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How to Think More About Sex

Written by Alain de Botton

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I. Introduction

I

It is rare to get through this life without feeling – generally with a degree of secret agony, perhaps at the end of a relationship, or as we lie in bed frustrated next to our partner, unable to go to sleep – that we are somehow a bit odd about sex. It is an area in which most of us have a painful impression, in our heart of hearts, that we are quite unusual. Despite being one of the most private of activities, sex is nonetheless surrounded by a range of powerful socially sanctioned ideas that codify how normal people are meant to feel about and deal with the matter.

In truth, however, few of us are remotely normal sexually. We are almost all haunted by guilt and neuroses, by phobias and disruptive desires, by indifference and disgust. None of us approaches sex as we are meant to, with the cheerful, sporting, non-obsessive, constant, well-adjusted outlook that we torture ourselves by believing that other people are endowed with. We are universally deviant – but only in relation to some highly distorted ideals of normality.

Given how common it is to be strange, it is regrettable how seldom the realities of sexual life make it into the public realm. Most of what we are sexually remains impossible to communicate with anyone whom we would want to think well of us. Men and women in

love will instinctively hold back from sharing more than a fraction of their desires out of a fear, usually accurate, of generating intolerable disgust in their partners. We may find it easier to die without having had certain conversations.

The priority of a philosophical book about sex seems evident: not to teach us how to have more intense or more frequent sex, but rather to suggest how, through a shared language, we might begin to feel a little less painfully strange about the sex we are either longing to have or struggling to avoid.

2.

Whatever discomfort we do feel around sex is commonly aggravated by the idea that we belong to a liberated age – and ought by now, as a result, to be finding sex a straightforward and untroubling matter.

The standard narrative of our release from our shackles goes something like this: for thousands of years across the globe, due to a devilish combination of religious bigotry and pedantic social custom, people were afflicted by a gratuitous sense of confusion and guilt around sex. They thought their hands would fall off if they masturbated. They believed they might be burned in a vat of oil because they had ogled someone's ankle. They had no clue about erections or clitorises. They were ridiculous.

Then, sometime between the First World War and the launch of *Sputnik 1*, things changed for the better. Finally, people started wearing bikinis, admitted to masturbating, grew able to mention cunnilingus in social contexts, started to watch porn films and

became deeply comfortable with a topic that had, almost unaccountably, been the source of needless neurotic frustration for most of human history. Being able to enter into sexual relations with confidence and joy became as common an expectation for the modern era as feeling trepidation and guilt had been for previous ages. Sex came to be perceived as a useful, refreshing and physically reviving pastime, a little like tennis – something that everyone should have as often as possible in order to relieve the stresses of modern life.

This narrative of enlightenment and progress, however flattering it may be to our powers of reason and our pagan sensibilities, conveniently skirts an unbudging fact: sex is not something that we can ever expect to feel easily liberated *from*. It was not by mere coincidence that sex so disturbed us for thousands of years: repressive religious dictates and social taboos grew out of aspects of our nature that cannot now just be wished away. We were bothered by sex because it is a fundamentally disruptive, overwhelming and demented force, strongly at odds with the majority of our ambitions and all but incapable of being discreetly integrated within civilized society.

Despite our best efforts to clean it of its peculiarities, sex will never be either simple or *nice* in the ways we might like it to be. It is not fundamentally democratic or kind; it is bound up with cruelty, transgression and the desire for subjugation and humiliation. It refuses to sit neatly on top of love, as it should. Tame it though we may try, sex has a recurring tendency to wreak havoc across our lives: it leads us to destroy our relationships, threatens our productivity and compels us to stay up too late in nightclubs talking to people whom we don't like but whose exposed midriffs we nevertheless strongly wish to touch. Sex remains in absurd, and perhaps irreconcilable, conflict with some

of our highest commitments and values. Unsurprisingly, we have no option but to repress its demands most of the time. We should accept that sex is inherently rather weird instead of blaming ourselves for not responding in more normal ways to its confusing impulses.

This is not to say that we cannot take steps to grow wiser about sex. We should simply realize that we will never entirely surmount the difficulties it throws our way. Our best hope should be for a respectful accommodation with an anarchic and reckless power.

