

Eighteen

SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

Nikolay Milkov

1. Introduction

Sexual experience is one of the most difficult subjects to be studied philosophically. One reason for this is that it has the most private, non-public (intimate), and thus elusive (since difficult to articulate) individuals. Secondly, today we scarcely accept norms anymore in sexuality. Practices that were considered sexual perversions for centuries, homosexuality, for example, are now accepted as normal. This point is an indication of the fact that sexual activity is varied in the extreme. Usually, people have different sexual experiences, with different partners (if any), accompanied by different impulses, hopes, beliefs and dreams. Apparently, there are different kinds of sex. Be this as it may, my investigation endorses the assumption that sexual experience has one structure, which it aims to disclose. To achieve this objective, I shall follow, what can be called, an “ontological” approach. The philosopher that I shall loosely follow in this effort is Wittgenstein.

2. Points of Departure

Perhaps the most well-known passages on philosophy of sex are to be found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1989, pp. 388–392). Since the book was published, it has influenced much of what has been written on the subject. In this essay, however, I am going to show that this influence has often led to one-sided insights. This is, firstly, because it offers a study of intentions—an examination of desire, but not of sexual experience proper. Secondly, it is a study of intersubjectivity of the sexual action, or of the relationship between the partners involved in it, not an analysis of the individual mind and body in sex. In the literature, this approach was called the “intentionalist” account. Besides Sartre, its most arduous defender was Roger Scruton (1986).

An investigation of sexual experience Sartrean in spirit, although analytical in style, was also suggested by Thomas Nagel. This author was a devoted intentionalist when he insisted, “physical contact and intercourse are natural extensions of [a] . . . complicated visual exchange.” It involves a desire that one’s partner be aroused by the recognition of one’s desire that he or she be aroused (1979, p. 46).

In this essay, we shall also oppose the so-called plain sex view, first advanced by Alan Goldman, which is conventionally considered a viable alter-

native to the intentionalist approach. According to the former, “sexual desire is (above all) desire for contact with another person’s body and for the pleasure with such contact produces: sexual activity is activity which such contact produces” (1977, p. 268).

Apparently, the roots of the plain sex view lie in the ancient conception that sexual activity is simply an “unimpeded . . . activity of our natural state” (Aristotle, *NE.*, 1153a15) which is driven by pleasure and other appetites. In other words, sexual actions are nothing but an unrestrained freeing of a certain innate ability of the person. I would like to note, however, that the cause of such a freeing of the sexual inborn abilities can be different: (1) the person in front of me—and with it we turn back to Sartre; (2) physical friction; (3) physiological filling of the genitals with blood. This point shows that the plain sex view is only one of many possible ways to philosophically reflect on sex.

Be this as it may, I am not willing to deny that sexual activity can be profitably seen as a consuming of something: of a stream of bodily contacts. In this sense, this kind of activity is similar to drinking, or eating. In contrast to all gastronomical types of consuming, however, sexual consuming is characteristically a joint action: the sexual agent is consuming the movement of her partner—with the help of her action. In that latter sense, sexual activity is similar to corporal fights: to wrestling, boxing, etc. In both cases we “process”, or operate on persons. However, whereas the purpose of the sexual activity is to produce in the partner pleasure, the aim of the bodily fight is to harm the adversary.

3. My Approach

I have already said that in this study, I shall suggest an alternative approach to studying sexual experience. Above all, I aim at describing the contents of the sexual experience and its dynamic: its creation, permutations, the interrelation of its parts, etc. My investigation is objective in the sense that it is anti-psychological. At the same time, being a study in ontology of mind and bodily movements during sexual action, it also opposes the plain sex view.

My method will be that of the phenomenological reduction in the sense that in this investigation, the subject is “put in brackets.” In more concrete terms, I shall not be interested in the sexual partner; neither in sexual psychology nor in “‘sexual arousal,’ ‘sexual excitement,’ and ‘feeling sexy’ . . . ‘sexual desire’ and ‘sexual interest’” (Taylor, 1968, p. 92). Sexual sensations are interesting for us above all as mental contents, not as feelings. These limitations are, of course, only made for theoretical purposes and do not mean that we in principle deny, or minimize, their importance in sexual experience.

