

A Phenomenology of Sexual Experiencing

CHRISTOPHER M. AANSTOOS, Ph.D.

Overture

The *Upanishads*, one of the oldest spiritual texts, tell us that the energy that supports all creation manifests as the warmth that arises when we are touched. What is this energy, and how can the touched flesh manifest it? We find it in many occasions: a mother's caress, a friend's hug, even a casual pat on the back. Certainly, one of the most potent is erotic contact. To say so is not to reduce touch to Eros, but to recollect the full significance of our sexuality, to recognize the power of "sex with soul" (Moore, 1998b, p. xiii). How might we realize this joy of complete experiencing? We need an access back to experience, to the lived origins of our subject, from which we can reflect upon the most basic and taken for granted questions: What does it mean to be sexual? What is sexual experiencing? All subsequent work in sexology and sex therapy presupposes these questions, but too often leaps over them while reaching for neurological data by which to explain them.

First Movement: The Need for a New Approach to Sexuality

Sexuality is understood as having an intrinsic relation to embodied experience, but notions of embodiment and experience are typically conceptualized by assumptions that reduce body and experience to the model of objects. This objectivism is rooted in a dualistic philosophical base, identified as Cartesian on account of Descartes' role in promulgating an ontological divide between an "immaterial mind" and a "material world" (of objects, including the body). This centuries-old splitting of mind and body is at core an alienation from and mystification of our own deepest experience of wholeness, from which we are only now beginning to recover. Influenced by the causal thinking of the physical sciences, psychologists typically assumed one side or the other of this split to be the "cause" and the other as the "effect". Cognitive neuroscience achieved a triumphant synthesis through its conception of our embodiment in terms of the computational brain governed by a neurobiological foundation.

The foundationally basic alternative posed by a phenomenological approach to sexuality is rooted in an alternative vision of what we as scholars are called to attain in the face of human phenomena. The contents of the natural sciences

can often be usefully seen as objects lacking any meaningful relationships (a nerve does not feel jealous), and therefore must be explained through an analysis of their place in a chain of mechanistic, extrinsic causation. In contrast, human phenomena are lived by subjects within meaningful, intrinsically involved situations. Since the latter is not reducible to the former without losing its own distinctive meaningfulness, it cannot be fully understood merely by the construction of a hypothetical chain of cause-and-effect designed to *explain* it. Explanations that seek causes (“why is she attracted to him?”), relying on the objective (or *meaningless*) level, do not disclose that which is *meaningful*. That is not their project, and such an accomplishment should not be asked or expected of them. Rather, understanding such human phenomena requires a project whose aim is to *describe* the experienced meaningfulness on its own terms, within its lived context.

In the field of sexology, it is seductive to assume that the “physical” hardware (the brain) must be the “cause” of the “merely experiential” stuff of the psychological realm, but this assumption turns out all too often to be not even good neurobiology. Roger Sperry, a Nobel Laureate neurobiologist, opened a very different way of thinking about the link between brain and experience. He asserted that their relationship was not merely an “upward” causality (from brain to experience), but also a “downward” one—that experience changed brain function, chemistry, and structure (Sperry, 1976, 1987). Other researchers, such as Hurley, Griffin, and Rao (all in Rao, 1993) began to follow up on Sperry’s insight about the significance of this “downward” impact of experience on the brain. Such findings, even more evident today, present a powerful refutation of neurological reductionism. Siegel (2010, pp. 39–42) aptly summarizes evidence showing the enormous extent to which experience molds the neuroplasticity of the brain:

Our attention has...the power to shape our brain’s firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself... Experience can also stimulate neural stem cells to differentiate into wholly new neurons in the brain.... Attention amplifies neuroplasticity by stimulating the release of neurochemicals that enhance the structural growth of synaptic linkages among the activated neurons.... Experience creates the repeated neural firing that can lead to gene expression, protein production, and changes in both the genetic regulation of neurons and the structural connections in the brain.

What is most remarkable about the brain is not a capacity to dictate the terms of our experienced world, but to adapt itself to those meanings we are living. This discovery offers a profound paradigm shift, one that is only now beginning to ramify through our scientific understanding of ourselves. Formerly, we assumed the brain had been “hard-wired” in advance of experiencing. A reevaluation of the role of experience and brain is now necessary.

