

# SEXUAL DESIRE

*A Moral Philosophy  
of the Erotic*

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"AROUSAL" ✓



THE FREE PRESS  
*A Division of Macmillan, Inc.*  
NEW YORK

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AROUSAL

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Human beings talk and cooperate, they build and produce, they work to accumulate and exchange, they form societies, laws and institutions, and in all these things the phenomenon of reason – as a distinct principle of activity – seems dominant. There are indeed theories of the human which describe this or that activity as central – speech, say, productive labour (Marx), or political existence (Aristotle). But we feel that the persuasiveness of such theories depends upon whether the activity in question is an expression of the deeper essence, reason itself, which all human behaviour displays.

We should not conclude, however, that it is only as an active being that man displays his distinctive causality. Men are distinguished equally by the quality of their experiences and by a receptiveness – displayed at its most complete in aesthetic experience – in which their nature may be wholly absorbed in attentive enjoyment. Those who see the distinctive marks of the human in activity may try to discover the root phenomena of human sexuality in the stratagems of desire. I believe, however, that we can understand desire only if we first display the outline of a more passive state of mind – the state of arousal, in which the body of one person awakens to the presence or thought of another. Arousal provides the underlying circumstance of sexual enjoyment, and it contains the seeds of all that is distinctive in the sexuality of the rational being.

Sexual arousal – considered, for example, in the terms favoured by the *Kinsey Report*<sup>1</sup>, and by other such exercises in reduction – is often represented as a bodily state, common to man and animals, which so irritates those subject to it that they can find relief only in the sexual act. The sexual act, it is thought, ‘discharges’ or ‘releases’ the tensions of arousal, and so quiets it. On this view the erection of the penis or the softening of the vagina are the root phenomena of arousal, and are to be observed throughout the animal kingdom. Their function in stirring the

animals to copulation is illustrated also by the human species. Sexual pleasure is then the pleasure, felt largely in the sexual organs, that accompanies the sexual act and which steadily accumulates to the point of discharge and release. vision del's  
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The attraction of that account is partly that it enables us to understand the localised nature of so much sexual pleasure. For sexual pleasure is not simply the pleasure of ‘obtaining what you desire’ – on the contrary, it is precisely a *part* of what you desire. And it is undeniable that similar physiological effects, and similar sensations, can occur in the act of masturbation and the act of love: perhaps they occur when riding a horse, or in all those chance circumstances of contact to which the Freudians draw attention in their theory of the ‘erotogenic zone’.<sup>2</sup> It might seem reasonable, therefore, to suggest that sexual pleasure is fundamentally a pleasure of sensation experienced in the sexual parts. On the other hand, if matters were so simple, we should have cause to wonder at the widespread occurrence of sexual frustration. For it would be natural, in this case, to assume that sexual desire is desire for sexual pleasure: a desire that could be as well satisfied by masturbation as by the time-consuming stratagems of courtship and seduction. (Thus Wilde’s ironical recommendation: ‘cleaner, more efficient, and you meet a better class of person’.) con 12-21  
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Moreover, whatever we say about the pleasure of masturbation, it has to be recognised that there is much more to the sexual act than its final stage: there is a desire to kiss and caress, and pleasures associated with those activities. A passionate kiss is both an expression of desire and a source of sexual pleasure. Once again, someone might be tempted to say that the pleasure here is no more than pleasure *in* the lips or mouth – thus giving credence to the idea of the mouth as an ‘erotogenic zone’. But such a suggestion is, to say the least, incomplete. For only in certain circumstances is the pleasure ‘in’ the lips to be considered either as sexual pleasure or as part of such a pleasure. Consider two actors kissing – or in some other way going ‘part hog’, as Pinter might put it (‘Joey: I’ve been the whole hog plenty of times. Sometimes . . . you can be happy . . . and not go the whole hog. Now and again . . . you can be happy . . . without going any hog’ – *The Homecoming*). It is conceivable that these actors might feel pleasurable sensations in the affected parts – why not? To rule out the possibility would be culpable apriorism. But surely this would not be sexual pleasure. To be sexual pleasure it must be an integral part of sexual arousal. And that is precisely what is put in doubt by the supposition that the two participants are *acting*.

What then is arousal, and what difference does it make to the kiss? We

should compare the kissing actors with a person kissing his friend in affection. It is true that in such a case there are strong proprieties at work, derived from our sense of permitted sexual relations. In the societies to which I and my readers belong, kissing has become too much a symbol of the sexual act to be regarded easily in other terms. Consider, however, a strict Islamic society, in which any such display of sexual feeling would be shocking, and indeed so shocking as not to offer itself as a possible interpretation. In such a society, as we know, friends kiss each other freely, and with evident pleasure. And the pleasure has nothing to do with any 'pleasurable sensation' located *in* the mouth or *on* the cheek, hand or brow. Such localised pleasures have little significance beside the act of attention with which the kiss is performed. While we may think of the pleasure of the kiss as focused in the mouth, this is largely because the thoughts of the kisser are focused upon his gesture, upon its tender meaning, and therefore upon the mouth only in so far as it is itself represented within the kisser's thoughts. The kiss is a recognition of the other's dearness, and its pleasure lies in the other's rejoicing in that. In such a case all idea of a 'sensation of pleasure' seems to evaporate. There may be such a thing, but it is of the least importance in explaining the act, or in accounting for its pleasurable quality.