The next preliminary remark is that we do not necessarily study the experience in one whole sexual action. Rather, as a rule, we carry out a dissection of the sexual action, investigating only some successive moments in it, in an effort to identify the phenomena (the individuals) of this experience.

These methodological restrictions reveal our investigation as “solipsistic.” It assumes that we are just a series of experiences, and amongst them is the sexual experience. Its study investigates, among other things, what happens in a single mind and body when it has such an experience.

Philosophical literature on sexual experience is rather poor. The paper of Roger Taylor on “Sexual Experiences” is one of the few that discuss this topic. This author claims that “the occurrence of sexual sensation must fit into a framework of behavior or desires, which seek their continuation or intensification.” We strive to “bring them to a conclusion as one might an itch” (1968, p. 92). Much before Taylor, Aristotle had noted, “by pleasure of friction, the sensations extend as it were over the whole body” (*Problemata*, 878b6–7; Aristotle, 1936–1937). In this paper, I try to elucidate the mechanism of mind and body functioning during the sexual act more comprehensively.

4. Ontology of Sexual Experience

The first thing to be noted is that sexual experience is an experience of an activity—it is an activity-experience. The latter was first investigated by William James who has noted, “the experienter . . . feels the tendency, the obstacle, the will, the strain, the triumph, or the passive giving up, just as he feels the time, the space, etc.” (1976, p. 84).

Since I speak of sexual experience dualistically—as a bodily activity, and also as a mental experience—I shall examine its individuals in two subsections. In the first one, dedicated to the ontology of the body, I look at the individuals of sexual action as series of gestures, or movements by sex. In the second, a study in ontology of mind, I shall discuss sexual sense-data. In this dissection, I shall not forget that sexual gestures and sexual sense-data are only two aspects of series of identical individuals. Sexual action and sensation are in a sense one.

A. Gestures

I shall tentatively define the bodily movements (caresses) involved in sexual action as gestures. Their idiosyncrasy as gestures consists in that, usually, they are not made in order to demonstrate, or show, or make something obvious, as it is the case of most of the gestures. Sexual gestures are exercised directly on the body of the partner: they are “immediate gestures.” They are gestural movements, nevertheless, since: (1) They are designed to achieve determinate bodily states, or postures. (2) They are produced spontaneously, and so are different for every single person. (3) Nobody, not even ourselves, can predict how the gestures of our forthcoming sexual activity will be formed.

Gestures are opposed to the pictures we produce. In this connection it is to be noted that a world of gestures was introduced by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, after Piero Sraffa convinced him that we do not only

make pictures of states of affairs, as the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1961) claimed we do. We often picture the stimuli received from the external world with the help of gestures. In a sense, gestures are pseudo-pictures. On this point I agree with Sartre who claimed that “the caress is not a simple stroking; it is a shaping.” However, whereas with conventional picturing we make copies (models) of states of affairs, gestures only help us to adapt ourselves to the other “flesh” (Sartre) with the aim of a joint action. What is processed here is our physiology (“natural faculty,” according to Aristotle), and the physiology of the partner.

B. Sense-Data

As I have just noted, *differentia specifica* of the bodily individuals of sexual experience is that they are non-pictorial. They are to be found on the “vertical (tactile, or kinesthetic) axis” of our mind, immediately connected with our body. The other, mind aspect of the gestures as sexual individuals are the sexual sense-data. It is a historical fact that, after G. E. Moore introduced this term “sense-data” in 1909, philosophers were interested almost exclusively on optical sense-data, first of all, in “patches of color.” All this had appalling theoretical effects in the mainstream (or analytic) philosophy, making it one-sided. What are sexual sense-data? Here is a description of them given by D. H. Lawrence:

[This] awoke in her new strange thrills rippling inside her, rippling, rippling, like a flapping overlapping of soft flames, soft as feathers, running to points of brilliance, exquisite, exquisite, and melting her all molten inside. It was like bells, rippling up and up to a culmination (1993, p. 133).

