

## PHILOSOPHERS HAVE AVOIDED SEX

It is a strange and puzzling fact that philosophers have acted almost as though man were not sexual.

It's as though sex had no significance for human thought, or as though it made no difference that the thinker was also a sexual creature.

This philosophical blind spot has been remarked from time to time by one solitary observer or other. In the last century the German sociologist Georg Simmel noticed that the discussions in Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* and "the very one-sided reflections of Schopenhauer," apart from occasional individual comments, "are all that the great thinkers have contributed to this problem."<sup>1</sup> As Erwin Reisner sees it, philosophy has paid strikingly little attention to this phenomenon so absorbing to the poets. "Indeed, one can almost say, it has industriously ignored and skirted the subject, exactly so, as if it had to fear that it might be corrupted by the notion..."<sup>2</sup>

The reference to Plato reminds us that we have all kinds of philosophies of *love*, but as Suzanne Lilar in her perceptive book on "the couple" points out, the West has never been

<sup>1</sup> "Fragment über die Liebe," *Logos*, X, 1, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Vom Ursinn der Geschlechter* (Berlin, Lettner-Verlag, 2nd edition, 1956), p. 10.

furnished by any of her thinkers a heterosexual philosophy of love: "It is to the love of boys that we owe the one and only great Western philosophy of love."<sup>3</sup>

What explains this persistent neglect of a subject in the twentieth century, an age which Madame Lilar and Denis de Rougemont, among others, are now describing as the erotic age, the age of the erotic revolution? Is philosophy afflicted by some persistent myopic flaw?

Sex is as natural and as ubiquitous as people—to everybody but the philosophers. The fear of a deep or enduring sexual relation on the part of philosophers in general did not escape Nietzsche's notice and he comments on it as though this is endemic to great philosophy: "Thus the philosopher abhors marriage, together with that which might persuade to it—marriage being a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum. What great philosopher hitherto has been married? Heraclitus, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer—they were not; more, one cannot even imagine them married. A married philosopher belongs in comedy, that is my proposition—and as for that exception, Socrates—the malicious Socrates, it would seem, married ironically, just to demonstrate this proposition."<sup>4</sup>

Philosophy for the most part has denigrated sex, underestimated its power, and attempted its redirection to more "philosophical" realities.

Since philosophy is the discipline that concentrates on the most abstract of the mind's concepts, philosophy has searched out those aspects of reality which all kinds of humans have in common, these attributes of existence which constitute humanity as such. The less abstract particularities, such as sexual differences, are studied by the other sciences and arts. These are not the primary business of philosophy.

However, what if the very concepts which are thought to be valuable to thought and worthwhile to philosophy are themselves creations of philosophy? What if the very notion of what is human has been given a decisive shape by a philosophy that now

<sup>3</sup> *Aspects of Love in Western Society* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> *Genealogy of Morals* (translation by Kaufmann and Hollingdale) "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?," paragraph 7.

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appeals to this notion to defend its hierarchy of values? Doesn't this mean we are going in circles?

Philosophy, above all other disciplines, should have been critically conscious of language. It has been linguistically self-conscious since Heraclitus, except that it has been strangely blind to the influence of man's sexual existence upon his linguistic existence. It was Johann Georg Hamann in the eighteenth century who first pointed out what Freud has now popularized, that man's sexual nature pervades all his language, even to the most rarified abstractions.<sup>5</sup> It would seem that sex is inescapable. To Freud love basically means genital union, but he goes on to say that "we do not separate from this—what in any case has a share in the name 'love'—on the one hand, self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas. Our justification lies in the fact that psycho-analytic research has taught us that all these tendencies are an expression of the same instinctual impulses; in relations between the sexes these impulses force their way towards sexual union, but in other circumstances they are diverted from their aim or are prevented from reaching it, though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognizable... We are of the opinion, then, that language has carried out an entirely justifiable piece of unification in creating the word 'love' with its numerous uses, and that we cannot do better than take it as the basis of our scientific discussions and expositions as well."<sup>6</sup> Making this same point in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, about the total presence of sexuality, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains how this sexuality of man could pervade his psychic and cultural life as well as his physical-chemical-biological existence; he speaks of man's erotic "atmosphere" or "structure" of perception much as the physicist speaks of "fields of force."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Hamann's *Essay of a Sibyl on Marriage* (1775) and *Skirts of Fig Leaves* (1777).