Arousal transforms this pleasure into a sexual pleasure. But it is the pleasure of kissing – the pleasure which one person takes in another, when expressing his affection – that is transformed. It is not the 'physical pleasure' (whatever that may be) felt in the mouth or on the cheek, but what I shall call the 'intentional pleasure', involved in the recognition of the meaning of another's gesture. Arousal seems to affect, not so much the *sensation* of kissing, as its 'intentional content': although the sensation itself is by no means insulated from the thought which provides its context.

We must, indeed, always distinguish <sup>1</sup>intentional from <sup>2</sup>non-intentional pleasures. Some pleasures are essentially pleasures at or about an object; <sup>1</sup> others (like the pleasure of a hot bath) are merely pleasures of sensation. It <sup>2</sup> is not clear whether pleasures of the first kind can be attributed to the lower animals: *perhaps* they can. A dog may feel pleasure, we are apt to suppose, at the prospect of a walk or about his master's return. There are of course highly intricate problems here, and it is not enough to be guided by our common habits of speech. Description of the mental life of animals must depend upon an overall theory of animal capacities, and it would be inappropriate at this stage to make any unwarranted assumptions. A lion dozing in the sun feels pleasure at the warmth of the sun, but the 'at' here means only 'because of'. Clearly the case is quite unlike the manifold

pleasures which this situation can inspire in a human being. And it is evident that we could not begin to understand the structure of human pleasure if we did not recognise the predominance of the intentional component: of pleasure directed onto an object, about which the subject, in his pleasure, is concerned. Such is certainly the pleasure that expresses itself in the kiss of affection. Might the same be said of the pleasure which expresses itself, and the further pleasure which is anticipated, in the kiss of desire?

Non-intentional pleasures ('pleasures of sensation') share the defining properties of sensation: they are located in the body, at a particular place (even if that place may on occasion be the whole of the body). They have intensity and duration; they increase and decrease; and like sensations they lie outside the province of the will – a pleasure is never something that we *do*, even if we may do things in order to obtain it.<sup>3</sup> As I noted above, the sexual act, and much that precedes it, involves such pleasures – or, at least, it does so in the normal case. And they form an important part of the experience; in particular their capacity to 'overcome' the subject, so that he is 'mastered' by them, acquires an important role in the intentionality of desire. For the Freudian, these pleasures are the true source of sexual delight, which is entirely focussed upon occurrences in the 'erotogenic' zones. And Freud's attempt to base sexuality in sensation has an important philosophical motive: it is an attempt to incorporate the body into the stratagems of desire – to show exactly why our existence as embodied creatures is central to the phenomenon of sexuality. However, it is undeniably paradoxical to regard the localised pleasures of the sexual act as the aim or object of desire: so to regard them is to ignore the drama of sexual feeling, and in particular to ignore the fact of the other who is desired. Many pleasurable sensations accompany sneezing, for example, or, more appositely, raising one's voice in anger and exerting oneself in the pursuit of a quarrel. In the latter case they clearly do not constitute the aim, or even the gratification, still less the fulfilment or resolution, of anger.<sup>4</sup>

Procopius, in his *Secret History*, has many scandalous things to say about the Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian. One particular incident is of interest to us. Theodora, according to Procopius, had the habit of lying naked upon a couch, with millet seed sprinkled over her thighs and sexual parts. Geese would be placed on her body, and the birds would nibble the seed with rough osculations from her flesh. The contact of their bills apparently sent Theodora into ecstasies (or at least pretended ecstasies – for she was on stage at the time).<sup>5</sup> Suppose we were to say that Theodora felt intense pleasure at the pecking of the geese. This would surely imply

that her pleasure depended in some way upon the thought that it was geese which were pecking her, rather than, say, carefully simulated automata, or any other device that could apply the gentle pressure of cartilage to her flesh. It *could* be so, but we should certainly find such a pleasure puzzling. Is she pleased *at* the pecking of the geese, or by it, or about it? (Those are not necessarily the same.) But then, why on earth? The correct description, I believe, is in terms of non-intentional pleasure. She feels a pleasurable sensation – a host of pleasurable sensations – which happen to be caused by geese. This is not necessarily abnormal, nor is it perverted, unless we suppose her to be aroused by the experience.

But it is precisely the supposition of arousal that would strike us as puzzling. For then it would seem that the geese play a constitutive role in her pleasure, that they are a kind of object of pleasure. Thus, in the normal case of sexual arousal, the physical stimulus cannot be detached in thought from 'what is going on': from a sense of who is doing what to whom. Tomi Ungerer has produced engravings of 'fucking machines' – machines designed to apply appropriate stimulation to the 'erotogenic zones' of those who 'consort' with them. I do not know Ungerer's purpose, but it is undeniable that the result is a vivid satire of a certain view of sexuality – the view which sees sexual pleasure and sexual arousal as purely 'physical', which is to say non-intentional, responses. Such a view corresponds to the picture of infantile sexuality given by many psychoanalysts, and indeed the theories of child sexuality offered by Melanie Klein have been favourably described by two of her followers as involving the recognition of the child's nature as a '*machine désirante*'.<sup>6</sup> Reflection upon the case of Theodora, and the idea of arousal that would be necessary to describe it, should cause us to recoil from such descriptions, which can be made to apply only by eliminating all reference to the intentional object of experience. They are, in other words, necessarily misdescriptions, and can derive their charm only from the covert recognition that this is so, from their character as 'demystification'.