That reconsideration provides for the neurosciences a profoundly important opportunity to demonstrate exactly how the brain attunes itself to the ever-present *experiential* flow of which it is the *neurological* instantiation.

Regrettably, such emergent revisions in the neurosciences have yet to affect the more reductionistic sense of neurobiology that holds sway in the human sciences. For example, Robinson (2009) exemplifies the way that a neurological focus redirects our view away from experience, recasting sexuality as merely epiphenomenal. She writes:

New advances in brain science (especially neuroendocrinology) are revealing that [experiences of our lovers]...have less to do with communication or compatibility than we thought, and more to do with a primitive pathway that runs through our mammalian brains (limbic brains)... In essence our scheming genes have subverted human will to their purposes (p. xvii).

Ah, those infamously “scheming genes” of sociobiological fame appear again as the *deus ex machina* to motivate that otherwise merely mechanical brain. In the general audience literature, experience is often even more explicitly reduced to brain function (Robinson, 2005). While one may bemoan that this is just the old wine of pop sociobiology poured into the shiny new bottles of neuroscience, the popularization of this viewpoint is matched by standard textbooks on human sexuality, which assume essentially the same reductionistic premise, as if it were completely uncontroversial. This reduction of the experience to its “underlying” hardware loses not only any generative impact of experience, but also its vital relation to context, and hence to any relation with meaning.

With the field under the sway of this preconception, the pharmaceutical industry may reap great profits (Moynihan & Mintzes, 2010), but the understanding of sexuality stands bereft of the deepest insights of its own foundations in embodied experiencing. But just what, precisely, gets left out? Nothing less than the experiencing person is obscured! And with that, an ability to comprehend such basic questions as: Is frequent sex good for your health? Or bad? Or neither? Taken out of their experiential context and researched only in terms of biology, the evidence is all too often disconcertingly contradictory, while the meaningfulness of experiencing is all too easily overlooked.

Mechanistic psychology can only comprehend this sort of phenomenon in one of two ways: by reducing it to the neurological (materialism) or to representation (idealism). The problem with the former is the fallacious assumption that the occurrence of an event in an fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) can ever reveal its meaningfulness. Meanwhile, the problem for the latter is how to account for its bodily felt appearance. If it is only really a representation of a disembodied consciousness, why the indirection of “looping”

the representation through the body? And there is the dilemma of how to account for the forgetting of having done so.

More clearly than other experiences, such as the habit of picking up one's pen, sexual arousal reveals a primordial constituting or flow of meaning coming into existence. As Langer (1989) says, sexual desire is an experience:

...in which something becomes significant to the extent that it attracts our body in a movement towards it, and our body comes into existence as a body in this very movement, so that the significance of the thing and that of the body come into existence together and imply one another (p. 50).

One way to realize the power of sexuality to reveal the intertwined nature of lived body/lived world is to remember the intimately personal significance of sexual arousal, to remember that one's experience is always one's own. For example, we can think of the commonplace way that we may be attracted to a person to whom another is not likewise attracted. As a 13-year-old, I was drawn to a girl whom I saw as very beautiful. My friend, on the other hand, recoiled from her, saying that she had a "frog face." Though I could see what he meant, to me it was still an incredibly beautiful frog face. Later in life, I again found myself in love with a woman whom I regarded as the most beautiful woman I had ever known. Friends would tell me, "She's not *that* beautiful" to which I could only reply, "She is to me." From these examples, we see that we cannot conceive of sexual appeal to be some objective *thing*, already constituted.

Of course, contemporary neuroscience purports to be able to explain sexual attraction by turning to assumptions from evolutionary psychology (such as a desirable waist-to-hip ratio signaling fertility). But such explanations, relying on "types" outside of a personal context rather than individuals encountered within personal situations, still beg the question "Why *this* woman?"—rather than another of similar type? The other's sexuality presences itself *for me*—"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," as they say. However, such beauty is not, strictly speaking, *in my eye*, but *there*, on the face of my love. It is not *in* some *interior* mental space that I encounter such an appeal, after all, but *there*, *in the other*. I find myself being drawn *there*, to this other person, not to some interior representation. It is *for me*, but it is not my creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is my way of encountering an appeal to my incarnate subjectivity in the other. Sexual appeal is thus inseparable from the body of the other whom I find appealing, but it is not reducible to objective physicality, because this woman appeals to me, but not to you, or even to me today, but not yesterday. Or just right now, when she laughed in just that lightly twinkling way, with that understated, checked upcurving of her lip revealing an ironic playful depth of self-awareness as a veritable biography.