From theoretical point of view, sexual sense-data can be presented as the result of series of pressures that affect our mind in the form of tactile perceptions. In this connection, we can remember that some philosophers, Democritus is here a good example, claimed that our visual perceptions are based on pressure too. This conception has been called a “printing” theory of perception. It was further developed by Immanuel Kant who accepted that matter “affects” our senses. Introducing the term of “affections” in epistemology, Kant opened the door for including items in the catalogue of sense-data that are also emotionally loaded. Sexual sense-data are typical example of these. Indeed, the term “affection” means both “to act upon physically”, and “to move the feelings of.” Sexual sense-data, in particular, are result of elements of the outer world—the bodily movements of the partners in sex—“affecting” their senses.

I shall end this section on the ontology of sexual experience, with the remark that sexual individuals are only contingently connected with sexual phantasms. In other words, the two are qualitatively different. This would be not surprising since, whereas the “material” of sexual phantasms comes from

the practical world, the individuals of sexual experience pertain to the “brute” world of kinesthetic ontology. Be this as it may, sexual phantasms can have an important function in sexual arousal—they can serve as “warming ups,” as vehicles that lift us up onto the sexual level of our mental, and bodily, life. (But, as I have already noted in §2, I can also warm up in other ways: through friction, for example.) In the moment of the very action they, however, are felt to be inseparable.

5. Sexual Rationality

The sexual experience is rather different from other cases of exercising natural state such as swallowing or respiration. Indeed, it is conscious, not automatic, and thus comprises several mental forms: not only intentionality but also reasoning, planning, etc. In this respect, it is similar to other exercises of corporal ability, for example, sport, or smoking.

Sartre claimed that sexual act “is an attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothing and to make it exist as pure flesh” (1989, p. 389). Apparently, this conception presents sexual act as reasonless. David Hume, in his turn, termed the pleasures resulting from natural ability actions “direct passions.” They arise on the level of impressions only, whereas the “indirect passions” arise on the level of ideas (1969, p. 3 and p. 485). In other words, in the first, we have one-level mental activity, while in the second, two-level. Sexual experience is surely a one-level mental activity.

In contrast to Hume and Sartre, I assert that sexual experience proceeds in acts of reasoning which, however, are exercised in action. This claim can be also supported by the authority of Aristotle, according to whom “the man’s action is . . . the exercise of the soul’s faculties in conformity with rational principle” (*NE.*, 1098a7–8; my translation). G. H. von Wright also had a similar vision. According to this author, the agent is “aiming by his (bodily) behavior at a certain result. We may also speak of the agent’s intending or meaning by his behavior a certain end” (Tuomela, 1982, p. 22).

My claim is that acting sexually, we make (micro) decisions about how to proceed further. This decision making, however, is incorporated into the action itself. It is similar to that exercised when driving a vehicle: a bicycle, or a car. It is a product of the fusion of two elements: (1) the stream of ever new sense-data we receive when we are in motion; (2) the series of our micro-decisions to proceed precisely in one way, not another.

The conclusion we can draw from this conception is that sexual experience is not irrational—it is just passionate. This point supports the belief (defended, for example, by Bertrand Russell) that there is no contradiction between rationality and passion, but between rationality and will. The prevailing common sense and philosophical view that sexual experience lures human beings away from rationality arises since it opposes the rationality of sexual experience to the rationality of public life. Indeed, the sexually-reasoning

person often looks incontinent (*akratic*). Many philosophers today, however, adopt the view, and we join them here, that the incontinent person is not irrational: she has her reasons for this, allegedly, unreasonable action that, indeed, differs from her “global reasons” (see for example, Davidson, 1970).