Thus, in the normal case of sexual arousal, it would be quite extraordinary if the caresses of one party were regarded by the other as the accidental causes of a pleasurable sensation, which might have been caused in some other way. Sexual arousal is a response, but not a response to a stimulus that could be fully described merely as the cause of a sensation. It is a response, at least in part, to a thought, where the thought refers to 'what is going on' between myself and another. Of course, sexual pleasure is not merely pleasure *at* being touched: for that could occur when one friend touches another, or a child its parent. (There are countless ways in which we are pleased at human contact.) It is

nevertheless (at least in part) an intentional pleasure, and if there is difficulty in specifying its object this is largely because of the complexity of the thought upon which it is founded.

The thought involves the following idea: It is *he* who is alertly touching me, intending my recognition of his act (or who is alertly kissing me, with a similar intention). The subject's pleasurable sensation is entirely taken up in this thought and, as it were, projected by means of it towards the other person. This is brought out vividly by the possibility of deception. Someone may discover that the fingers which are touching him are not, as he thought, those of his lover, but those of an interloper. His pleasure (in the normal case) instantly turns to disgust: it suffers, indeed, the same kind of reversal as is suffered by an emotion, when the belief upon which it is founded is shown to be false. Thus sexual pleasure, like an emotion, may be in conflict with the facts. The man who feels pleasure, mistaking another's touch for the touch of his lover, is to be compared with the father who feels proud, mistaking the boy who runs first past the winning post for his son. We find it no more puzzling that a lover's excitement should be extinguished by the discovery of unknown fingers about his person than that a feeling of triumph should be extinguished by the discovery that one has not, after all, won the prize. Similarly, the discovery that these fingers, while they are the fingers of my lover, are not alertly engaged in soliciting my attention – for he is asleep, say, unconscious, or dead – will extinguish my pleasure, even if it does not change the character of my sensations.

To some extent all pleasures – even non-intentional pleasures – can be undermined or compromised by a change of belief. The meat tastes differently when I discover it to be the flesh of my favourite dog. But it is important to see that the dependence of pleasure on belief is here much looser. I might have thought I was eating mutton, and learned in fact that it was moose or kangaroo. This does not automatically alter the physical pleasure of eating it; on the contrary, the pleasure will, in a reasonable being, reconcile him to the virtues (much misrepresented, if the newspapers are anything to go by) of moose or kangaroo. Similarly, although I would be a fool not to jump out of the soothing bath after being told that what I took for water is really acid, this is not because I have ceased at once to feel pleasurable sensations in my skin. In the case of sexual pleasure, the knowledge that it is an unwanted hand that touches me at once extinguishes my pleasure. The pleasure could not be taken as confirming the hitherto unacknowledged sexual virtues of some previously rejected person. Jacob did not, for example, discover attractions in Leah that he had previously overlooked: his pleasure in her was really

pleasure in Rachel, whom he wrongly thought to be the recipient of his embraces (Genesis 29: 25 – and see the superb realisation of this scene in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*). If the belief changes, it is the persistence of pleasure, and not the *change* of pleasure, that needs to be explained.

Theodora may have fantasised that the geese-bills were the pecking kisses of some imaginary lover. And when one tries to imagine a 'pure' state of self-induced arousal – combined with undirected, or apparently undirected, sexual pleasure – it is really such a case that one is imagining. If that is so, however, then either sexual arousal, or sexual pleasure, or both, must be intentional. The function of fantasy is to provide an object for our states of mind, and, by making that object subservient to the will, to enable us to enjoy a magical power which we frequently long for but cannot possess. (Thus sexual fantasy is no more 'undirected' than is fear felt in response to the image of danger – as in a daydream.)

Of course, as I have recognised, there are non-intentional pleasures connected with the sexual act, which form an important part of what we seek in the sexual act. But they gain their importance for us partly because they can be taken up, as it were, in a state of arousal, borrowing the intentionality of arousal, and becoming incorporated into the drama of the sexual encounter. It is quite conceivable that these pleasures should occur – even the pleasure of orgasm – without arousal. For arousal is a 'leaning towards' the other, a movement in the direction of the sexual act, which cannot be separated, either from the thought upon which it is founded, or from the desire to which it leads. This may sound stipulative; but as we shall see, there are sound considerations in support of such a concept of arousal. In order to understand that concept we need to analyse, first the thought, and secondly the desire, to which it refers.

In speaking of 'thought' I am conscious of speaking somewhat loosely. The 'representational' nature of our mental states cannot always be comfortably described by this term: or rather, it cannot be assumed that any particular theory of 'thought' (such as that given by Frege, which argues that the identity of a thought is given by the conditions for the truth of a sentence which expresses it), will suffice to cover all the examples of intentionality. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this chapter, it will be sufficient to attempt to describe at least some of the thoughts which compose the intentionality of arousal, since, although the mode of representation that is intrinsic to arousal will not be exhaustively captured by this analysis, the analysis will provide what is required for an understanding of desire.