To reduce sexual attraction to mechanistic theorizing fails to comprehend anything of this implicitly given but powerfully lived significance. To explain it as the result of the impingement of material sensation, a chemical discharge

in the brain, or as the result of the imposition of representations by immaterial consciousness, is to overlook the only place such appeal resides: in the engaged, embodied experience.

Second Movement: A Phenomenological Alternative

Phenomenological Method

Phenomenology is the bold project to eschew conceptualization of “the real” for description of whatever presents itself as real in our deepest experience. It is the discipline that makes the implicit meanings of lived experience explicit through description. First formulated by Edmund Husserl (1937/1970) in the early decades of the 20th century, phenomenology has gone through much subsequent development and is increasingly appropriated now as a methodology for the various disciplines of the human sciences. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) is most helpful to this examination of the embodiment of sexuality. Other phenomenologists also helpful include Levin (1985) on *The Body’s Recollection of Being*, Lingis (1985) on *Libido*, Dillon on “sex and objectification” (1998) and on “sexlove” (2001), and Steeves (2004) on imagination and embodiment.

Circumscribing the Phenomenon of Sexuality

In contrast to the dualistic approaches, a phenomenology of sexuality begins with a fidelity to the irreducible primacy of lived experience. This inquiry begins by circumscribing the phenomenon of sexuality with descriptions of specific experiences. As I consider my own, the following examples may help to sensitize us to its parameters:

As a very young boy, of five or six, I savored going into the coat closet in the front hallway, closing the door behind me, and, there in the dark, stroking my mother’s fur coat. It felt so good to touch it, to caress its sublime softness, slowly, over and over, much like I later tingled while feeling my lover’s furry hair between my fingers—or when caressing my cat, slowly, lusciously, drawing my fingers down the length of the soft fur of her belly, sharing with her the mutual bliss of such sensuous contact.

Once, when I was nine, I sobbed uncontrollably in the middle of getting my hair cut. To have my head touched just felt so good. It gave me such a deep sense of wholeness, wellness, and at-homeness that I cried from the intense sensuous pleasure of that moment. The barber, confused, asked what was wrong. But I, only a nine-year-old boy, had no words with which to describe my experience, nor any way to explain the ecstasy of that touch.

More recently, I licked and nibbled and sucked my lover's armpit, shivering with arousal at such scintillating contact. The erotic allure of that sensitive, interior space, coming forth from hiddenness—veritably a vaginal armpit.

But what was it about the irresistible softness of fur? Or about the overwhelmingly satisfying sense of having one's scalp gently massaged? And what is it about her armpit, after all, that made licking it an arousing rather than disgusting experience? Or about the erotic appeal of any bodily orifice? We would do well to remember the bewilderment we felt in early adolescence when we heard about the details of "French kissing"—and our amazed realization that people actually found it satisfying to have another person's tongue inside of their own mouths. What is this erotic charge, so unmistakably palpable in a given situation, yet so elusive, even paradoxical, to conceptualize objectively? It does us no good to seek answers in the realm of the "epidermal" or the "neurotransmitter", for these explanations still beg the questions of experienced meaning that lie at the heart of "Why this flesh, rather than that?"

If we return to our examples, we will find that it is not the body conceived as an object that is the basis of such meanings. Concealed by this conception of the body as an object lurks the body as we live it in our immediate experience. Armpits evoke the interiority of vaginas not in objectified bodies, but in experienced ones. An erogenous zone is not a place in objectified space, but an emplacement of lived experience. Or, as Moore (1998b) depicted it, the body is "an erotic landscape...a mythology...a mystical body...always available for poetic reading...thick with stories, told and untold, already explored and yet to be discovered" (pp. 19–20). To apprehend this body of imagination and meaning, we need a phenomenological guide.

Phenomenology of Embodied Existence

Through the body, we embody a network of lived relations, with other people and the world; this intertwining nexus can be described as a "bodying forth" (Aanstoos, 1991). That depiction of embodied experiencing can also help us to grasp sexuality better. As with any phenomenology, it begins with a suspension of the traditional object-centered metaphysics of the body and instead takes as phenomena whatever bodily experience reveals itself. Rather than vitiating that experienced givenness by reducing it to conceptual categories extrinsic to experience, we attend faithfully to what presents itself, taking it precisely *as* it presents itself. We learn to look with appreciation, wonder, awe, upon our actually lived bodily experience.