This position will become clearer if we accept, together with Gilbert Ryle, that thinking is not limited to theorizing only, but also includes intelligent behavior. We can also support this point with Michel Foucault’s claim that “there is no experience which is not a way of thinking” (1985, p. 17). Foucault added on the same page:

“Thought,” understood in this way, is not, then, to be sought only in theoretical formulations such as those of philosophy or science; it can and must be analyzed in every manner of speaking, doing, or behaving, in which the individual appears and acts as subject of learning, as ethical or juridical subject, as subject conscious of himself and others. (Ibid.)

Such is also the subject when experiencing sexually.

I can invigorate the argument of this section if I compare sexual experience with dreaming: the latter is paradigmatically irrational. That is also why I make a clear difference between acting sexually, and criminal acts committed during a sexual action: the law holds us responsible for them. Furthermore, I also classify a particular sexual action as sexual perversion (the criteria for this being quite vague today) because the rationality of the latter differs from the rationality that the “normal” sexual act obeys.

I can summarize the results I have reached in the last two paragraphs (§4.2 and §5) with the claim that sexual experience is reasoning under pressure—“pressure” in two senses: (1) in the sense of tactile effecting of our body; (2) in the sense that it is reasoning at very high speed in which we make our micro-decision how to act further.

6. Sexual Experience as Knowledge

(1) *Sexual knowledge*. When we have a sexual experience, the agent automatically turns the sense-data with which she is affected into meanings, which she processes further. In this way, she turns them into knowledge. In other words, if the sexual sense-data are perceived, we also know their meaning—their “intensity of existence” (a term I shall explain in a moment). Incidentally, this conception coheres with my claim that sexual experience proceeds in acts of reasoning.

My next claim is that sexual experience is a source of paradigmatically new, or synthetic knowledge. This is the case since its sense-data are indefinables. In this, they resemble all other indefinables, for example, the pure color of yellow. Our knowledge of such objects is radically new in a typical way. Moreover, it is a paradigmatic case of *synthetic a posteriori* knowledge,

in the sense that it is a source of a new knowledge that is impossible to deduce *a priori*. Indeed, a virgin cannot know what sexual experience could be. Moreover, even the experienced person rediscovers sexual experience every time when she is engaged in it.

Since Kant, it has been believed that what is problematic in epistemology is the synthetic *a priori* knowledge. The meaning of the synthetic *a posteriori* knowledge was considered to be clear and uniform. In the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.3), however, Wittgenstein had shown that many of what is believed to be empirical, and thus *a posteriori* knowledge is in fact logical and thus *a priori* (1921, p. 137). In analogous way, accepting that sexual experience is typically synthetic *a posteriori* knowledge, I am pointing at the fact that a great part of a *a posteriori* knowledge is not synthetic proper. Here I have in mind, for example, cases of *déjà vu* knowledge by which we somehow already know them.

Furthermore, sexual knowledge has an anti-realistic character in the sense that one element of this kind of knowledge is “inferred” from another one. In this respect, its elements are different from the objects of eating or smoking, which are already available (in the form of cigarette, or cake) before the act of consuming was started.

But how can sexual knowledge be both *a posteriori* and deductive? The answer to this question is to be found in §5 where I specified that sexual reasoning is a product of the fusion of two elements: (I α) the stream of ever new sense-data we receive passively; (II β) the series of our micro-decisions to proceed one precisely way, not another. Seen as a kind of knowledge, sexual experience is an amalgam of new knowledge and series of (practical) inferences.

(2) *Historical Excuse*. That sexual experience is a kind of knowledge can also be supported etymologically. In the Old Testament the word for sex is knowledge (*jāda*). Thus in Genesis (4:1) we read, “Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived, and bore Cain” (see also Genesis 38:26; Judges 21:12). In the New Testament, St. Luke recounts that after Mary was told that she is going to give birth to Jesus, she said to the angel: “[But] how shall this be, seeing I know [*γινώσκω*] not a man?” (Luke, 1:34).