The first important component in the intentionality of arousal should

be evident from the above discussion. Arousal is a response to the thought of the other, as a self-conscious agent, who is alert to me, and who is able to have 'designs' on me. The presence of this thought is evident from our understanding of those two all-important expressions of sexual interest: the caress and the glance.<sup>7</sup> A caress, when perceived under the aspect of arousal, has the character of discovery – of an 'unveiling', to use a somewhat Heideggerian idiom. A caress of affection is a gesture of reassurance – an attempt to place in the consciousness of the other an image of one's own tender concern for him. Not so, however, the caress of desire, which outlines the body of the recipient; its gentleness is not that of reassurance only, but that of exploration. It aims to fill the surface of the other's body with a consciousness of one's interest – interest, not only in his body, but also in him as embodied, in his body as an integral part of his identity as a self. This consciousness is the focal point of the recipient's pleasure. From the recipient's point of view, arousal, in these circumstances, is a form of permission, a silent utterance of the thought 'Go on! Make yourself familiar with what you seek to know.' Sartre – in what is perhaps the most acute philosophical analysis of desire<sup>8</sup> – speaks of the caress as 'incarnating' the other: as though, by my action, I bring his soul into his flesh and make it palpable. The metaphor is by no means inapposite. However, it is important to add that such 'incarnation' would mean nothing were it not for the element of familiarity, which is both offered and sought by the one who caresses.

The caress is given and received with the same awareness as the glance is given and received. They each have, so to speak, an epistemic component (a component of anticipation and discovery), which is also an important focus of arousal and desire. It is hardly surprising, given this, that the face should have such a supreme and overriding importance in the transaction of desire. And yet, on some views of desire, including the Freudian view, it is very strange that this should be so – strange that the face should have the power to determine whether we will, or will not, be drawn towards an act which gives pleasure in quite another part. Why do eyes, mouth, nose and brow transfix us, when they have so little relation to the sexual prowess and bodily perfection of their bearer? The answer is simple: the face is the primary expression of consciousness, and to see in the face the object of sexual attraction is to find the focus which all attraction requires – the focus on another's existence, as a being who can be aware of me. Much has been written about the glance of love, which seems so imperiously to single out its object and so peremptorily to confront him with an intolerable choice. In truth, however, it is the glance of sexual interest that precipitates the movement of the soul, whereby two

people come to stand outside the multitude in which they are presently moving, bound by a knowledge that cannot be expressed in words, and offering to each other a silent communication that ignores everything but themselves. It is as true of the glance of desire as it is of the glance of love that it concentrates into itself the whole life of the human being, constituting a direct appeal to the other to recognise my embodied existence. The experience has been well described by Robert Grant:

[The 'love-glance'] may be anything from an open, cloudless smile to a troubled, serious gaze, but it is instantly recognisable to a like-minded recipient. It differs entirely from Miss World's orthodontic grimace, the coquette's winsome leer, or the closed, resentful stare of the fashion model (which suggests nothing so much as a juvenile delinquent interrupted in the act of self-abuse). It is completely involuntary, the more obviously so the more it is fought down by modesty (the process is matchlessly and movingly depicted by Shakespeare in the courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda). What it announces is the fact of incarnation: I am here, my inmost self, in my face. The rest of my body, it says, my private parts, and therefore I myself, all are yours, if you will have it so. Being unguarded, like the naked body whose uncovering it foreshadows, it is a pledge of innocence, and an innocence not subsequently destroyed, but fulfilled, in the sexual act.<sup>9</sup>

It is a familiar thesis of the philosophy of language – and one which, thanks to the work of Grice, Searle and Lewis,<sup>10</sup> can no longer be easily disputed – that the act of *meaning* something is essentially interpersonal. It involves an intention to communicate, and also an intention that this first intention be efficacious in revealing the content of what is said. It involves, in short, an elaborate design upon the consciousness of the other, an attempt to enlist his participation in a cooperative act. Thomas Nagel has suggested that the complex intentionality exemplified by meaning is to be found also in the glances of desire, so that if we speak of those glances as 'meaningful' this should not be thought to be a metaphor.<sup>11</sup> If Nagel's suggestion were right, then, following the theory of meaning put forward by Grice, we should expect the glance of desire to involve, first, an intention to arouse sexual interest; secondly, the intention that this first intention be recognised; thirdly, the intention that, through being recognised, it play a part in precipitating what is intended. However, although there are grounds for thinking that the intentional structure of meaning may sometimes exist in the glances of desire, reciprocity is normally of a lower order. In the normal case, the intention is that the other's desire be precipitated, not by a recognition of my intention, but by a recognition of my desire. The intended reciprocity here is perhaps sufficiently like that of meaning to enable us to use meaning as

a convenient metaphor for arousal, so long as we do not imagine that sexual gestures are fully 'articulate' expressions of cognitive mental states – so long as we remember, in other words, that sexual gestures cannot be 'translated.'

The experience of arousal may then be explained on the analogy with linguistic *understanding*: just as I understand your utterance by latching on to the intentions with which you thereby acquaint me, so do I respond to your glance or caress by recognising the desire behind them, and seeing, through the desire, the possibility which might otherwise have remained concealed. A caress may be either accepted or rejected: in either case, it is because it has been 'read' as conveying the message that 'we might surely make love'. In discovering this message through the language of your caress, I receive it, not as a raw image, so to speak, a shocking presentation of an outlandish possibility, but as a thought concealed within your gesture, which you too are discovering in the very act of discovering me. Ovid's instructions to the seducer (*Ars Amatoria*, book I) are finely aware of this reciprocal intentionality. They illustrate the idea that the caress and the glance must not reveal premeditation: that truly arousing conduct is that in which the awakening of the woman seduced is made to seem like a mutual self-discovery, so that *she* seems, in her own eyes, to be responsible for what he feels.