That discernment begins when we cease conceptualizing the body as an encapsulated object. We do not deny the possibility of viewing the body as an object. Indeed, such an impersonal viewpoint—which discloses the body as a mass of tissue, blood, organs, and neuronal networks—is the necessary

underpinning of the surgical attitude. The fact that the body lends itself to both first-person and third-person viewpoints is of great significance to an understanding of its ontology. But we cannot understand the first-person experience of one's own body by reducing it to a third-person perspective, because the body is not only the *object* of perception, but the *subject* of perception as well (Husserl, 1937/1970, pp. 178–180; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, 1968; Sartre, 1943/1956). Husserl (pp. 211–212) made a key distinction, in his native German, between *Körper* and *Leib*. The former word refers to the body in the sense of “the physical body” (as in that of a corpse), whereas the latter rather means the experienced or “lived” body. Embodiment, as lived experience, is a movement of the heart, reaching out to touch, to embrace—as ecstasy. To describe the body of our experience as *ecstatic* is to remember the etymological meaning of ecstasy: *ex-stasis*, to stand beyond, or to place beyond. It is also to assert the body's existential character as disclosiveness, as openness onto a world. That is to say, the body reveals, through its openness, the very meaning of being human: That as human beings, we *are* this openness, that is our being to be, when we are most fully human.

Our embodiment manifests its openness across the most diverse events. The ecstatic as a “placing beyond” is, after all, manifested in both orgasm and panic—and so many variations in between. We may feel a “gut reaction”. Or a “broken heart”, “cold feet”, a “loss of face”. We may feel the “chill in the air”. Or be twinkled by the twinkle in the other's eyes, or struck by the betrayal in the other's voice. Or we may burst into giggles. Or goose pimples. Or ulcers. Or awe, as I felt when my 5-year-old daughter described the tooth fairy as “wings of love.”

Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes this openness of the body, and how it forms our deepest relational intertwining with the flesh of the world. This shared “flesh” is also evoked by William Roll's (personal communication, 1996) use of the term *skinship* to depict our relations with each other. The body has “carnal knowledge” of the flesh of the world. “All sense perception involves something like a carnal embrace” (Lingis, 1985, p. 52). In the sense that “our flesh lines and envelops all the visible and tangible things which nonetheless surround it, the world and I are within one another” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 123). Therefore, “Every perception is a...communion...the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 320). Lingis (1985) amplifies this sense of intercourse by noting, “Perception is an inscription of a dynamic version of the outside within and a reflection of oneself on the outside” (p. 51). This analysis is most evident with regard to sexuality. For example, “To see someone sprawled on the bed as seductive is to feel, forming within oneself, the movements of taking him or her. The other is structured perceptibly as a surface destined for kisses and embraces, the exterior relief of one's inward lines of feeling” (Lingis, 1985, p. 51). This ecstatic body is thus a “body of love” (Brown, 1966), a “movement of sympathy” (Levin, 1988, p. 298).

Body and world are distinguishable, certainly, but not separable. Far from being dualistic, the body–world boundary is a permeable one, permitting of unceasing interpenetrability. Its porousness is what allows for the commingling of each with the other. We can caress each other, but the caress that gives the other pleasure also pleasures me as well. There is a “reversibility” between one’s own body and the other, exemplified most keenly by the way that we must be “touchable” in order to be “touchers” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). This profound understanding of the nonduality of embodied consciousness requires more explication than is possible here. Cohen (1984, p. 330) illustrated this reversibility thesis with the metaphor of a Mobius strip:

Insides turn into outsides and vice versa. At best these discriminations are provisional, relative.... Subject and object are not two opposed domains to be somehow united, they are both aspects of the same flesh, the flesh seeing itself, turned upon itself, overlapping itself, folded upon itself, reversible.

Similarly, Cataldi (1993) interprets Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the Flesh by indicating that his reversibility thesis reveals the Flesh as a medium of “exchange” (pp. 68–69) that “debororders” the body–world boundary (p. 110). Cataldi notes that this “debordering” is especially evident in emotional experience, and adds:

In the deepest of our emotional experiences...it is difficult or impossible to tell the “inside” and the “outside” apart from each other. Because they may “become” each other and “reverse,” it is difficult to say “who” is perceiving and “who” is perceived (p. 175).