Apparently, the change of the language of sex in the Western culture was connected with the influence of the Islamic tradition. Indeed, in the *Quar’ān* (V,6) the word for sex is “contact,” not knowledge. Obviously, this change went together with preserving the concept of knowledge for language only. Indeed, in contemporary Arabic and Turkish, one knows languages, whereas in all European languages, one speaks languages.

In contrast to European languages, contemporary European philosophy connects knowledge with language only. It adopts the view that we only know sentences; data are perceived. My claim is that the reluctance of the Western philosophers today to accept that sexual experiences can be a kind of knowledge is due to this assumption. Obviously, this attitude is an effect of the influence of the Islamic cultural tradition on European philosophy in the Early Middle Ages.

(3) *Sexual Thoughts*. In a paper on philosophy of sex published recently, I came upon the following story:

When I was a young man I had a friend who for obvious reasons was popularly known as “Johnny Drugs.” One summer, to everyone’s astonishment, Johnny had a brief sexual relationship with a female police officer. He cheerfully told me that his attraction to her was dramatically enhanced by the fact that she was in the police force, to the extent that he found himself repeating the inner mantra “I’m fucking the Police! I’m fucking the Police!” as he was penetrating her (Morgan, 2003, p. 7).

This anecdote reminds us that sexual experience is firmly embedded in ordinary life. In it we meet persons that we like, and others that we find ugly. Sometimes we are sexually aroused by some of them. Moreover, we observe many social taboos—many actions that we want (perhaps, unconsciously) to do but we did not do them because they are forbidden.

Through sexual action, parts of this knowledge surface in the head. Sometimes we know that this activity is prohibited; or that it was exactly it that we wanted to engage in a few days ago, with exactly this person. Now this wish comes true, and exactly this makes it tantalizing.

Seen from a more general perspective, we can easily discern clear ethical dimensions in sexual activity. Acting sexually, we are “processing” persons; and we know this. Furthermore, our performance can be also seen as something of a theatre. Being private (intimate) to the extreme, sexual activity is (usually) at the same time public, the solitary audience being our partner. Indeed, we strive to act well, exactly like being on the stage. This performance presupposes, of course, knowledge exchange.

We have all this in our head while acting sexually, and we connect it with the reasoning during the act, as described in §5.

7. Changing Attitudes

The thoughts we have during sexual action are about objects and facts of the real world. In other words, the *world* we feel in reasoning sexually is the same world we know in our everyday life. This is true in the sense that the sexual thoughts we have in sexual action are composed of the material objects of everyday life, such as bodily positions, persons, etc. (We, for example, try to adjust our position with the aim of feeling most comfortable; or we are just “fucking the police”; etc.) What is different is the *meaning* of the objects in it.

In this, sexual experience is similar to that of the “opium eater,” the mind of whom “does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance,” not in that of space, time and other “objectivities” (Huxley, 1972, p. 14).

Considered from a more general perspective, sexual experience resembles other kinds of contemplation *sub specie aeternitatis*. Here I follow Wittgenstein, according to whom the good work of art sees the single object *sub specie aeternitatis*, the good life sees the world as a limited whole *sub specie aeternitatis*, and the mystical (ecstasy) feels the world *sub specie aeternitatis* (1979, p. 83; 1921, p. 149; Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.45). I should like to add that in sexual experience we perceive a single person *sub specie aeternitatis*. That is how we reach what we have already called “intensity of meaning”; and that is also what constitutes “sexual meanings.”

8. Sex: Happy and Unhappy

At this point I must make the proviso that sexual experience is such form of contemplation only if it is successful (*gelingen*) or “happy.” In this it resembles good art, successful mystical contemplation, a good life, etc. We cannot define such experiences, and so cannot prescribe what a happiness-directed activity is—any definition of it will be tautological. Wittgenstein put this point this way: “The world of the happy is a happy world” (1979, p. 78). It just comes to us, as a datum.

One of the main ideas of Sartre, recently repeated by Roger Scruton, is that there can be no such a thing as a successful sexual act. The reason for this is that the “deep aim” of sexual desire cannot be achieved in principle. In sex, that is, we try to incorporate the partner into our world as another subject in it. However, there is no place for two subjects in one world. As a result, “erotic love, which begins in the idealization of the beloved, turns to a systematic disappointment” (1986, p. 241).