The intentional structure just described, while clearly distinct from the structure of (linguistic) meaning, has much in common with it. But we should be misrepresenting the intentionality of arousal if we saw it simply in these terms, without considering the crucial element of 'bodily awakening', which each participant both feels in himself and seeks in the other. This experience is a crucial aspect of our experience of embodiment – and of our nature as embodied beings. It may be illustrated by an example, which will also help to emphasise the peculiar kind of representation that is intrinsic to arousal. Consider the case of a woman, who opens to her lover's explorations:

Ile be a parke, and thou shalt be my deare:  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountaine, or in dale;  
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be drie,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountaines lie.  
[Venus and Adonis]

This opening (in the above lines, an importuning) is a fundamental gesture of arousal, and would be inconceivable without the idea of him, the lover, taking an interest in her as she is in her body. Venus' offendedness stems directly from her perception that this idea is no more

than a fond illusion – having exposed herself to so much, she must then destroy the unfeeling witness of her humiliation. It is integral to the woman's thought that her lover is a conscious being, and also conscious of himself as an agent and patient in the sexual transaction. Moreover, she thinks of him as having a conception of her body, and of her in her body. Her sense of his caress is of an invitation: she experiences it as fundamentally addressed to her through her body, and in her body. Arousal is founded first in the thought of his bodily presence, as a source of interest in her, and secondly in a desire to address to him the equivalent of what he addresses to her.

In the first impulse of arousal, therefore, there is the beginning of that chain of reciprocity which is fundamental to interpersonal attitudes. She conceives her lover conceiving her conceiving him. . . . (Sartre argued that such infinite chains of response show sexual desire to be impossible. However, the regress is indefinite, not infinite, and certainly not vicious. For just such a chain of response is involved whenever one person understands another's meaning.)<sup>12</sup> There is also a specific experience of embodiment. My sense of myself as identical with my body, and my sense of you as identical with yours are crucial elements, both in the aim and in the reception, of the arousing caress. I am awakened *in* my body, to the embodiment of *you*. Underlying the woman's state of arousal is the thought: 'I, in my body, am something for him', and her response – the 'opening' to his approaches, and all that is entailed in that – must be understood in part as an *expression* of that thought, and of the interpersonal intentionality that is built upon it.

Although I am identical with my body, my experience of embodiment must be sharply distinguished from my experience of the body. In arousal the unity between body and person is immediately experienced, and forms the living focus of an interpersonal response. But the body is not the object of this response – as it is the object of a pathologist's examination or an anatomist's exposure. Arousal reaches through the body to the spirit which animates its every part. There are indeed 'bestial' inclinations, which seek to sunder the body from the spirit, and to present the first as the single focus of a sexual interest. But the interpretation of these inclinations is a matter of difficulty to us, precisely because their intentionality eludes our understanding. Consider again the female experience. In the 'normal' case of feminine bestiality the animal in question (a favourite dog, say) is treated *as if* he were a person. Not, perhaps, a very developed person, and not even a fully responsible person. But nevertheless a creature with at least one of the attributes that distinguishes persons: the attribute of the 'first-person point of view',

which enables him to see the world as something other than himself, and to take an interest in it, not only as the repository of warm and welcoming objects, but also as the field of action of other beings like himself. For it is the sense of this in the dog's perspective – a sense which, however erroneous, is natural to our anthropomorphic way of seeing things – which permits the gestures of arousal. The dog, too, is perceived as an embodied person.

This is not to say that there is not true bestiality in women – an interest in the animal body *as such*. John Aubrey's description<sup>13</sup> of the voyeuristic Countess of Pembroke, who would watch the coupling of horses in order to prime herself for the lovers who were to mount her, is perhaps a case in point – although one can see at once how vast a shadow is cast in her desire by her own self-conscious perspective. Perhaps the Countess wished to see her lovers *as* animals, in order to be excited by the thought of herself as similar, indifferent to the human attributes and interpersonal demands of the creature who is mounting her. This is a refined case of true bestiality, in which the other both is, and is thought of as, an animal. True bestiality is perverted. 'Perverted' means turned from some 'normal' aim. In this case, the arousal is turned from a person to the caricature of a person – to a creature which either is, or is thought to be, stripped of that first-person perspective which gives sense to the intentionality of arousal. The bestial act, which abrogates the responsibility of the object, abrogates also the responsibility of the subject – and that is its point. It is an attempt by the subject to flee from the burden of interpersonal, to be *merely* an animal, in this encounter which could otherwise not be accomplished without intolerable disgust.