3.

Sex manuals, ranging from the *Kama Sutra* to *The Joy of Sex*, have been united in locating the problems of sexuality in the physical sphere. Sex will go better – they variously assure us – when we master the lotus position, learn to use ice cubes creatively or apply proven techniques for attaining synchronized orgasm.

If we occasionally bristle at such manuals, it may be because – beneath their encouraging prose and helpful diagrams – they seem intolerably humiliating. They want us to take seriously the notion that sex is troublesome to us chiefly because we haven't tried postillionage or got the hang of the Karezza method. Yet these are adventures at the luxurious end of the spectrum of human sexuality and mock the sorts of challenges we are more normally faced with.

For the majority of us, the real cause for concern is not how to make sex even more enjoyable with a lover who is already keen to spend several hours on a divan with us trying out new positions, amid the smell of jasmine and the song of hummingbirds. Rather,



The most urgent problems we face with sex seldom have anything to do with technique. *Kama Sutra*, India, late eighteenth century.

we worry about how problematic sex has become with our long-term partner due to mutual resentments over childcare and finances; or about our addiction to internet pornography; or about the fact that we seem to crave sex only with people we don't love; or about whether, by having had an affair with someone at work, we have irretrievably broken our spouse's heart and trust.

4.

In the face of these problems and many more, we might question our expectations of how often we can rightly look forward to sex going well for us – and, contrary to the spirit of the age, might conclude that a handful of occasions in a lifetime may be a fair and natural limit to our ambitions. Great sex, like happiness more generally, may be the precious and sublime exception.

During our most fortunate encounters, it is rare for us to appreciate how privileged we are. It is only as we get older, and look back repeatedly and nostalgically to a few erotic episodes, that we start to realize with what stinginess nature extends her gifts to us – and therefore what an extraordinary and rare achievement of biology, psychology and timing satisfying sex really is.

For most of our lives, sex seems fated to remain steeped in longing and awkwardness. Whatever the manuals may promise, there are really no solutions to the majority of the dilemmas sex creates for us. A useful self-help book on this subject ought hence to focus on the management of pain rather than its outright elimination; we should hope to find a literary version of a hospice, not a hospital. Yet though

we cannot expect books to dissolve away our problems, they can still provide opportunities for us to discharge our sadness and discover a communal confirmation of our woes. Books retain a role in offering us consoling reminders that we are not alone with the humiliating and peculiar difficulties imposed by our unavoidable possession of a sex drive.

II. The Pleasures of Sex

I. Eroticism and Loneliness

I.

Before considering the many problems that sex causes us, it is worth taking a detour to look at the opposite side of the coin: to ponder the question – not as obvious as it may seem – of why sex should, on rare occasions, be such a deeply pleasurable and rewarding activity.

In so far as our age is interested in this topic, it tends to put forward a single over-arching explanation derived from evolutionary biology. This discipline, which is ubiquitous in the modern world, informs us that human beings, like all other animals, are genetically programmed to reproduce themselves and need the pleasures of sex as a reward for undertaking the immense efforts of getting together and raising children with a partner.

According to evolutionary biology, what we find sexy is really just a reflection of something that will further the species. We may be drawn to intelligence, because this indicates a quality that is important in ensuring the survival of our young. We like to see people dancing well as this indicates a vigour that will come in handy when protecting the next generation. What society calls an ‘attractive’ person is ultimately someone whom the unconscious intuitions will be good at fighting off infections and go into labour without complications.

This evolutionary–biological thesis clearly isn’t wrong. It is, however, blunt, disconnected from our actual experiences of sex – and in the end a little boring. While it successfully explains why sex exists, it doesn’t begin to shed light on our conscious motivations for wanting to sleep with particular people or on the range of pleasures we derive from doing so. Evolutionary biology may provide us with an overall motive for our actions, but it doesn’t develop any reasons that we actually have in our own minds while we invite someone for dinner and later try to unbutton their jeans on the sofa – and on this basis, it doesn’t provide us with a very satisfactory account of why sex should really matter to us as reflexive humans.

2.