Third Movement: Phenomenology of Sexuality

To demonstrate this phenomenological understanding of sexuality, some brief concrete analysis will be a useful exemplar. This analysis will be based upon descriptions that I have gathered from interviews with men and women in three countries: the United States, England, and France. For each phase of the analysis, we will begin with some illustrative quotations from these protocols, to develop an explication of their essential structural significance.

Sexuality is like an atmosphere, in the sense that it is an ever-present background—a horizon of existence as such (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Just as we *are*, we *are sexual*. In that sense, we could look for the phenomenon of sexuality in any, and every, experience. Even eating an orange secretes a sexual dimension, and so offers us an aperture onto sexuality. Nevertheless, in most moments this sexual dimension of existence is quite implicit, and the portal offered is quite narrow. It may be most fruitful to look for experiential manifestations of sexuality where this phenomenon shows itself most directly: those occasions when we find our sexual being explicitly solicited. In these moments, we find ourselves spontaneously experiencing “the call of

the erotic”, which will thus be identified as the initiation of the first phase of the explicit experience of sexuality. This first phase will be described here in two aspects: the world as it is experienced, and the experiencing of that world. Sometimes, this first phase will continue with additional adumbrations, which will be included next as the second phase of the experience.

I. The Call and Response

The Experienced: The Sexualized World as the Call of the Erotic

The experience of sexuality begins with an invitation, a solicitation. The other beckons me, calls me out, arouses me, turns me on. This call need not be signaled purposefully, nor do I necessarily grasp it as purposive. Yet its appearance is felt unmistakably, even when the intentions of its sender are highly ambiguous. Some examples from the protocol data include:

The way he looked at me, with such deep eyes, like he could see completely through me. Now I know what it means to feel you're about to swoon. Though it was just a look, it hit me so strongly I actually felt my knees weaken.

Her arm brushed ever so softly against mine as she reached across the table, and it felt so, so...stimulating. It was quick and vague. Did she mean anything by it? I couldn't tell, but I knew for sure its impact on me. There was no question about that.

The solicitation is experienced perceptually, and thus with immediacy. That is to say, the perceived presents itself without mediation by other modalities of consciousness (such as thinking, belief, etc.). It is not a representation, but neither is it a mechanical connection. This call may arise from any sensory modality, for erotic perception is truly polymorphous, as Freud held, or (better) all perception is a cohabiting of sensory modes—a “sensorium commune”, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) pointed out. I may be first solicited visually, say by the curve of a hip, or a lip; or I may first experience the call aurally, by the husky sound in the other's voice, or even the breath. Or, again, it may be that touch that opens me onto the erotic profile.

It was the way he moved that first caught my attention. There was just something so sexy in the way he walked, even in the way he moved his arm as he reached for something.

I just really liked the way his mind worked, what he was saying...it was such a turn-on. I can't really explain it.

To understand this initial description of the phenomenon, let us more deeply reflect upon this experience of being “called” by the erotic profile. The twin questions to pose are: “What calls?” and “Who is so called?” It is in attempting to answer these basic questions that much of psychology goes awry. Neuropsychology reduces the solicitation to brain chemistry, but thereby loses any constitutive role for meaning at all, and so cannot address either the “who” or the “what” in any personal context. Behaviorism reduces the erotic solicitation to a stimulus causally linked to responses conditioned upon the body conceived as a mechanism, an object-body. Cognitivism conceives of the erotic as a representation posited by the intellect, but in so doing dismisses the constitutive role of the bodily felt experience. In none is it possible to account for that palpable immediacy of intrinsic connection described in the previous examples. Because a phenomenology of sexuality begins instead with the notion of the body as body-subject able to take up an existential project, erotic experience is approached as a manifestation of that intertwining of lived-body and lived-world. So, in this first phase, then, it is the other as a lived body who calls, and it is one’s own “body-subject” that is solicited by the call of the erotic. A pure subject cannot be so summoned, nor can a pure object, but only the living unity of embodied subjectivity.