<sup>6</sup> *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (ed. James Strachey; London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), pp. 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, reprinted 1966), pp. 168-169.

The evidence for the ubiquity of sex has been available to the Christian or religious philosopher as well. It does not stop with the sexuality of mankind's myths which provided the material and even the conceptualities of the earliest philosophy. Even the most spiritual and transcendent mysticisms are painted vividly, even luridly, with sexual conceptions. It has often been remarked, the Church was aware of it, but the philosophers did not explore it. Beginning with the metaphors of Israel as a girl betrothed to God and the Church as the Bride of Christ, those who described religious experience drew more and more upon the love poems of the Song of Songs, which of course, were allegorized as a presentation of the relation of the soul to God or Christ as well as upon other languages of marriage and erotic experience. When one reaches the explicit descriptions at the high-water mark of mysticism in Hadewych, Eckhart, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa, it becomes almost necessary to be informed that what is being presented is an experience of *God*, not of a human lover. The clearest presentation of this explicitness is perhaps the well-known sculpture of "St. Theresa in Ecstasy" by Bernini in which the saint is being stabbed by an arrow of an angel; as a representation of a woman approaching or in the throes of orgasm, it is probably to be counted one of the most erotic paintings ever accomplished in any culture. The Etruscan tomb paintings or the Khajuraho and Konarak temple sculpture do not begin to compare with it. It is a convincing demonstration that man's sexuality is found in the highest reaches of his spirit. The closeness of this relation of spirituality and sexuality is made strikingly clear the moment the relationship is reversed, in the case of blasphemous sexual parodies in John Wilkes' *Essay on Woman*.<sup>8</sup>

It is not an unreasonable demand to insist that the treatment of sex constitutes a sort of test for philosophy. In the first place there is evidence accumulated by social investigators to suggest that the crisis in sexuality, if we can call it that, is directly related to the crisis of identity and man's loss of confidence in himself which Western man has suffered since the onset of industrialization and the desacralization of man's cosmic position. De Rougement thinks that the control of erotic energy

<sup>8</sup> London, 1763.

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may turn out to be more important for the survival of civilization than the control of nuclear and solar energy.<sup>9</sup> Philosophy has ignored these problems. Twentieth century British and American philosophy in particular has been quite adept at avoiding most of the principal issues of our age.

This is possible in philosophy because of the concern with abstractions already mentioned. It is the vocation of philosophy to deal with the most basic questions, but this vocation often provides a rationale for constructing self-contained logical systems which provide no opportunity for the philosophers working within this system to perceive any disturbing inadequacy not precluded by the satisfying coincidence of premises and conclusions. This procedure has strength but not relevance. One reality which eludes this sort of analytical comprehension is sex. This is why sex is ignored or referred to one of the sciences or reduced to "ethics." Sex is a test case for the seriousness of philosophy. Other major issues which are perennial and which test the viability of any philosophy worth man's attention are suggested by such concepts as Bread, Power, Neighborhood, Knowledge, Meaning. A philosophy which ignores economic, social, political, scientific and ultimate questions is nursing irrelevance.

Philosophy did not exactly ignore sexuality so much as reinterpret it, but these reinterpretations all turned out to be a flight from sex. This procedure of reinterpretation had two advantages. It allowed the philosopher to indulge the illusion that the subject had been treated, but it also allowed the avoidance of the subject.

To see how this is so we need only look at the major philosophers who are known for a treatment of love. These philosophers can be typed according to various conceptions or images of man and in turn these conceptions can be called the philosophical mythologies of sex. They are found in every culture and age and several are often adopted by the same philosopher, although basically they are few in number. They are amenable of course to infinite variety and may be, but do not necessarily have to be, represented in gross pictorial form.

<sup>9</sup> *Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1963; translation by Richard Howard of *Comme Toi-Même*, Editions Albin Michel, 1961), p. 22.

