

Modern Attitudes Toward Sex

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1961

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Sexual attitudes, like other attitudes, generally derive from unspoken and often unconscious premises. Creative thought, which is always articulate and precise, results from frustration: a man sees that a problem must be solved and he creates new thoughts in solving it. But the overwhelming preponderance of human „thought“ is not of this purposive, articulate, and creative kind. Most of what we consider our mental activity consists of sub-articulate, half-conscious semantic reflexes-reactions to key words as the situation invokes these words in our minds.

The Judeo-Christian Sexual Dogma

For example, our mental reaction to sex — our so-called „philosophy“ of sex — is, in most cases, a set of neuropsychological reactions to a few very simple „poetic metaphors.“ The particular metaphor that has had the strongest influence on Occidental civilization and that underlies traditional Judeo-Christian sexual dogma is that sex is „dirty.“ Sexuality is a kind of besmirching of oneself. Sexual activity is filthy. Sexual functions are like excremental functions—foul, disgusting, embarrassing, not „nice,“ etc.

We speak of this as a *simple poetic metaphor* because it can be analyzed as a literary critic analyzes a line of verse. A metaphor is the implicit identification of two different factors. Simile says, „The ship is like a plow.“ Metaphor, less obvious and therefore more effective, insinuates the identification without stating it openly: „The ship *plows* the waves.“ When an identification is not put forth as an explicit proposition we are less likely to challenge it. When we are told that the ship is like a plow, we are apt to ask, „When? how? in what way?“ When we are told that the ship plows the waves, we agree at once that, in some respects, the ship is like a plow. This identification is all the more effective because we are not aware that we are making it.

Judeo-Christian theology has consistently spoken and written of sex in metaphorical terms as a species of dirtiness. The identification of sexuality and dirtiness has been „built into“ the psychological and neurological reactions of countless millions of people subliminally — without their being completely aware of the „poetic“ or pre-logical nature of the identification.

When Romantic poets associate sexuality with budding flowers, growing grass, sprouting shrubs, and so on, they are creating an identification that points toward the opposite kind of reaction. Here we get the equation „sexuality equals springtime,“ in contrast to the Judeo-Christian „sexuality equals dirtiness.“ Both equations are effective psychologically because they are poetic and imperfectly articulated.

Modern attitudes toward sex are far from consistent or unanimous. Indeed, we can say of twentieth-century sexual philosophy what historian Crane Brinton (1959) said of twentieth-century philosophy in general, that the chief characteristic of modern thought is „multanimity,“ a word coined to signify the opposite of unanimity. However, behind the sharply contrasting attitudes of modern sexual philosophers one common tendency can be observed—the tendency to reject the Judeo-Christian identification of sexuality and dirtiness.

This metaphorical identification deserves to be more closely scrutinized before attempting to understand the various forms of rebellion against it. According to Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Unabridged), *dirt* signifies 1. „Any foul or filthy substance; excrement; earth; mud; mire; dust; whatever, adhering to anything, renders it foul or unclean. 2. Meanness, sordidness. 3. In placer mining, earth, sand, and gravel, before the gold has been washed out ... *v.t.*, To make foul or filthy; to soil; to bedaub; to pollute; to defile.“ According to a popular epigram,

„Dirt is matter in the wrong place.“ Dirt is that which must be washed off an object before it is sanitary or edible. Dirt is the part of the ore that the placer miner throws away. Dirt is that which, adhering to an object, makes the object less useful or desirable. Any crime or antisocial behavior sounds worse when the word „dirty“ is placed in front of it: a „dirty thief“, a „dirty murderer“, even a „dirty liar“ are worse than an ordinary thief, murderer, and liar.

Traditionally connected with the concept of „dirtiness“ has been the concept of „obscurity.“ Etymologically, this word has been traced back to „that which is not represented on the stage“, that which is kept off scene (Watts, 1958). The traditional view, therefore, makes sex not only repugnant but also mysterious, arcane, hidden. Judeo-Christian morality, in short, regards sex

much as a civilized man regards drug addiction. It is something to be avoided or, if it cannot be avoided, it must be engaged in furtively. As Alan Watts (1958) remarked, the traditional Occidental attitude toward sex is not so much antagonistic as „squeamish.“ Squeamishness is characterized not by the open antagonism of a logical position but by the ill-defined negative feelings that result from internalizing an unpleasant metaphor.