Of course, a person may take a distinctly personal pleasure in this – in the spectacle of his own degradation. But that it *is* a degradation should not be doubted. It involves a falling away from the normal condition of arousal, and a rejection of personal responsibility. No doubt there are physical sensations, and glandular transformations, that occur equally in normal human arousal and in its perverted counterpart (else there would be no call for the idea of 'perversion'). And if the *only* difference were to be found in the fact that, in the first case, the object is conceived as a person, in the second case as something essentially non-personal, and if there were no further difference that followed from this, then it would be arbitrary to distinguish them. But the differences between the attitudes, stratagems and satisfactions that arise from normal sexual arousal, and those that arise from its perversion, are so great as to justify the contrast between them. If you leave out the context, then you can always give arguments for assimilating states of mind, however different they may be.

You could, for example, assimilate love to hatred on the basis of their common fascination with another's well-being, or running to swimming on the basis of their common movements. My argument implies that the glandular transformations and physical sensations that accompany arousal stand to arousal much as the movements of the legs stand to running. They are an essential part of it, but may equally occur in its absence. And, as in the case of running, what makes them what they are is the intentionality of the state of mind which is expressed in them.

Furthermore, the sexual organs do not appear, so to speak, *neutrally* to us, at times of arousal. The sexual organ undergoes a transformation which is essentially dramatic, and not merely physiological. Both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of the other the sexual organ becomes the self. To be penetrated by a man's penis is to be penetrated by *him* (to be enclosed by a woman's vagina is to be enclosed by *her*). Suppose there were two such organs. Or suppose that a man could strap on his 'tool', remove it, replace it and exchange it. In this case there is a kind of depersonalisation of the phallus: it is, to use Hannah Arendt's useful term, 'instrumentalised'.<sup>14</sup> It begins to lose some of its intrinsic personal interest, and comes to seem, instead, like the lurid dildos which are on display in sex shops, and which owe their appeal precisely to the fact that they are attached to no human body and no human will (and which therefore have precisely no *sexual* appeal to the person of normal inclinations). Even if, by some miracle, it would be possible to feel pleasurable sensations *in* the tool, rather than through it, it would cease to be the recipient of the kind of individualising attention which the lover normally craves. Caresses would direct themselves, not to the tool itself, but to the body to which it is attached, perhaps at the point of attachment, which would begin to gather to itself some of the magic of the phallus and some of its constant dialectic of modesty and pride. (There would be no point in concealing or revealing the thing itself, but much point in so 'dramatising' its mode of attachment.)

*Project* To be aroused by another is to incorporate that other into a sexual project, the project of love-making. We feel that there is something perverted, and perhaps inexplicable, about the man who claims that, being aroused by one person, he is able to perform the sexual act with another. Of course there are many cases here – the extreme example being perhaps the *Empress Messalina*, described by *Juvenal* (*Satire VI*), of whom we might wish to say that she was the victim of an insatiable appetite for sex, which, having been roused by one man, required her to proceed to others, and so on, *ad infinitum*. But notice that an important new element has been brought into the description: that of 'appetite'. The

purpose is precisely to lift the phenomenon out of the realm of normal sexual arousal, and attribute to it a character, and an explanation, which are not otherwise exemplified. There is something very important in common to the *Empress Messalina's* desire and that of any other normal human engaged in the sexual act. But there is also something very different. The difference lies in the intentional content, and it is partly this difference of intentionality that is signalled by the idea of 'appetite'.

Of course there are less serious cases than that of nymphomania: the more normal case is that of someone who, having been aroused by one person, contrives to curtail that arousal, in order to engage in the sexual act with another. Here there are in fact two states of arousal, which may be closely joined but which can never be one. The first arousal does not point towards the second; it has no natural history of which the second is an episode. The anticipation that is invoked in it is not for the act which is intended, but for another which is denied. The case is to be compared with that of a man who whets his 'appetite' for paintings by contemplating, say, *Poussin's Golden Calf*. It may be that, after a period of visual 'starvation', such a project has much to recommend it. But we know very well that the terms 'appetite' and 'starvation' are here being used metaphorically. We cannot conclude that the man's real interest, in studying the *Poussin*, is one that might have been equally satisfied by a *Velazquez*, a *Gauguin*, or whatever object he may subsequently enjoy. On the contrary, he was attempting to revive in himself precisely that kind of interest in painting which compels him to treat each example 'for its own sake alone'. In other words, his interest in the *Poussin* cannot be satisfied by a *Velazquez*, say; if it could, that would only show that it was not the *Poussin* which interested him, but any painting that would 'do just as well'. In such a case we could indeed speak of 'appetite', but what kind of appetite this is, what are its meaning, value and rationale – all these would be highly mysterious. Likewise in the case of sexual arousal. The arousal must be understood as a response to a particular person. Even if it is possible to 'whet one's appetite' for such responses, this cannot show that they are 'transferable' from object to object, like the desire for wine which leads one to sip assiduously from every glass.

To the intentionality of arousal must be added that of excitement. The 'epistemic' intentionality that I have discerned in sexual arousal has an intrinsically cumulative character, and leads the subject constantly onwards with an effect of discovery. Each phase of arousal contains an anticipation of the next. Excitement can exist in both non-intentional and intentional forms – as a general state of heightened response, and as a particular state of excitement *about* or *over* some matter of interest. In the



latter case the element of anticipation and discovery – the ‘epistemic’ structure – is always paramount. Excitement is part of the dynamic character of arousal: and this dynamic character marks yet another difference between sexual arousal and physical hunger. At every point there is a pleasure of expectation and anticipation, which carries the subject forward, and which also forms an integral part of what is pleasurable now. Sexual excitement is responsible for the ‘masterful’ and ‘urgent’ quality of desire. It leads to the sense that desire ‘overcomes’ the agent, and deprives him of his freedom. (And therefore, according to some philosophers, notably Schopenhauer, it leads to the illusion that desire is an *exercise* of the will, and a peculiarly fruitless one, destined only to post-coital disappointment.) Excitement involves the thought of something happening, and not just a physical sensation – I am not excited in *this* way by the prospect of a cigar, a glass of ale or a hot bath. I am excited precisely by a cooperative enterprise, in which I and the other gradually evolve within each other’s perspective, changing for each other and through each other, with a constant and reciprocal anticipation of our mutual intentions.