Some of these pictorial forms—the Androgyne, the Garden of Eden, the Judgment of Paris, the circle of Yang and Yin, the Virgin Birth—are better known than others because they are sacred or central to major religions or cultures, but their particular pictorial representations do not exhaust their impact.

Most philosophies picture man essentially as pre-sexual, some as post-sexual. Seldom is the flight from sex as obvious as the anti-sexual philosophies of gnosticism or Manicheism or the Hindu philosophy of Shankara, an extreme example of regarding everything material as illusion. For the most part the philosophies give sex a place but no affirmative significance. In a few cases sex is divinized, in which case again sex as distinctly human existence is transcended. The reverse of this sacralization, a satanization, is not far away.

The major sexual influence on Western ideologies is Platonism, which envisages a pre-sexual man whose present sexual existence is a fallen state, alienated from man's essence. The major Christian philosophies of the past are so seriously qualified by Platonism that they stand as mixtures of Greek-Latin ideals and Christian eschatologies. The Christian eschatology introduces a post-sexual man whose image is a Christ brought to earth without sexual intercourse, the son of a "pure" Virgin, whose disciples and priests are supposed to represent the complete life of the Kingdom of God by their devotion to celibacy. In this view the true man of the future is post-sexual.

However the major image of the contemporary age may be none of these but the man of solipsistic sex who is independent sexually, that is, mono-sexual, in need of no deep or lasting relation with a partner of the opposite sex. He is literally a solipsist; sexually he is the only one who exists—nothing else in the universe is an appropriate sexual partner. The other person is only an object for his gratification.

In Roman times this mono-sexuality took the form of imperialistic sex; Ovid's *Ars amatoria* describes how the campaign for empire is carried on. In the eighteenth century Casanova shows imperialism—the dominance of the world for one's gratification—in a new form; here is a sexual d'Artignan, the courtier in lace. In the affluent society today sexual imperialism must assume a form appropriate to the day: the imperialist is now the consumer. Consumer sex is still solipsistic. In consumer

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sex women are attractive objects advertised for gratification, like other consumer objects with similar attractive advertisement. The major change today is the adoption of mono-sexuality by women. The Feminine Ideal, for example, for the Kronhausens in *The Sexually Responsive Woman* is a woman sexually autonomous, for whom heterosexuality would be a non-essential, a woman who has educated herself to be self-gratifying—a self-contained unit.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the cultural changes the philosophical mythologies haven't changed.

Plato's position on sexual love is representative of the Greek view in general. Aristotle does not differ materially on this question and even the later Hellenistic philosophy of the Epicurean Lucretius is essentially Platonic in its sexual doctrine. The representative character of Plato's Hellenism is perhaps best symbolized by the fact that the timeless Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris, the story of the rivalry among the three goddesses—Hera, Athena and Aphrodite—which provides the background of the Trojan War, can serve as an account of the Platonic philosophy of sex. Among the blandishments put before the young man Paris to influence his choice of one goddess over another was the promise of Aphrodite—and everyone knows what Aphrodite stood for—to give him the most beautiful maiden in the world. The point of the story is the stupidity of the young man's choice, which brought on the war, the death of many heroes, and the destruction of a civilization. Paris had chosen sex. It should be noticed that in the myth sex is a perfectly natural part of the universe, along with other desirable possibilities, and there is no thought that sex is evil or corrupt. Sex is a natural part of human existence; however to select it over other values, values of the soul, is to make an unreasonable choice.

It is this relation between the body and the soul that provides material for most of the so-called paradoxes of the Platonic view of sex. Readers of Plato cannot understand how he can take such a dim view of sexual relations with women and be so suspicious of marriage as an institution that subverts the state much as

<sup>10</sup> Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, *The Sexually Responsive Woman* (New York, Grove Press, 1964), pp. 84-85.

property does for the Marxist, and yet not be anti-feminist, in fact, make himself conspicuous as the philosopher who advocated equal rights for women in all affairs. Nor can readers understand how Plato can create a view of the cosmos in which love motivates everything, and yet in which nothing found in nature can fulfill the desire of this love. And again, physical love is quite frankly discussed in one of Plato's greatest dialogues, and yet, as one writer put it, "it is not at all clear how sex enters into the Platonic philosophy."<sup>11</sup>