Modern attitudes toward sex, then, are „multanimous“ rather than unanimous because they are in opposition to a fundamentally cloudy alternative. The orthodox Christian and the orthodox Jew have „squeamish“ feelings about sexual functions, but not even their best theologians — not even Saint Paul — have demonstrated logically that „sex is dirty.“ They have demonstrated all sorts of negative things about sex (most of which we now know to be inaccurate) but they have always communicated the concept that „sex is dirty“ subliminally rather than logically. The modernist has difficulty, therefore, defining precisely what he is against, and the leading proponents of modern attitudes toward sex differ sharply among themselves according to how clearly they understand

that what they are rebelling against is semantic-poetic feelings rather than logical ideas.

Modern and Traditional Sexual Thought

Supporters of traditional attitudes toward sex tend to resent and denigrate all sexual activity not directly connected with conception. The degree of resentment and denigration has varied with epoch and place, but, in general, fornication has been considered bad, masturbation worse, and homosexuality still worse.

Although modern thinkers tend toward multanimity rather than unanimity, in general their tolerance for nonreproductive sexual activities is inversely proportional to the degree of Judeo-Christian contempt for these activities. In other words, fornication has largely come out from under the cloud; masturbation (within sharply defined limits) is no longer considered so contemptible; and homosexuality is still largely under the cloud, as is animal intercourse.

Fornication has almost always found easier forgiveness than other so-called sexual „sins“ — and this fact has been little understood or commented upon. Once we are aware of it, however, the reason is not hard to find. Fornication is the sexual „offense“ most often performed by ordinary adults, and it does not differ in physical details from the reproductive marital intercourse grudgingly permitted by the Judeo-Christian code. Indeed, the distinction between the love-making of an unmarried couple and the love-making of a married couple is purely metaphysical and social-theological — i.e., purely *verbal* — and cannot be demonstrated to the senses. Given this physical factor, and the ubiquity of the act, defenses of fornication had naturally been made long before

„modernism“ arose. Troubadour poetry, the songs of the *minnesingers*, the cult of Romantic Love, and, indeed, most of the lyrical art of Judeo-Christian culture have long carried this argumentative burden. The proposition that „Fornication is not a 'sin' if it is accompanied by Love“ has been a strong minority conviction for 700 years at least, in spite of the clergy.

Adultery, like fornication, has been accepted in song and poetry for centuries; but, unlike fornication, it collides sharply with property instincts, so that it has not had quite the respectability in literature that fornication has had.

Masturbation is not as commonly practiced among adults as it is among adolescents. Also, it obviously differs physically from the „acceptable“ marital intercourse allowed by the clergy. For these reasons it has not inspired poems, operas, and songs in its defense, and has had to wait for the rationalistic twentieth century to bring it out from under a cloud.

Homosexuality differs from marital intercourse in obvious physical details, but since it has been practiced most often among artistic and cultured circles it has been defended off and on through the centuries. However, it has never been able to win wide popular acceptance.

Intercourse with animals, which is practiced almost exclusively in rural communities, has never been defended until Dr. Kinsey (1948) pointed out that it is not harmful or likely to become compulsive.

The Evolution of Modern Thought

Thus, we can see that when modern thinkers began to question the traditional Judeo-Christian sexual code they had behind them a kind of minority tradition. It is no accident, then, that in our time, the orthodox opposition to fornication has been most widely challenged, whereas the orthodox opposition to intercourse with animals has been less widely challenged. „Dirtiness“ can be removed from a sexual act only gradually, because the way in which the association with dirtiness was first made was not a logical one. A modern rationalist can more successfully defend the goodness, harmlessness, or Tightness of a kind of sexual behavior if this kind of behavior has been defended earlier by poets, dramatists, and musicians.

The rebellion against the doctrine that „sex is dirty“ has grown slowly. Havelock Ellis and Richard Krafft-Ebing introduced scientific objectivity into the study of human sexual behavior, but their influence was, initially, confined largely to doctors of medicine and psychiatry. It was Sigmund Freud who struck the first real blow for modernism, and he seems to have done it somewhat accidentally. Freud's published conclusion (1900) that many — perhaps all — neurotic symptoms result from the sexual upbringing characteristic of Judeo-Christian culture electrified the world. It was not long before people were asking if we had to continue to pay the price in neuroses for the blessings of this civilization. Freud himself (1922) thought that we did have to pay that price, but could alleviate the situation slightly. Others were more radical. Wilhelm Reich (1951) called for a „sexual revolution“ that would free man from the age-old taboos and usher in an age of sexual rationality.