What, however, are we excited about? Although sexual excitement is a special case (a very special case) of the excitement to be observed in all friendly conversation, it has a focus which normal conversation lacks. This focus is our mutual embodiment, the other’s ‘being in’ his body and I in mine. In our excitement we sense each other’s animation, and become acquainted with the pulsing of the spirit in the flesh, which fills the body with a pervasive ‘I’, and transforms it into something strange, precious and possessible. The penis which hardens and the vagina which softens to the longed-for touch convey the whole person, just as he is conveyed in his laughter and his smile. (Hence, while you can ‘possess’ another in his body, you cannot possess the body alone: necrophilia, like rape, involves no fruition of desire.)

Sexual arousal has, then, an epistemic intentionality: it is a response to another individual, based in revelation and discovery, and involving a reciprocal and cooperative heightening of the common experience of embodiment. It is not directed beyond that individual, to the world at large, and it is not transferable to another, who ‘might do just as well’. Of course, arousal might have its origin in highly generalised thoughts, which flit libidinally from object to object. But when these thoughts have concentrated into the experience of arousal their generality is put aside; it is then the other who counts, and his particular embodiment. Not only the other, also I myself, and the sense of my bodily reality for him. Thus Molly Bloom:

and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

It can readily be seen why it is that, in so many cases, arousal seeks seclusion – seclusion with the other in a private place, where only he and his point of view are relevant to my intention. Moreover, arousal normally attempts to *abolish* what is not *private* – in particular to abolish the perspective of the onlooker, of that ‘third person’ who is neither you nor I. Milan Kundera describes an orgy in which two of the participants catch sight of each other across the room. The passage shows what an enormous effort is involved in sustaining true sexual arousal when the veil of privacy has been discarded. In effect, the consciousness of observation destroys the intentionality of the act:

Both couples were in the same situation. The two women were leaning over the same way and doing the same things. They looked like enterprising gardeners working in a flowerbed, twin gardeners, one the mirror image of the other. The men’s eyes met, and Jan saw the bald man’s body shaking with laughter. They were united as only an object can be united with its mirror image: if one shook, the other shook as well . . . The men were united by telepathic communication. Not only did each know what the other was thinking, they both knew the other knew. [*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*]

Eventually laughter gets the better of them, and their hostess, partner of one of the men, is mortally offended. The laughter, however, is the expression of a particular perception of the sexual act. When witnessed from the third-person point of view, the focus of the act is no longer the embodiment of the participants, but their bodies. This being witnessed by the other tends to kill arousal in the subject. Clearly, neither man is responding to the woman who attends to him – only to the contact of her body. The two women might have been mechanical dolls; and indeed, they have become mechanical dolls, in the laughing eyes of those who suffer their attentions. The laughter expresses the incongruity of the act, when it is divorced from the sentiment of arousal. The personal has been made public, and in the act of public recognition, it has become impersonal and routine. The frenzy of the orgy might be seen, indeed, as a reaction to the futility of sexual experience, when the urge towards impersonality is elevated into its single goal (see Aldous Huxley, *Ape and Essence*).

The aversion from the public which is characteristic of arousal could

also be described as a 'fear of the obscene'. The obscene is the representation or display of the sexual act in such a way as to threaten or ridicule its individualising intentionality, by placing the body uppermost in the thoughts of those engaged in it. If the desire for sexual stimulation is represented as directed indifferently towards, say, the penis, or towards anything possessing a penis, or towards a human body considered independently of its agency, viewpoint and will – if, in other words, sexual arousal is represented as an urge or appetite, focused on certain parts of the body, and satisfiable indifferently by anything with the right equipment – then the result (as in the ballad 'Nine Inch Will Please a Lady', attributed to Robert Burns) is normally obscene.

Obscenity is akin to bestiality. It standardly involves the attempt to divorce the sexual act from its interpersonal intentionality; from that epistemic 'directedness' that is contained within sexual arousal. But the divorce is effected by a peculiar shift of attention. In obscenity, attention is taken away from embodiment towards the body; the body rises up and inundates our perception, and in this nightmare the spirit goes under, as it goes under in death. Thus particular bodily perceptions – those which English children express in the sound 'ugh' and Yiddish-influenced Americans in the sound 'yuk' – play a prominent part in the experience of obscenity. The sense of the body as rotting, glutinous, adhesive – all that Sartre refers to in his celebrated analysis of *le visqueux*<sup>15</sup> – may dominate our perceptions, and nowhere more insistently than in our experience of sex, in which bodies adhere through their viscid and agglutinative parts. In the experience of the obscene the person is, as it were, eclipsed by his body, which, because it fits exactly to his shape and movement, creates an absence, a darkness, where he should otherwise have been. I no longer find the person whose embodiment enticed me: only the body which, in its frightful dissolution, its character as melting flesh, fascinates and also repels me.