The Experiencing: Responding to the Invitation

The “call of the erotic”, as the solicitation of sexual experiencing, is matched by the ways in which we find ourselves responding. This response is a continuation of the initial perception of the other as erotic. Dillon (1998, p. 101) has rightly pointed out that the distinction between the initiation and the response is not so sharp, and gives as his example the way that a caress reaches out “to adore the flesh intertwined with it.” The evocation and the response are “not sequentially ordered in the manner of a stimulus to deliberation to action; instead there is an unfolding of corporeal intentionality which flows with the surges of the emergent situation in which it is enveloped” (p. 101).

The response can have two sides, or modes: an active and a passive synthesis. Sartre (1943/1956), in his phenomenology of encountering another person, saw perception as a form of appropriation, and in that sense emphasizes the active mode. An example of this mode is the experience of a woman who described herself passionately repeating “I’m so hungry. I want to eat you.” But Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), in his examination of the phenomenology of perception, calls it communion, thereby drawing attention to the passive, or prethematized, synthesis that perception yields. In other words, our response to the call of the erotic can take the form of either grasping or merging.

The perception of the other as sexually appealing is an empathic immersion in the perceived other. In this immersion, there is a sort of appropriation underway. We reach out to the other with any and all of the diverse faculties available for such contact. The person responds with the anticipation

of finding a mutuality of desire in that contact. This intended fulfillment within a communion is the trajectory toward which our anticipatory responsiveness refers. Our arousal, in this sense, arcs in reference toward a futural possibility. This anticipatory orientation is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as an “intentional arc”.

This anticipation reveals the perceived receptivity of the other to contact, and the shared tending toward connection. I experience this susceptibility there, in the other, and likewise in my own body, which flows outward toward that beckoning. Already there, in virtuality, already underway, this responsiveness, that is at once anonymous, and yet intimately personal, and intensely idiosyncratic (Kleinplatz, 1996). It is this virtuality that serves to arouse so intensely our awareness for the anticipated potentiality that we are opening ourselves onto, by our own manifest responsiveness. As Kleinplatz (1996, p. 112) said: “Thus, eroticism involves not only heightened arousal but the awareness of the potential for intense arousal and the choice of entering into it.” A man noted that he felt himself to be like a flower, opening, blossoming with each word, with each caress from his lover. A woman described her delighted arousal brought about by the give and take of leaning into her lover’s chest, and his leaning into her own.

In the second phase, we respond to the call of the erotic by putting ourselves into the situation that beckons us. As Sartre (1943/1956) had shown, the body as lived is the body in situations. For example, we find the smooth back of our lover alluring precisely as we experience its touchability for our caress. Indeed, it is just that caressing contact that we can already sense that draws us so seductively to that smooth back. In other words, beneath the body of mechanistic neuroscience, there is “another” body, as it were, one already operatively engaged in the situation, already being there, already caressing that silky skin, tingling to its curving smoothness, seeing the erotic profiles, and so opens and lights the way for our vision of it as such. “The look...envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 13). It is the body as expression, for, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. 146) notes, “The body is essentially an expressive space.” The body is especially articulate, especially expressive, when it gestures: “Eros is visible in every moving gesture. We greet, we entreat, we give, we receive, we hold, we retreat, we touch and caress.... These are gestures” (Levin, 1983, p. 232). By means of such gestural potentiality, we inhabit our situation, both through our actual movement, and by our insertion of ourselves through the pull of possible movements.

This bodily felt capacity to project ourselves into this virtual, imaginal activity is our initial response to the summons of the erotic. In that sense, we take the position of the lover much as we take the position of the sleeper: by aligning ourselves with its possibilities, in order that they may engage and “gear” us to them. We align ourselves with the erotic body of the other through the power of our own lived body to project oneself into a situation as sexual.

In sexuality, we see with a desire that comprehends a situation, not merely intellectually, but deeper: an intentionality, or meaningfully focused orientation, “which follows the general flow of existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 157). Erotic perception is not a pure inner mind aiming at an outer objective thing. A sight has an erotic significance for me, not when I mentally associate it to pleasure or to zones of my body, nor through some causal, physiological response, but precisely when it speaks to me bodily. The body so addressed is one that has the power to project round itself a sexual world, and so to put itself into an erotic dimension by situating itself there. From such a vantage point, comprehensive conceptions of sexual dysfunctions include the loss of the intentionality and imagination of the lived body engaging a world of meaning. In describing a case of erectile dysfunction, Merleau-Ponty puns that it is the man’s “intentional arc” that has “gone slack.”