Meanwhile, from another direction, aid and comfort arrived for the more radical. Studies of anthropology and comparative religion had shed a great deal of light on how the Judeo-Christian taboos had arisen out of savage ignorance. Sir James Frazer (1892–1914) popularized this subject in a twelve-volume work that made mythology and primitive religion as well known as Darwin had made human evolution. Benedict (1946), Mead (1948), and others helped to make these discov-

eries known to ever-wider audiences. By the mid-twentieth century, it was generally known that every society has taboos that seem utterly irrational to an outsider, and that the Judeo-Christian taboos on sexuality can be accounted for by the same prelogical thought processes that gave birth, for example, to the Orphic taboo on eating beans. Shame or fear over the act of masturbating seems, in the light of such anthropological knowledge, as irrational as shame or fear over eating beans.

At the same time, a change began to take place in literature, which had been extremely puritanical and evasive during the nineteenth century. One of the causes of the revival of sexual realism in literature was, almost certainly, the example of the psychoanalysts, anthropologists, and other scientific writers. A scientific work cannot be as evasive as the puritan temperament would wish it to be. Freud and Frazer, and their followers, had to discuss sexual matters in specific detail. Literary men, struggling to reveal the truths of human life in terms of their imaginative dramas, could not read such scientific texts without wishing they themselves had the same freedom. Sexual frankness was also necessary to the crusading medical men who led the fight against venereal disease and to the writers who defended planned parenthood. All of this led writers such as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway to present sexual material in their novels with the same frankness that could be found in a scientific treatise. Thus there developed an atmosphere in which sexual matters could be discussed. Sex, no longer completely „off scene,”

was no longer completely „obscene,” either.

In spite of all this, the pressure of orthodoxy is still great. Modern sexual attitudes, in practice, are an uneasy blend of reason and unreason, science and superstition, knowledge and mythology. According to Albert Ellis (1958), the Child Study Association of America, consisting largely of trained psychiatric social workers, wrote in a recent publication that, when parents discover that a child is masturbating, they should „ally themselves with the child’s own conscience in this matter and while assuring him that the practice will not harm him, also help him to find ways to grow out of it.” On the surface an enlightened, modern viewpoint, this statement contains within itself all the contradictions of our multanimous culture.

To „help” a child „to find ways to grow out of” masturbation sounds better than to frighten him half to death with threats of blindness, as Taylor (1955) tells us was done in the Victorian Age. But the assumption that the child must be „helped to grow out of it,” as if it were a harmful thing, reveals a partial emotional hangover of Victorian standards since, as Kinsey (1948), Ellis (1958), and others have pointed out, masturbation is not harmful.

However, D. H. Lawrence (1930) writes a poetic and impassioned defense of the right of unmarried adults to fornicate; in the midst of it he has a diatribe, several pages long, on the evils of masturbation. In the course of this diatribe, Lawrence refers to masturbation as „selfabuse” and even repeats the old, exploded myth that once the habit is formed masturbation „goes on and on, on into old age, in spite of marriage or love affairs or anything else.”

Similarly, Theodoor Van de Velde, one of the most liberal and enlightened authors in the „marriage-manual” field, writes (1947) an eloquent, even lyrical, defense of the „genital kiss,” as he calls it. But he is careful to add that „carried to orgasm,” this becomes a „perversion.” On the other hand, Hannah and Abraham Stone (1952) advise that there is „nothing perverse or degrading ... in any sex practice which is undertaken for the purpose of promoting a more harmonious sexual adjustment between a husband and wife in marriage,” and seem to be recommending cunnilingus and/or fellatio to the point of orgasm. (Why it should be stopped before orgasm Van de Velde does not make clear.) Albert Ellis (1954) is not afraid to recommend cunnilingus and/or

fellatio to climax, but he mentions the penalties that can (theoretically) be invoked in various American states, even when these acts are performed between two fully consenting and legally married adults. Connecticut threatens 30 years for mouth-genital contacts; Georgia goes further and threatens life imprisonment at hard labor; Ohio has a 1-to-20-year term.

The same contradictions appear wherever we look. D. H. Lawrence (1930) urged that, for sex to fully escape from the cloud of „dirtiness,“ we should be able to „give it its own phallic language, and use the obscene words“ in lovemaking. Thirty years later, however, Lipton (1959) writes that the use of these words during love-making is considered „degenerate“ and „middle class“ by the young Bohemians of today. The same young Bohemians often use obscene words for shock effect in their poetry.

Idealism and Realism in Sexual Thinking

The wide conflicts of opinion among modernists can, of course, be traced to one or two basic conflicts in primary assumptions. In other words, it is possible to see most of the conflicts we have been discussing as manifestations of a few simple philosophical predispositions. In general, modern sexual thinkers can be divided into the (more or less) idealistic and the (more or less) realistic. The idealists, such as D. H. Lawrence and Wilhelm Reich, tend to be preoccupied with the life-importance of „the perfect sex-love relationship,“ and their thinking largely revolves around making such relationships possible for greater numbers of people. The realists, such as Alfred Kinsey and Albert Ellis, tend to accept mankind unconditionally as it is, and their thinking is concerned with helping the individual to accept his own sexual pattern regardless of how „imperfect“ it may be.

