

The Meaning of Sex

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Sex Has No Inherent Meaning

THE DESIRE TO *give* sex meaning is an understandable, important enterprise. Honestly approached, it can be a valuable exercise; disguised as the righteous desire to simply appreciate the meaning sex has, or as the pursuit of restoring sex's "true" meaning, is a common source of conflict for both individuals and society.

Sex only has meaning insofar as we experience it. Its meaning is emergent, not objective. We discover the meaning of sex each time we have it, meaning that only lives in our experience. The meaning of sex changes -- is reinvented -- each time we have it.

Most people need sex to have meaning; the alternative is too frightening, i.e. having sex in an existential vacuum. Sex without meaning would require participants to float freely in sexual *experience*, rather than being snugly anchored in a cognitive framework, with a rational *explanation*.

This is scary because of our indoctrination that sex is "bad." We learn that we need protection from our sexuality: its non-linear, open-ended nature, its cacophony of impulses and feelings, its transcendent possibility of taking us out of ourselves. We might not, after all, make it back.

Because sex is ultimately physically grounded, it is a right-brain, non-linear experience, not a left-brain, cognitive one. Of

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course, sex can be analyzed, evaluated, and so on, *but not as part of the experience*. Having sex and understanding sex are two separate activities, much like eating and understanding nutrition are two separate activities. Trying to understand nutrition or digestion while eating undermines the sensuality and enjoyment offered by the experience of eating.

"Sex" is not limited to intercourse; not even limited, in fact, to genital activities. In reality "sex" describes a huge range of activities. This is half of a dialectic: many things can be sex because sex has whatever meaning we experience moment by moment; and sex has an infinite range of meanings because the scope of activities that can properly be called sexual is so vast.

People who believe they know the objective meaning of sex can easily say what sex is and what it isn't. Their dichotomy is clear, the sexual side predictably narrow. That's one reason some people can be so righteous about what humans should and should not do sexually.

"Intimacy," for example, is a common rallying point for people who need sex to have meaning. "Intimacy" (which, it should be noted, means radically different things to different people) is excellent. But setting it up as a standard for "good" sexuality creates a hierarchy of sexual experiences, down-playing or even excluding many of its most important aspects.

This is true *regardless* of the particular meaning people decide sex "really" has. In this sense, Christianity and other sex-negative institutions are not the only source of sexual repression in our culture. Rigidity about sexual experience, meaning, and decision-making is the true culprit.

Organized Humanism, for example, stands opposed to religious concepts of sex being inherently evil. But to the extent that Humanism is attempting to discover some secular "true meaning" of sex, it is in collusion with society's conceptual rigidity. Ultimately, it is different from other sexual dogmas only in content.

With the perspective that sex has only emergent meaning, we can experience a wide range of sexual feelings and meanings. With another perspective, much of this range is either invisible, or worse, repugnant and, by definition, excluded.

Sexuality, for example does have a dark side. One can deal with this in many ways, but an experience-based model of sexuality does not judge this fact. Instead it accepts it, makes room for it, plays with it or not, but always respects it.

If, however, one believes sex has a revealed meaning--say, it must always "nurture a relationship"-- then there's no room in the model for sex to have a "dark" side. One denies that it exists, says it reflects a perverse mind, weed it out, destroy it--its existence threatens the model of what sex can be. This is a primary source of censorship and other repressive movements.

The fact that sex has no inherent meaning is, actually, its ultimate positive quality. It gives us the opportunity to discover an infinite number of meanings in sex, and to use sex as a vehicle for self-exploration. It gives us the chance to play, in the purest sense of the word.

That sex has no meaning is scary. Thus every time you have sex you're adrift. It means you take responsibility for your choices and experiences. If you believe that sex is dangerous, of course, or if you believe that sex is so powerful that it can destroy you, then sex is a terrifying prospect.

Sex's lack of meaning is also scary because it means partners are not subject to our control or accountable to objective criteria. It means we have no right to tell a partner, "you're obviously wrong for what you like or do sexually, so you should want what I want--sex the 'right way.'"