These paradoxes disappear when it is realized that Plato removed sex from serious philosophical consideration as a human affair when he transposed sex upon a cosmic screen. In demythologizing the Homeric poetry Plato retained the sexual relationships but on a metaphysical level: matter loves form. So everything in nature is moved by love, but nothing in nature can gratify nature. In his physical existence man longs for the eternal forms which alone can satisfy his soul. But his sexual existence qua sexual has no significance for this metaphysical eros; man's sex, as a matter of fact, is a matter of indifference. Plato's conception of love, insofar as human sex is concerned, is completely non-sexual and can apply indifferently to heterosexual, homosexual, or asexual relations. As Irving Singer put it, "Sex is an afterthought, a technological device for propagating the race."<sup>12</sup> So Plato adopts so generous an attitude toward the equality of women, because he does not think of women as women, nor men as men. Human beings are not essentially masculine or feminine but sexless. Sex is a biological accident of no philosophical interest. Everything Plato says about love would be valid if there were only one sex or no sex at all. Sex is a negative; it makes no difference in Plato's concept of man. This should also explain the preference for the myth of the androgynous man related by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. The vision of man as a creature originally both male and female not only serves to explain sexual desire, which appears as a longing for a lost unity which once was perfect, but projects a conception of humanity essentially prior to sexual differences. This pre-existence of the soul in Plato corresponds to the pre-sexual

<sup>11</sup> Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York, Random House, 1966), pp. 76.

<sup>12</sup> *The Nature of Love*, p. 76.



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existence of man in the Myth of Androgyne; both are figurative expressions of the truth that man is not masculine or feminine but in his true reality a pure soul. So in the *Symposium* Socrates recommends to us “the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life” and asks us to imagine man as a lover “holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine. Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be able to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities... and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.”<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Aquinas, as the most convincing approximation to an official Christian philosopher, unites three different influences in his thought. One is the position of Aristotle—ultimately derived from Plato—that sexual activity is a natural function of a rational animal and has no significance beyond procreation. The other two influences are Christian, one based on the primitive Christian eschatology (“the form of this world is passing away”), which is the real reason, and not gnostic or “puritan” hatred of the flesh, for primitive Christian scepticism about marriage; and the other derived from Augustinianism with its doctrine of original sin.

The notion of original sin as it was developed by the church fathers introduced a new element in the philosophy of sex, the transmission of sin through sexual activity. The depreciation of the body, a notion which is not emphasized in Plato but which comes to the fore in late Hellenistic versions of Platonism, is employed at crucial points for the interpretation of the Genesis myth of the Garden of Eden and the result is the conclusion that not only does the story apply to every descendent of these mythical parents who is consequently born to follow their footsteps in sin, but that the reason for this continued introduction of sin is quite naturally hereditary. And since heirs are produced by sexual intercourse, there must be something wrong with intercourse. This could not be procreation as such, because Genesis commanded us to “be fruitful and multiply.” So it must be something else in the procreative act. In the context of a Platonic hierarchy of values, which denigrated the

<sup>13</sup> Jowett translation.

“lower” or “material” passions, there could not be much doubt about what this element was: it was the desire or passion which accompanied sexual intercourse which was the objectionable element in sex.

These were the traditions which Thomas inherited and which it was his task to synthesize into some viable balance. Thomas is important not only because of the recognition which he has been accorded but because by common agreement his Christian philosophy of sex is one of the most balanced and human representations of the Christian position. Freud attributes to Augustine the interesting comment on human beings that “we are born between urine and feces,” *inter urinas et faeces nascimur*.<sup>14</sup> This is not only a very perceptive observation of female anatomy, but a statement fraught with ambiguity. Should we respond, “Look how far we’ve gone!” or “Look how dirty we are!”? Thomas faced the same ambiguity in juxtaposing the traditions he inherited. He felt that sex is somehow noble and valuable because human beings arise from its prolific sources, but in another way it is somehow dirty. But in exactly what does this dirty element consist?