These remarks, of course, are oversimplified. Nonetheless, there is considerable truth in them. Consider, for example, the matter of premature ejaculation. This very widespread problem makes it extremely difficult for many couples to achieve the simultaneous climax about which the Stones (1952) and other popular authors of marriage manuals write so glowingly. To a Reichian, and to most orthodox Freudians, it is a grave psychological illness of the male and should be cured whenever possible. This is, fundamentally, an idealistic position. Dr. Kinsey, representing realism, counsels that men and women accept themselves as they are; he says (1948) that it is „unrealistic“ for wives to expect their husbands always to restrain themselves long enough to achieve simultaneous climax. He urges wives to be more tolerant and husbands to feel less guilty.

The same distinction between idealists and realists can be seen when we examine the matter of frigidity in women. Dr. Edmund Bergler, representing orthodox Freudian idealism, writes (1951): „Under frigidity we understand the incapacity of woman to have a vaginal *orgasm during intercourse*. It is of no matter whether the woman is aroused during coitus or remains cold, whether excitement is weak or strong, whether it breaks off at the beginning or end, slowly or suddenly, whether it is dissipated in preliminary acts, or has been lacking from the beginning. The *sole criterion* of frigidity is absence of vaginal orgasm“ (author's italics). On the other hand, Albert Ellis says equally forcefully (1954): „After carefully reviewing the recent literature on this subject and interviewing scores of sexually normal and disturbed women, I was forced to conclude that the so-called vaginal orgasm is largely a myth.“

Like many disputes that seem to be over matters of fact, this is at least partially a matter of values. Dr. Bergler thinks that any woman who cannot achieve „vaginal orgasm,“ and is, there-

fore, „frigid,“ needs psychotherapy in order to become normal. Dr. Ellis thinks that if a woman is achieving any kind of orgasmic satisfaction in sex, she is achieving what is natural for her. In other words, Dr. Bergler represents the idealistic longing for the „perfect love-sex relationship“ and Dr. Ellis represents the realistic acceptance of whatever love-sex relationship is possible for the specific individual.

The same conflict underlies the majority of discussions about homosexuality. Dr. Lindner (1956) and others who speak of homosexuality as a „way of life“ seem to be concerned with helping the individual homosexual to find such happiness as is open to him or her; Dr. Bergler (1959) and others who speak of homosexuality as a „disease“ are, of course, interested in curing it – again, in the interest of „the perfect love-sex relationship.“ Dr. Ellis (1960) takes an in-between, liberal-realist position and holds that occasional homosexual activity may be normal but that exclusive or obsessive-compulsive homosexuality is the result of an emotional disturbance and can be treated and cured by psychotherapy.

It begins to be obvious that all those we have been calling the idealists are following in the tradition of the cult of Romantic Love introduced to the Western world by the medieval troubadours, whereas those we have been calling realists are representatives of the ethical relativism that has been introduced by cultural anthropology. Perhaps the terms „realist“ and „idealist“ are too simplified, and we certainly do not intend to have them taken as judgmental; they are meant to serve as brief descriptive labels, and no more. But there is probably food for thought in the fact that the idealists are in some respects closer in spirit to earlier rebels against Judeo-Christian orthodoxy than are the realists. Taylor (1955) has pointed out that most historic rebellions against Judeo-Christian sexual teaching have deliberately taken inspiration from the early Mediterranean fertility cults. The pagan conception of the „holiness“ of certain types of sexuality has repeatedly been resurrected as an alternative to Judeo-Christian asceticism. We should not be surprised to see a disguised form of this old pagan ideology appearing as one branch of the modern sexual revolution.

Indeed, among certain of the extreme Bohemians of the so-called „Beat Generation,“ sexuality has become associated with religious ideas from outside Judeo-Christian culture. Kerouac (1958) describes Tibetan *yabyum* (ritualized coitus) among the California „Beat“ mystics. Mailer (1959) has described the entire „Beat“ movement as a search for „perfect orgasm,“ with decidedly religious (non-Judeo-Christian) overtones.

Among the „Beats,“ however, this search for the perfect love-sex relationship is less orthodox than elsewhere. They believe, for example, that it is as likely to be found in homosexual as in heterosexual relations. McReynolds (1959) quotes a „Beat“ girl as saying „that if you liked someone very much you ought to sleep with him or her at least once, because sex helped bring you closer to the person.“ McReynolds adds that he does not believe this attitude is really an attempt to turn life into „one long orgy“; rather, he thinks, it is an attempt to make real and concrete the „universal love“ many earlier Romantic movements have conceived only abstractly.