Conventional sex therapy’s mistake is the fallacy of reductionism: The notion that experience is reducible to objective neurobiology, that experience is finally a matter of measurable swellings, contractions, and secretions. No attempt to calibrate just the right amount of vasocongestion or lubrication can take the place of what gets neglected: the existential meaning of the situation for the person. How it is, for example, that intercourse with *this* partner is so painful, or how at *this* point in the relationship the woman is anorgasmic? Beneath the measurements, there are matters of desire—an interconnected web of personally lived meanings that both rest upon and constellate a world, and thus can only be addressed by attending to and comprehending this experience on its own terms. To treat these “disorders” without understanding their experiential meanings for the person is to reduce the person to a mechanism, and while it is of course possible to so conceive a person, to do so forecloses the fuller dimension of the situation as a meaningful experience. No objective measurement of penile erection can substitute for understanding the meaning of the situation in which the person, not merely the penis, is always involved in an intricate, experiential web of signification. This web of meanings is embedded in the individual’s own unique biography come to light in a present moment fraught with the spontaneously emergent meanings of the situation. These in turn are distilled with the person’s own desires, motives, anxieties, and possibly relationship dynamics. Together, they produce an erection or lack thereof. It is the sex therapist’s understanding of this constellation that is crucial in appreciating whether his soft penis—or even his full erection—suggests a problem requiring treatment or is evidence of good judgment (Kleinplatz, 2004).

II. Play and Fulfillment

Sexual desire aroused may or may not be taken up in any particular situation. When it is, a further phase of the experience occurs, one of play and fulfillment. Sexuality fulfills itself as a playful conjoining, a merging of energies,

rhythms, bodies, fluids, pulsations, culminating in such an alteration in the field of experience that, at times, it is no longer even clear whose sexual organs are whose, whose movement, whose tingling, whose orgasm. There is a coming in and out not only of body parts, but of consciousnesses as well, in the sense that egoic awareness of separate personhood alternately flits in and out, as the experience of flow immerses one so fully in the immediate sensory field that there is, at times, no leftover self-reflection. Waves of pleasure sweep the lovers up within a flow that has no definite boundaries, not even that of linear temporality. Orgasms may or may not be a constituent, and, when present, they may or may not mark a finality to the experience. Rather, as play, it is rich with a variegated plethora of improvisationally occurring openings, each tantalizingly ripe with fulfilling tactile contours.

A woman describes this open field in the following way:

That night, making love in the cabin, I felt I was having intercourse with the lake, the cliffs, the trees, all embodied there together in my lover, and me all extended fully into that vast space.

A man likewise experienced this pre-subjective deformation of the “ego-other” structure very powerfully:

“Come all the way in,” she said, and I did. Through the portals of her eyes I entered her, fully. She changed shape, her face became bird-like, then even more geometrical. And then that huge, huge expanse. It was as if we, together, were the ends of the universe, encompassing that infinite space, and yet with no distance at all.

In this phase of sexual experiencing, such a transcendence of self can occur that the descriptor *ecstasy* can be taken, quite literally, as a “going beyond”. This self-transcendence is the fulfillment of a complex intermingling of self and other, with variants of reciprocity or mutuality. In a reciprocal partnership, each takes turns tending to the other’s experience. In the mutuality variant, this dialectic is intensified through the reversibility of the flesh (Dillon, 2001, p. 118). Each partner experiences the intensification of their own arousal and fulfillment through the other’s. This deep communion of self and other requires a more profound understanding of intersubjectivity than is traditionally available in objectivistic psychology. Phenomenologists describe this more primordial intersubjective matrix, but perhaps it was Buber who most radically depicted it. As Friedman has summarized Buber’s view, “When two individuals ‘happen’ to each other, there is an essential remainder that reaches out beyond the special sphere of each—the ‘sphere of the between’” (Friedman, 1988, p. 124).