Thomas begins with the principles of Aristotle’s natural philosophy which he believes will appeal to every rational being. Sex is good because it is natural. What is natural can be formulated in principles which constitute natural law.<sup>15</sup> The natural laws of sexual relations, which can be derived from an observation of all animal life, are the obligation to propagate and the obligation to rear the offspring which are the result of the propagation.<sup>16</sup> All this applies to hamsters as well as humans. The conclusion is that sex is good if it leads to the propagation and rearing of offspring.<sup>17</sup> Since the obligation to educate offspring implies a precondition for sexual activity, and among human beings this precondition answers to the description of the institution of marriage, sexual activity is then good if its purpose is procreation and it takes place within marriage.<sup>18</sup> Sex is good

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (translated by James Strachey; New York, W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 53, n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 1/2, 94, 2c.

<sup>16</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 154, 1c and *ST* 1/2, 94, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 154, 11c.

<sup>18</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 122.

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because the preservation of the race is good; marital intercourse for the right motive is altogether virtuous.<sup>19</sup>

But there is a problem. Church tradition had held that sexual intercourse was somehow connected with original sin. Is this sexual act sinful because it transmits original sin? Thomas' answer was No. Sexual activity is not sinful as such but not because sex is free of all sin. There is nothing especially sinful about sex but it participates in sin because all activity involving physical desires excessive to natural purpose is sinful.<sup>20</sup> To turn the statement around, sex is dirty but only because a lot of other human activities are dirty as well. In other words, pleasure and the mutual communication of and participation in joy, which may count among the more exalted achievements of human sexuality, are precisely the elements which constitute the sinfulness in sexual relations. Aroused desire is the punitive consequence of original sin.<sup>21</sup>

If this is the case, why marry? The purification of marriage becomes a problem. Thomas' general justification is procreation. But what if desire outruns the ends of procreation? This excess of desire over the ends of procreation is what constitutes sin. And this should be controlled by chastity<sup>22</sup> and virginity.<sup>23</sup> The higher way is virginity and this is exalted in the model of the mother of Christ and in the celibate life of the "religious," the nuns, monks and priests.<sup>24</sup> The other solution, chastity, refers to the control of all desires and is recommended to the rest of mankind in marriage. So marriage, it eventually turns out, is good, but it is the lesser of two choices. But since its goodness consists alone in the propagation and preservation of the race, its ideal expression involves an absence of passion. It is in fact a "remedy for desire," a means of controlling passion. Wedlock without sexual intercourse, which is the way in which the marriage of Christ's mother is presented, is really more holy, but wedlock without a desire that exceeds the desire to produce children is acceptable and normal for human beings.

<sup>19</sup> Commentary on I *Cor.* 7, Lectio 1.

<sup>20</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 153, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 153, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 151, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 152, 1c.

<sup>24</sup> *ST*, 2/2, 152, 5c.

Thomas' philosophy of sex then must be said to fail in its attempt to achieve a balanced synthesis of man's sexual interests. In the final analysis the Aristotelian and Christian synthesis breaks in half. On the one hand the exaltation of sexless life as a higher vocation and on the other the justification of sexual existence by appeals to principles which are not distinctively human, but which apply to animal sexuality just as well, leave us with another failure on the part of philosophy to deal with sexuality as a human question. Unintentionally, no doubt, Thomas has succeeded in avoiding human sexuality as a philosophical problem. The carrying out of his ideal of the absence of sexual desire was never seriously considered as a program for men, but in Victorian medical treatises it was actually adopted for a time as a true picture of female life, as Steven Marcus in his study of Victorian sex points out.<sup>25</sup>

The mention of the Virgin Mary suggests another set of sexual mythologies which are based on the notion of the sacredness of sex. Christian cultures do not provide satisfactory examples of a full-blown divinization of sex. Venus cannot make her appearance as a goddess in a monotheistic context but Christianity has allowed or developed certain surrogates for the sex goddess which are, it is quite significant, always negative in their sexuality. The cult of the Virgin Mary, the woman who has renounced sex, is the official negative image of sex sponsored by Western culture, but there are unofficial versions of divine sexuality in its negative form, including erotic mysticism which has already been mentioned, and above all the tradition of courtly love which developed in the high middle ages. The point of the love ideal celebrated by the troubadours is man's abstention from sexual expression; the lady whose qualities were celebrated in their songs, should she be actually possessed sexually, would no longer be a lady. Even the goddess of reason enthroned in the French Revolution is not so revolutionary that she violates the canons of monotheism with respect to the divinization of sex: the very point of her supreme status is its sexlessness—this is a goddess of cold, objective, scientific reason, the goddess of the philosopher.