The „Beats,“ further, are largely free of the sexual intolerance of most intellectuals. Lipton (1959) emphasizes the amicable relations between heterosexual and homosexual „Beats“ and the fact that neither group tries to „convert“ the other. There is, instead, a general feeling that each person has a right to seek truth and express love according to the laws of his or her own nature. It is for this reason that „Beats“ tend to be unfrightened also of psychoses or criminality. Much of the best literature produced by „Beat“ writers deals with friends who were psychotic, criminal, addicted to drugs, or in some other way socially „undesirable.“ The jazz musician, Charlie Parker,

was all of these, and remains a leading „Beat“ hero; Lipton (1959) quotes a poem by a „Beat“ writer that describes Parker’s psychotic episodes with almost clinical lack of emotion and claims that one should neither pity nor condemn, because, through these experiences, Parker was able to reach the special kind of awareness his music demanded.

The „Beat“ philosophy of sex, in short, is like all other aspects of „Beat“ philosophy, centered on the individual’s achieving his full potential in awareness and the expression of love. No other values are higher than these to a „Beat.“ Therefore, the only question to be asked about any sexual experience is: does it add to one’s awareness or one’s expression of love? All other questions of abstract morality or social normalcy are, to a „Beat,“ irrelevant.

But the „Beat“ search for self-fulfillment is only one of the many different present-day approaches to sex. The „Beats“ are most interesting because they combine the „idealistic“ search for the „perfect“ love-sex relationship with the „realistic“ acceptance of relativity. Equally important, however, are several vastly different attitudes. In addition to such representative „realists“ and „idealists“ as we have already discussed, there are unclassifiable thinkers such as Alan Watts (1958), who tries to synthesize modern scientific positivism with ancient Oriental mysticism and, in so doing, has created a philosophy of sex that can be described as more relativistic than the relativists and yet at the same time more perfectionist than the perfectionists. Watts believes, and argues plausibly, that the „perfect love-sex experience“ will only come to those who do not seek it, and that to abolish completely the Judeo-Christian squeamishness about sex we will have to abandon also the way of thinking that considers Man apart from nature.

Equally noteworthy are the theories of Ian Suttie (1935), who argues that there is a „taboo on tenderness“ in our civilization even more pervasive than the taboos on sexuality, and that we have to become less afraid of selfless love before we can thoroughly cleanse our sexual attitudes of lingering Judeo-Christian denigration. Ashley Montagu (1955) has reiterated psychiatrist Suttie’s ideas, with the different emphasis of a physical anthropologist, and has added to them a faint patina of well-concealed puritanism.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that in all the conflicting attitudes of modern thinkers toward sex, one overriding theme is evident. That theme is not, as defenders of orthodoxy often charge, a simple reversion to infantile self-indulgence. On the contrary, we can observe both in „realists“ such as Alfred Kinsey and Albert Ellis, and in „idealists“ such as Wilhelm Reich and Edmund Bergler—a deep scientific humanism that demands more of Man than Judeo-Christian orthodoxy ever did, because it respects him more. To believe that Man is capable, through reason, of solving his sexual problems is to have more faith in him than those who believe that his „fallen“ state gives him an inborn tendency toward „sin.“ The self-denial and self-torture of the orthodox is not more „responsible“ than the attempt of a modern man to make sex a satisfactory and beautiful experience for himself and his partner. It might even be said that the orthodox person, refusing to attempt to make of sex a wholesome and decent part of life and ruthlessly „denying“ himself, is less responsible, more infantile, than the modern. The medieval saint who went off into the desert to punish his flesh looks suspiciously like the four-year-old child who bangs his head against the wall because his parents won’t give him what he wants.

Indeed, perhaps the orthodox teaching that „sex is dirty“ has no more complex an origin than the fox’s pronouncement that the grapes he could not have were sour. Except for masturbation and intercourse with animals, sexual relations always involve more than one person, and, hence, require a certain amount of reciprocity, tolerance, maturity, and responsibility. Those who enter such relations with a decent respect for themselves and their partners are undoubtedly less „self-

indulgent“ than those who back away in repugnance. The repugnance is very often a mask for a lazy and cowardly refusal to accept participation in ordinary human life with its mixed joys and sorrows. Although the traditionalist will accuse modernists of irresponsible hedonism, the truth may be that he really fears the adult responsibility of modernism.

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Appeared in *The Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior* (1961) edited by Albert Ellis and Albert
Abarbanel.

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