which it is possible for one to come to a deepened understanding of human sexuality. I am just saying that it is a central or permanent way in which this can happen for creatures such as we are, and thus that any account of sexual desire which leaves it out must be inadequate.

As I have already said, however, it does not follow from the fact that sexual desire is capable of deeper forms of expression that only such expression of sexual desire is morally legitimate. Moreover, it is often extremely unclear just which kinds of expression of sexual desire are shallow and which deep. Thus Stefan Zweig, from whose essay on Casanova I have already quoted, manages in that essay to celebrate the very shallowness of Casanova's erotic life, finding in it much to envy in its freedom from moral concerns and in its full-blooded impulsiveness. Yet Zweig would certainly not have supposed it to be good that all behave as Casanova did. It is possible to celebrate the sheer variety of forms of expression of human sexual desire whilst being glad that they remain that, a variety, and that none establishes a hegemony over the others.

Sexual desire, then, I am arguing, is interestingly balanced between depth and shallowness. There is, perhaps, a reason for this in that located close to the centre of our experience of sexual desire is, oddly enough, that of disgust.

In a valuable essay, David Pole has analysed the concept of disgust.¹¹ He argues, as have others, that disgust always carries a charge of attraction: those things we find disgusting we find both repellent and attractive. Pole also suggests that we get our central notion of disgust from organic matter that is decomposing in some way, which would help explain why such things as slugs - to take one of Pole's examples - are experienced as disgusting: for the slug's slimy body, which it appears to be losing as it crawls along, seems to be caught in a process of decay and corruption. One of the most disgusting things I have ever seen was the neck of an otherwise healthy horse, gashed wide open by barbed wire, into which had buried themselves thousands of maggots which were feeding on the blood oozing in clots from the wound. A friend told me of his disgust on seeing a frog which has a loose back like a string vest into which the young flee to seek shelter and are carried for safety. Organic decay, then, or what looks like it, or smells of it, is perhaps the core of disgust.

Consider now the sexual act. In this act the bodies of those involved undergo profound changes: the flushing of the face, the erection of the penis, the tumescence of the nipples, the secretions of the vagina. One is overwhelmed in desire by one's body, as Sartre puts it: one's will is here in abeyance. All of these things can, of course, be received as an expression of excitement. But there is no doubt that they can be seen as disgusting, and often have been so seen: I should imagine that Christianity has been particularly good at finding them disgusting. For, by their very nature, and in their triumph over the will, they are redolent of a body in decay. This is why desire for the other in his or her flesh can so easily, in certain persons, tip over into disgust

with his or her flesh. And in sexual jealousy such disgust is to the fore: for the sexually exciting transformations of the beloved's body resemble nothing so much as the disgusting decay of that body when they are provoked by, and express desire for, a rival. Yet the transformations of one's beloved's body, even when they are connected with one's rival, remain exciting, and they do so even partly because they disgust, for that which is disgusting is appealing, as we have already noted. Disgust, one might say, adapting a Sartrean idiom from another context, lies coiled like a worm at the heart of desire, and it is brought to the light of day by betrayal. Sexual jealousy may begin in the recognition of one's dispensability as a sexual partner, but once it has been evoked it feeds upon the primordial disgust which lies hidden in all sexual acts. It might be said that the idea that disgust lies at the heart of sexual desire is absurd. And it is, of course, true that not everyone will be susceptible to the sense that the transformations of the body in sexual excitement are redolent of a body in decay, however latent this might be. But there are other reasons for supposing that disgust is inherent in sexual desire. For example, it just seems to be the case that sexual desire (especially male desire?) is often ignited and intensified by a sense of doing something which involves disgust. This is connected with the fact that in sex we suspend or overcome our normal sense of disgust. As William Ian Miller says:

[S]exual desire depends on the idea of a prohibited domain of the disgusting. A person's tongue in your mouth could be experienced as a pleasure or as a most repulsive and nauseating intrusion depending on the state of relations that exist or are being negotiated between you and the person. But someone else's tongue in your mouth can be a sign of intimacy *because it* can also be a disgusting assault.¹²

But can it be right to say that modern sexual desire, whose expression is so free in comparison with that of previous ages, carries a sense of disgust at its core? Perhaps the idea is not as absurd as it might seem, for A. Béjin has argued that

present day [sexual] norms tend to provoke a conflict between immediate surrender to the demands of the senses, and an increased conscious mastery of the organic processes... One must... abandon oneself to sensation, without ceasing to submit one's actions to a rational calculation of 'sexual expedience'.¹³

The claim is that we have done a great deal to subsume our sexual practices under the same kind of cost-benefit calculus that applies in so many other areas of our life. If this is right, then modern sexual desire, for all its seeming liberation from older forms of control, may be thought to express a powerful asceticism which itself testifies to a sense of disgust with sex. Indeed, the fact that modern people seem obsessed with a kind of highly stylised, more or less 'pornographized' sex is itself perhaps a sign of a kind of unacknowledged disgust for sex, a disgust for sex that cannot be packaged and presented in a highly sanitized form.

I have spoken, then, of the possibility of a deepened understanding of sex and of the disgust which is implicit in sex. These two ways of thinking can certainly pull us in different directions, making us think of sex as now something full of grace and light, now as something mean and shabby. But they can pull in the same direction. For the experience of sex can be deeply consoling. If we ask why this is so, then a key part of

the answer is surely that, given the wretchedness of the human heart and its potential to fill one with disgust, it can seem little short of a miracle that one person should consent to the intimacy with another that making love involves. In other words, in some moods it can seem that when two people make love this act will depend upon, and involve, mutual forgiveness. Responding to such a thought, some have seen in sex the possibility of a quasi-religious act, as John Berryman suggests in one of his poems: 'Our Sunday morning when dawn-priests were applying/Wafer and wine to the human wound, we laid/Ourselves to cure ourselves down...'. Such an idea is certainly blasphemous, but it helps us see that, in an age of decay of religious belief, there may lie secretly in the modern obsession with sex something more than I have already suggested: a kind of longing for a redemption no longer available in traditional terms.

There is, for some people, something melancholy in the fact that sex can be both a source of the kind of consolation I have mentioned, as well as being imperious and desperate in the way I have also mentioned. We often long for it to express only the most tender of feelings. Yet one can also be glad of this discrepancy in our experience of what sex is, since it makes of sex one of those mysteries of the human condition which help us hold on to the sense that life is worth living because what it offers us is inexhaustibly rich and varied.

Christopher Hamilton
King's College London

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel Barnes, (London: Methuen, 1984 [1943]), II, iii, 2.

² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.389.

³ Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), ch.4.

⁴ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, pp.89-90.

⁵ Stefan Zweig, *Casanova: a Study in Self-Portraiture*, tr. Eden and Cedar Paul, (London: Pushkin Press, 1998 [1928]), pp.88-9.

⁶ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, p. 76.

⁷ Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, pp. 362-3. Cf. also Igor Primoratz' discussion of Scruton's views in *Ethics and Sex* (London: Routledge, 1999), ch.3.

⁸ Primoratz, *Ethics and Sex*, p.46.

⁹ Primoratz, *Ethics and Sex*, p.49.

¹⁰ D. H. Lawrence, 'A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover"', in *Phoenix II*, Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (eds) (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p.504.

¹¹ David Pole, 'Disgust and Other Forms of Aversion', in *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion*, George Roberts (ed.), (London: Duckworth, 1983).

¹² William Ian Miller, *An Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.137.

¹³ A. Béjin 'The Influence of the Sexologists', in P. Ariés and A. Béjin (eds), *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precepts in Past and Present Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985)