But if the divinization of sex must be carefully concealed in

<sup>25</sup> *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York, Basic Books, 1964, reprinted 1966), p. 31.

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a Christian culture, this is not the case in other cultures. Holy sex has been around for a long time. The earliest known female figure was sculptured twenty thousand years ago, according to the anthropologists, probably for religious or magical purposes. We don't know exactly what was in that sculptor's mind but the supposition is that for him the energies of reality were somehow sexual and could be induced or manipulated by sympathetic images to put at the disposal of the man or his tribe the sexual powers so represented. The earliest identifiable philosophy of divine sexuality is found in Hindu literature, in the Brahmanas and Upanishads. Hindu religious cults and philosophies manifest prodigious variety but the theme of the divinity of sex is a constant in spite of its many forms. In these early versions of this philosophy sex is considered divine in the sense that Brahman, the source of all the multiplicity of the universe, is the source of the original duality which was male and female and which in turn generated sexually everything that exists. But most important this sexual activity on the human level is a means of participation in the god's creation of things (in the cult of Shiva the male partner becomes Shiva in the act of sexual intercourse), in the divine joy which is an attribute of the eternity of divine life, and in liberation or salvation from the disunited state of earthly existence. In the *Maithuna* or embrace the couple symbolize the merging of the two opposite principles of the universe in a timeless union and in the Kaula philosophical cult of Matsyendranatha participation and meditation on this sexual embrace is a way of tapping the reservoir of eternal life. As an example, the image of Shiva-Shakti, the sexual union of the god with his consort, is seen as a perfect representation of the divine.

Who is it whose semen was offered in sacrifice in the beginning of the world into the mouth of Fire, of Agni, the teacher of the gods and the antigods? Is the golden mountain made of any other semen? Who else in the world goes naked, and who can sublimate his sex power? Who made of his beloved the half of his own self and who could not be conquered by the Bodiless? Rudra, the God of gods, creates and therefore destroys, O king of heaven! See how the world bears everywhere the signature of the *linga*

and the *yoni*. You know also that the changing three worlds sprang forth from the semen poured out by the *linga* during the act of love. All the gods, the Creator (Brahma), the king-of-heaven (Indra), the lord-of-fire (Agni), the Pervader (Visnu), the genii and the powerful demons whose desires are never satisfied, all acknowledge that nothing exists beyond the Giver-of-Joy (Sankara)... This Ruler of the Worlds is the cause of causes. We never heard that the phallus of any other being was worshiped by the gods. Who is more desired than he whose *linga* is ever worshiped by Brahma, Visnu, and all the gods and thyself.<sup>26</sup>

Now this is a philosophy of sex. Western thinking on the subject of sexual philosophy is nowhere as clear or explicit about its principles. But this is not human sex. It is sex which has been deified.

Non-biblical Near-Eastern and European myths contain the same sexual principles and the West shows the same sexual backgrounds, but, with the beginning of philosophy in the West, these myths are desexualized at the same time that they are made more explicitly scientific or metaphysical. The mystery religions such as the Dionysian cult—one thinks of the paintings of the “Villa of the Mysteries” at Pompeii—are sectarian and communal revivals of the sexual principles which rationalism had unsexed when it demythologized the old Hellenistic ideologies; the principle of identification with the god through certain sexual rites is the same found so clearly rationalized in Hindu thought. But in the Hellenistic mysteries we have only the cult, no philosophy.