Sex having no meaning requires that we trust ourselves when being sexual. It means making choices from a vast array of options. Will we make good choices? Choices that reveal things about ourselves that we've defended against? This is worse than being exposed as having lust in your heart. Will we be attracted to activities that "good people" are not? Will our choices hurt our partner, our family, our country?

Then, you have to trust sex. Will it take you so far out of yourself that you can't come back? Will you have your eyes be blinded by the brightness or darkness? It's like reaching into a cave without knowing what's there. It takes courage.

Furthermore, you have to trust your partner. Can s/he handle whatever you create sexually? Can s/he go to new sexual vistas with you as you invent them, or will you find yourself alone? Will s/he go further or faster than you, also leaving you feeling alone? In reality, sex is almost always an experience of oscillation: of partners being alone and then finding each other, again and again. Can you tolerate being parallel and then coming together, then splitting up again moments later, trusting that you'll find your way back toward each other?

Finally, you have to trust that you're adequate--that is, that your body will respond to whatever challenge sex presents. In reality, that's redundant, because sex only exists in the body, and so it can't present challenges your body can't handle. In this sense, losing an erection, for example, is a perfect response to whatever is going on at the moment. Only if we have a particular, arbitrary standard for our body's behavior is a lost erection problematic.

Many troubling behaviors reflect how badly people wish sex to have meaning. To sustain the illusion that it does, for example, society is willing to persecute some members through laws regulating consensual sexual behavior or preventing sex education. This is why people are invested in others' sexuality--because it seems dangerous to have alternative models of sexuality floating around. In this sense, the desire for sex to have meaning makes society a theocracy, with the government, organized religion, and media its priesthood.

Also the wish for sexual meaning is behind the common desire for special rules to govern sexual behavior and decision making. This is an example of the wish, as Fromm called it, to escape from freedom: to avoid taking responsibility for the complex and (it feels) dangerous richness of our sexuality.

Ecstatic sexuality--that is, body-centered instead of mind controlled--is possible only if we let go of socially-constructed, allegedly ontological boundaries of sex. People fear this is the same as letting go of ethical boundaries, which is not true. Ethical boundaries regarding sexuality do *not* require some arbitrary, objective boundaries being imposed on the sexual body and mind. This insight (in addition to an actual code of ethics) is part of the treasure that Humanism can offer.

Humanism should be vigorously developing a dialogue that addresses sexuality's ecstatic nature through a non-mystical, meaningful (emergent) yet not meaningful (objective), sacred yet non-religious grandeur.

Ironically, the sanctified meaning that some people need sex to have, blocks access to the very transcendent qualities they claim to desire. By confronting this as a personal and social objective Humanism could give people a chance to have profound sexual experiences the possibilities of which are inherent in both the human body and the human mind.

So is sex meaningless? Yes and no. It is meaningless in the objective or philosophic sense. But it is meaningful on the personal, experiential level. One reason that people have sex

is to be periodically renewed, nourished in their experience of whatever kind of meaning they expect--whether that meaning involves intimacy, closeness, pleasure, creativity, bodily perfection, or the promise that life is OK.

The need to pretend that sex has meaning is understandable. It indicates a desire to be grounded, to depend on something. But developmentally, we all have to get off the floor and walk, even though it seems so terribly high up there, and the floor seems so terribly hard, and falling is so terribly scary.

As with all fears, how we respond to this one is a clear statement of where we are and who we are. Pretending we don't have this fear is immature, and it prevents us from moving forward. Acknowledging this fear is a prerequisite for constructing a mature universe.

So we need to deal with this fear by confronting it: by looking sex straight in the eye of its deep, black maw, and walking straight in--whistling a happy tune, if necessary--trusting sex and ourselves, knowing that the worst thing that can happen is merely that we'll have an experience we don't want to repeat.

Bibliography for Further Reading

- Carol Cassell: *Swept Away*
- Betty Dodson: *SexJor One*
- Helen Hazen: *Endless Rapture*
- Marty Klein: *Your Sexual Secrets*
- Raymond Lawrence: *The Poisoning of Eros*
- Avodah Offit: *Night Thoughts*
- Shree Rajneesh: *Quotations on Sex*