In the eyes of an onlooker, someone not party to our arousal, our bodies invite obscene perception. (Hence there can be obscene representation of wholly innocent sexual acts.) The observer is not engaged in the delicate negotiations whereby we coax each other into our bodies, so as to experience that intense excitement which transforms the sexual union into a union of persons. The spectator of our antics sees, first and foremost, the agglutinating bodies. The thought of his interest is precisely an obscene thought, in which our embodiment is obliterated by our bodies, and rendered alien, impersonal, prey to the fascinated curiosity of the disgusted child. We see ourselves, so to speak, under the aspect of 'yuk!' (This is one reason that might be offered for the view that, whatever

else they may be, masturbation and voyeurism of the kind experienced in the video booth do not involve the release and satisfaction of the impulses which more fortunate beings may release and satisfy in the sexual act.)

Sexual arousal can occur only between persons, and is an artefact of their social condition. An immense moral labour has gone into the construction of the intentionality of arousal, and while it is willing labour, constantly performed anew by each generation of consenting adults, it might not have occurred. The state of mind that I have described is one of those achievements of civilisation which it would be folly to discard and yet which can, like morality, be discarded at almost any time. There is, however, a temptation which wars against arousal: the temptation to free the sexual act from the demanding stratagems of personal communication, and to represent as appetite that which can become appetite only by losing its characteristic intentionality.

Before saying more about that intentionality, it is necessary to make a point about method. Questions about the nature of mental items are to be answered, not by scientific investigation, but by philosophical (which means equally 'phenomenological' or 'conceptual') analysis. Of course, scientific investigation of mental phenomena is also possible. There could be a science of sexual behaviour, which might show important similarities between human beings and the lower animals. It is likely that there are such similarities, since sexual behaviour is explained, in both cases, by a reproductive function. But such an investigation would not answer the questions that I have been considering. Those questions concern the perceived surface of things, from which our mental concepts take their sense. I believe that there is a significant phenomenon, to which I have given the name arousal, and that we single out this phenomenon – either by referring to it, or, more normally, by selectively responding to it – in much of our ordinary social behaviour. There may be other things that someone may wish to call by the same name – the sexual readiness of animals, or the titillations that occur in the bath. But, at the superficial level (which is the level that matters), these must be distinguished from arousal, to the extent that they lack the intentionality of arousal. I have been discussing a phenomenological problem: the problem of the intentionality of a state of mind. That such problems are (scientifically speaking) superficial should not lead us to discount them; still less should it lead us to look for a solution to them in the results of science. For persons too are superficial, as are their values, their projects, their griefs and desires. Better, however, the shallowness of persons than the unfathomableness of things.

Like every such shallow thing, however, arousal has a history. It is the

descendant of experiences which we now only dimly imagine, and the ancestor of others which we cannot know. Much play has been made of our 'historical' nature. No human experience, it is argued, and no conception of the human being, makes sense outside the cultural context which generates and completes it. Conceptual analysis, which abstracts from this context, merely peels away the verbal skin, and preserves it in the formaldehyde of logic. If the result is sempiternal, it is because the human life has fled. Logic preserves, not the historical reality, but only our fleeting attempts to describe it: it gives us, not the 'real' but the 'nominal' essence. It may be a timeless truth that bachelors are without wives, but when has that been an obstacle to marriage?

At the deeper level, we are therefore told, there is no timeless truth about sex, only the endless reconstitution of our sexual experience from the fluctuating matter of human history. What can we conclude, therefore, from an examination of the intentional understanding contained in some given phenomenon? In what way does that lead either to a full description of the human reality or to a coherent prescription to which all of us might bow? A true 'genealogy of morals' would recognise no 'natural' sexual experience and no universal norm.

It is with such arguments that Michel Foucault, in his recent *History of Sexuality*,<sup>16</sup> would persuade us that there is no timeless 'truth' of sexual experience, and that sexual morality is the product of cultural conditions that have been eaten away by the worm of time. I am not persuaded by those claims, and hope to give reasons for rejecting them. When suffering their intellectual temptation the reader should remember two important observations. First, an experience may be historically determined and yet a part of human nature. For human nature too is historically determined, and an experience which belongs to the epoch of personality belongs to the human essence. Second, a description of human experience may – for all that has been written concerning the 'naturalistic fallacy' and the 'is-ought gap' – have prescriptive implications. The reader may doubt this, but he must recognise that his doubt is dogmatic. His duty is to keep an open mind for just so long as my argument requires.

So much by way of method. For the present we may draw an important conclusion, namely that a feature normally regarded as distinguishing erotic love (which possesses it) from sexual desire (which does not), is in fact present, not only in desire, but also in arousal, which is the surrounding circumstance of the sexual act. This is the feature of 'interpersonal intentionality'. The problem that worried Plato does not exist: there is no conflict or contradiction of the kind that he envisaged between sexual desire and erotic love, nor does the first belong to some

'lower' part of our nature than the second. Indeed, as I shall now argue, only a rational being can experience desire, and those sentiments that are so often slighted, as being indicative of our 'animal' nature, are sentiments that no mere animal has ever felt.