Curiously, in what is apparently the only case in the West of the development of a philosophy of the holiness of sex, that of the Marquis de Sade, we have an instance of holiness in reverse, an attempt to sacralize sex in the only way perhaps it can be deified in a Christian culture, that is, to satanize it. De Sade’s philosophy is an effort to understand a parody of Christian sexuality; it is the deification of sex in reverse. As de Sade expresses it in *La Nouvelle Justine*, “Yes, I hold nature in abhorrence; and this is because I am only too well aware that I

<sup>26</sup> *Mahabharata*, Anusasana parvan, 14. 211-232.

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detest it. Apprised of its horrible secrets, I have taken a kind of pleasure in copying its dark wickedness.”<sup>27</sup>

Imperialistic sex, in our own day the affluent consumer sex, is the reduction of sex to egoistic aggression. This aggression may be unrefined or highly refined. It was treated as a quite refined game by the Roman poet Ovid, who catalogues all the tricks for putting the “object of my affections” at my disposal. It remained for the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer to provide the metaphysical underpinnings for what was otherwise a dalliance, a sort of game. Schopenhauer did not author the *Playboy Philosophy* but his type of reasoning provides a rationale for it.

The most important principle in Schopenhauer’s philosophy is the distinction he draws between the conscious and the unconscious life of man, a distinction which, it will be obvious, anticipates much in Freud. In matters of sex as in other affairs, the conscious life of man consists of a series of delusions about the real motivations for our actions. In other words, to preserve the equilibrium of our egos, to prevent shame, humiliation and embarrassment, and for a host of other considerations, our conscious minds concoct all sorts of reasons to conceal the real reasons for our actions, which are unconscious instincts. And so in sexual matters, nature conceals her true ends. To know this vast, prodigious realm of the unconscious is to provide a new understanding and judgment of the realities behind the familiar facade of traditional morality, jurisprudence and social arrangements. Philosophy can grasp some of the dimensions of this unconscious nature.

The aim of nature in sex is procreation, pure and simple. This means that the two basic instincts of the human race are survival and procreation.

Up to this point Schopenhauer seems on the way to Freud. However, he added to this analysis of the unconscious several other principles which he claimed also lay in the unconscious. One of these principles, the war between the sexes, is not only a perennial joke which the poets have located in almost every culture, but seems to be a natural extrapolation from a map of the unconscious: sex is nature’s cunning trick for preserving

<sup>27</sup> *La Nouvelle Justine, ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, chapter 11, “Histoire de Jerome” (*Œuvres complètes du Marquis de Sade*, Paris, Au Circle du livre précieux, 1963, tome VII, p. 47).

the race; each sex plays the trick, but in different ways; the result is a sort of contest in which anything is fair since it is done at the promptings of nature. The other principle is the "natural polygamy" of man and the "natural monogamy" of woman which Schopenhauer also bases upon instincts. One can readily see the implications of stockpiling such a selection of principles. The natural skirmishing between the sexes is heightened by the fact that each sex is attempting to attain a different—in fact opposite—state of affairs, and the tactics of every participant can be justified by an appeal to irrational, ultimate instincts! Each man is trying to possess as many women as suits him and each woman is trying to trick each man into an unsought bondage. To use the opposite sex and at the same time to frustrate his or her intentions is to act faithfully in accordance with one's own true nature.<sup>28</sup>

In what sense is this a philosophy of human sexuality? Its major principle, the procreation of the species, is not distinctively human. Its special Schopenhauerian twist is a conception not authentically sexual, if sexuality is a mutual relationship. It is best described as a concept of monosexuality, in which each participant is furnished with an imperialistic rationale for the justification of his impulses.

We come now to Freud. Surely with Freud we have reached a truly human sexual philosophy? It is true for many that what Pope said of Newton with respect to physics, the twentieth century can say of Freud with respect to sex. To paraphrase Alexander Pope:

Sex and the laws of sex lay hid in night  
God said, Let Freud be! and all was light.

If this sort of sentiment is true it applies to Freud as a scientist not as a philosopher. His efforts to collect and organize empirical data on the sexual life of the psyche and his development of methods of therapy for psychological problems make him a pioneer in a new science, but his interpretation of the implications of his findings for various realms of culture and his

<sup>28</sup> *The World as Will and Representation* (translated by E. F. J. Payne; The Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), Vol. II, "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love," pp. 531-567.