In contrast, I claim that there is such a thing as sex that does not disappoint—in the same way as there is an art, and also other things in ordinary life, which does not disappoint. There is, indeed, a disappointing element in sexual experience, but its source is different from those cited by Sartre and Scruton.

The disappointing element in sexual action is a result of the fact that sexual experience with necessity produces a form of “transcendental illusion.” Indeed, as already noted, acting sexually, we usually feel, or think of quite trivial things. However, we do this *sub specie aeternitatis*: we feel the intensity of their existence. Unfortunately, sooner or later, the sexual act ends: abruptly, exactly like dreams end, in a moment. At this very moment, the intensive positive attitude with which we perceive these trivial things *sub specie aeternitatis* vanishes. Our “sexual thoughts” prove to be evanescent, like dreams are. This experience is rather disappointing.

Obviously, this is the reason why sexual experiences come and go without inducing a long-term trace in the subjects who are experiencing them. The point is that sexual experience simply has no articulate content, or, more precisely, its content is very thin. Sexual memories are mainly memories of movements in moods and agitations of our emotions.

Apparently, this is one of the sources of the belief that, despite being connected with the most intensive sensations, there is something mediocre in the sexual experience and because of this, it does not deserve respect. Many intellectuals defend this view. Thus in an early (Apostolic) paper of G. E. Moore, “Shall we take delight in crushing our roses?” (1894), he argued that lust for intercourse without the intention of propagation “appears to be the greatest evil upon earth.” (Regan, 1986, p. 39).

On the basis of these considerations, the conclusion can be made that, apparently, the virtue of sexual action is to be sought mainly in three directions. First, this is its biological use as a means for the reproduction of the human race. Even most arduous sexual skeptics agree on this point. Second, its practicing is apparently beneficial for our emotional equilibrium—this is a point to which Sigmund Freud first turned attention. Third, it connects people, making the most contentful experience, like romantic love, more durable.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. (1936–1937) *Problems (Problemata)*. Translated by W. S. Hett, et al. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . (1962) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Martin Oswald. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Davidson, Donald. (1970) “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” pp. 21–42. In Donald Davidson. *Essays in Actions and Events*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Foucault, Michel. (1985) *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2. *The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Parthenon Books (First French ed. 1976).
- Goldman, Alan. (1977) “Plain Sex,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, pp. 267–287.
- Hume, David. (1969) *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (First published 1739)
- Huxley, Aldous. (1972) *The Doors of Perception*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- James, William. (1976) “The Experience of Activity,” pp. 79–95. In *The Works of William James*, vol 3. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (First published 1904).
- Lawrence, D. H. (1993) *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (First published 1928/9)
- Lossev, A. F. (1989) “Letters from the Prison,” *Voprosy Filosofii*, no.7, pp. 149–161 (in Russian).
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Morgan, Seiriol. (2003) “Sex in the Head,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 20, pp. 1–16.
- Nagel, Thomas. (1979). “Sexual Perversion,” pp. 39–52. In Thomas Nagel. *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Regan, Tom. (1986) *Bloomsbury’s Prophet: G. E. Moore and the Development of His Moral Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1989) *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel Barnes. London: Routledge. (First French ed. 1943)
- Scruton, Roger. (1986) *Sexual Desire*. New York: Free Press.

- Taylor, Roger. (1968) "Sexual Experiences," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 68, pp. 87–104.
- Tuomela, Raimo. (1982) "Explanation and Action," pp. 15–43. In *Contemporary Philosophy. A New Survey*, vol. 3. Edited by G. Fløistad. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Weininger, Otto (1906) *Sex and Character*. Authorized translation. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. (First German ed. 1903)
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1979) *Notebooks 1914–16*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . (1961) *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wurtzel, Elizabeth. (1994) *Prozac Nation*. New York: Riverhead Books.