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) related this sense of intersubjectivity to the phenomenon of embodiment. As he said, “Insofar as I have sensory functions...I am *already* in communication with others” (p. 353). This “already” available intersubjectivity, so crucial to this fulfillment phase of sexuality, is particularly evident in the phenomenon of the touch. As noted earlier, to be able to touch, we must have a surface that can be touched; that is, touching requires touch-ability, so that, in touching another, we are also touched by that other’s touch. Merleau-Ponty (1964) speaks of a “postural impregnation” of one person by another, for example, the way that one person’s smile plays across the other’s face. Ultimately, he writes, “I live in the facial expressions of the other, as I feel him living in mine” (p. 146). It is in this way that sexuality “expresses one’s presence to the other subject and becomes the expression of the presence of the other to oneself” and the sexual body becomes “the intermediary of the immediacy and directness of human encounter...of human intersubjectivity” (Kovacs, 1982–1983, p. 212). This fundamental “reversibility” of the flesh opens us to the deepest possibilities of mutuality, with the consequence that, in sexual fulfillment at its best, we enter a realm far removed from any “zero sum game” in which pleasure is some quantity that belongs to either you or me. Instead, as the excitation is mutually engaged, it becomes a truly shared prospect, in which the other’s pleasure is simultaneously my own. As we resonate to each other’s exhilaration, a veritable contagion, a “syncratic sociability” of arousal, builds and we experience an elastic bodily field of intercorporeal bliss.

This capacity of the sexual body-subject to weave back and forth between the personal and the interpersonal is an example of a more generic human capacity to do so. Csikzentmihalyi (1999), who has studied this phenomenon for many years, calls it “the flow experience” or simply “flow.”

Coda

In conclusion, the body and existence are related, just as are expression and that which is expressed: two interdependent terms that together constitute the reality of which, separately, they are only abstract moments. The body is “solidified existence” and existence a “perpetual incarnation”. This understanding of the body as expression helps clarify the existential significance of sexuality, a sense that appears in even its most sedimented forms. In that sense, our existence *is* sexual. Sexuality permeates the human mode of existing; it is neither cause nor symptom, but a dimension. Therefore, we could, with equal precision, say that sexuality is an existential project: a way of pro-jecting our own existence as a living spontaneity.

The failure to appreciate this existential dimension has been the key limitation of the current objectivistic approach to sex therapy. Of course, that tradition deserves credit for having brought sex back from the repressed. But it did so in the same way that psychology restored consciousness from its once-taboo status: by treating it as a mechanism that can be explained by the objectivistic

presuppositions of a natural science. In light of the phenomenology of sexuality, the loss of the appreciation of the meaningfulness of the experience must now be finally realized.

We should note, too briefly, that it is not ultimately to neurophysiology that this reduction brings us, but always to a context, which as such includes an implicit cultural norm of such physiology, a critique well-articulated already by Kleinplatz (2004), Loe (2004), Moynihan and Mintzes (2010), Potts (2008), and the Working Group on a New View of Women's Sexual Problems (2001). As Irvine (2005) pointed out, traditional sex therapy falsely universalizes a set of historical and social relations. Numerous examples, from the so-called disorder of coital anorgasmia to problems of "sexual addiction" and "hypoactive sexual desire disorder" tellingly demonstrate the implicit cultural norms involved in such allegedly medical diagnoses.

Once we return sexuality to its embeddedness within its cultural context, phenomenology shows us that we must go all the way and understand its ultimate inherence in its full lived (i.e., personally meaningful) experience. To understand this intentionality, whereby the body subjectively projects itself within a meaningful world, we must understand how a person participates simultaneously as a body *and* as a subject in constituting a situation as erotic. Only then can we take seriously the situated *meanings* of desire, not merely the length of time to erection or to orgasm. The original wave of sex researchers (especially Masters and Johnson) established the legitimacy of the field by constructing it on the seemingly solid edifice of measurable, physiological responses. We must now grasp that the current understanding of human sexual phenomena in terms of neuroscience and physiological substrata carries with it a correlative cost: the neglect, indeed the concealment, of our lived experience. The physiology of a wink and a blink, after all, may be the same, but the meaning of the former is certainly lost if it is conceived in terms of the latter. Objective data reveal a "third person" perspective, but they do not, and cannot, substitute for the "first person" perspectives of the experiencing persons themselves. For it is only there that what matters for this individual is revealed.

Thus, sex therapy's own success presupposes our concretely lived experience. Rather than blindly depending on that stratum, the field can be guided by a phenomenological explication of it. Our task should be to welcome sex therapy back to its own taken-for-granted origins in lived experience, just as sex itself welcomes us back to that primordial wholeness. In sex we "come" to come home to ourselves, "back into our world from our mental outposts" (Moore, 1998a, pp. 26–27), home to our own most, unmediated, im-mediate sensory being.

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