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construction of a picture of man that corresponds to his sexual existence are hardly to be credited as original. Moreover, there is almost no evidence in his work of a critique of his methodology and little more than a naive awareness of the principles which constitute the structure of his work. In addition to these, are other reasons why we cannot speak of a philosophy of sex, even with Freud, surprising as this may seem. These reasons have to do with an ambiguity in his position similar to the one that dogged Thomas Aquinas.

The problem in brief is that Freud's procedure for the investigation of man's sexual existence presupposes investigators who are non-sexual on the one hand, and on the other that Freud's definition of man, concealed in his investigations, produces the conclusion that man is less sexual the more human he becomes. If these two philosophical positions are submitted to examination, it should become apparent that the first is hardly any evidence of philosophical homework, and the second is not particularly original.

The first point, a naive indifference to the effect of sexuality on investigation in conjunction with a total preoccupation with the "objective" investigation of sex, has recently been identified as a deficiency through biographical and ideological studies of Freud himself by such as David Bakan<sup>29</sup> and David McClelland<sup>30</sup> and the same interest in the total personality of the investigator, including his sexuality, has manifested itself in the rethinking of the role of the psychoanalyst, for example.

The second position, the picture of man that underlies and not surprisingly emerges from Freud's work, is little more than Thomas Hobbes with case studies. The theme of the conflict between man's animal background and his new human cultural state is a very old one. In Hobbes it was expressed as the problem of the relation of man in a state of nature to man in a state of society. Freud's discussion of culture leaves no doubt that he means to refer to man's distinctly human existence

<sup>29</sup> *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Princeton, Van Nostrand, 1958).

<sup>30</sup> *Psychoanalysis and Religious Mysticism* (Wallingford, Pa., Pendle Hill, 1959).

which is to be distinguished from a pre-human state of nature. Now the problem arises from the carrying over of the basically animal drives into human society. These animal drives are Schopenhauer's instincts of self-preservation and procreation, but, to these basic egoistic and libidinal drives, Freud adds another derived from Hobbes, the instinct for aggression. In addition, he adopts Hobbes' theory of the rise of human existence: man as a distinct form of existence with a conscience, a morality, a sense of guilt, a language, and a society, began with a compact with his fellow man to hand over powers of instinct repression and control to a group. The conflict between sex and humanity began at that moment.<sup>31</sup> Freud's major innovation, and that for which he is known as a psychologist, is the exploration of how this societal repression operates in the individual psyche.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the part of Freud's work that is original, the scientific part, is hardly philosophical and the philosophical part is hardly original. Freud's sexual science is non-sexual and his concept of sexuality is a negative sexuality. In the final analysis, certainly not at first glance, this is emasculated man and not a philosophy of human sexuality.

What are the possibilities for a philosophy of human sexuality? Evidence is growing that such a philosophy can emerge and that it can elucidate the distinctively human nature of our sexuality, the positive significance of sex for an understanding of the mysteries of culture and our common life, and the influence of our sexual existence on our conceptual and spiritual positions. This will not be science in the old sense, just as psychiatric therapists and psychoanalysts are not practicing science in the old sense, because sexuality always crucially qualifies objectivity and neutrality. It will mean listening again to many contributors who have been overlooked because we were trapped by our ignorance. A hundred years before Freud, Hamann pointed out that even our concepts, including those by which we describe and interpret sexuality, were themselves sexual and that sexuality has implications for methodology, including the "scientific" study of sex, and a few years later

<sup>31</sup> See *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

<sup>32</sup> *Standard Edition*, Vol. 17, pp. 143-144.

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Franz von Baader<sup>33</sup> suggested a concept of sex which contained personal and integrative values that transcended those of mere propagation or libidinal instincts. These insights can be recovered. To them can be added phenomenological investigations of contemporaries such as the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And it could happen that philosophy will cease to avoid sex.

<sup>33</sup> Franz X. von Baader (1765-1841). See *Sätze aus der erotischen Philosophie und andere Schriften* (Frankfurt, Insel, 1966) and *Über Liebe, Ehe und Kunst, aus den Schriften, Briefen und Tagebüchern* (Munich, Kösel, 1953).