In search of an explanation that we can more directly relate to, we might begin by focusing on a singular moment in the dating ritual, one whose recollection, even many years later, will almost always be accompanied by a unique sense of excitement: the first time we kissed, and thus physically and openly admitted our attraction to, a particular person.

It might have been inside a car after a long dinner during which we barely dared to eat, or in the corridor at the end of a party, or quite suddenly, before parting outside a train station, without any concern for the many commuters pressing past on all sides. We may not be the finest conversationalists, but when we are describing how we met and the run-up to our first kiss, we are rarely dull.

This first moment, which decisively shifts us from relative strangers to sexual intimates, thrills us because it marks an overcoming of loneliness. The pleasure we take is not rooted purely in stimulated nerve endings and the satisfaction of a biological drive; it also stems from the joy we feel at emerging, however briefly, from our isolation in a cold and anonymous world.

This isolation is something we all become acquainted with after the end of childhood. If we are lucky, we begin comfortably enough on this earth, in a state of close physical and emotional union with a devoted caregiver. We lie naked on her skin, we can hear her heartbeat, we can see the delight in her eyes as she watches us do nothing more accomplished than blow a saliva bubble – in other words, than merely exist. We can bang our spoon against the table and inspire uproarious laughter. Our fingers are tickled, and the fine hairs on our head are stroked, smelt and kissed. We don’t even have to speak. Our needs are carefully interpreted; the breast is there whenever we want it.

Then gradually comes the fall. The nipple is taken away, and we are blithely induced to move on to rice and morsels of dry chicken. Our body either ceases to please or can no longer be so casually displayed. We grow ashamed of our particularities. Ever-expanding areas of our outer selves are forbidden to be touched by others. It begins with the genitals, then spreads to encompass the stomach, the back of the neck, the ears and the armpits, until all we are allowed to do is occasionally give someone a hug, shake hands or bestow or receive a peck on the cheek. The signs of others’ satisfaction in our existence declines, and their enthusiasm begins to be linked to our performance. It is what we *do* rather than what we *are* that is now

of interest to them. Our teachers, once so encouraging about our smudgy drawings of ladybirds and our scrawls depicting the flags of the world, seem to take pleasure only in our exam results. Well-meaning individuals brutally suggest that perhaps it is time for us to start earning some money of our own, and society is kind or unkind to us chiefly according to how successful we turn out to be at doing just that. We begin to have to monitor what we say and how we look. There are aspects of our appearance that revolt and terrify us and that we feel we have to hide from others by spending money on clothes and haircuts. We grow into clumsy, heavy-footed, shameful, anxious creatures. We become adults, definitively expelled from paradise.

But deep inside, we never quite forget the needs with which we were born: to be accepted as we are, without regard to our deeds; to be loved through the medium of our body; to be enclosed in another's arms; to occasion delight with the smell of our skin – all of these needs inspiring our relentless and passionately idealistic quest for someone to kiss and sleep with.

3.

Let us imagine some incremental steps in the story of a couple seducing each other for the first time – and in so doing analyse their pleasures in relation to this thesis about loneliness. Let us begin by picturing the couple in a cafe at eleven o'clock on a Saturday night in a large city, eating ice cream after seeing a film together.

There is doubtless a biological explanation for the sexual excitement this couple are feeling, connected to an unconscious narrative

about reproduction and genetics, but the man and the woman are also turned on by the overcoming of the many barriers to intimacy that exist in normal life – and it is this dimension we can focus on to explain the greater part of the eroticism they will experience on their way to the bedroom.

The Kiss – Acceptance

Spoon in hand, the woman is describing a holiday she recently took to Spain with her sister. In Barcelona, she says, they visited a pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe and ate in a restaurant that specialized in seafood with a Moroccan influence. The man can feel her leg beside his, and more specifically the elasticity of her black tights as they taper to the hem of her grey and yellow skirt. When she is in the midst of relating an anecdote about Gaudí, he moves his face towards hers, ready to pull back if she gives any indication of fear or disgust – but his advance is met, to his enchantment, by only a tender and welcoming smile. The woman shuts her eyes, and both parties register the unique, unexpected combination of moisture and skin across their lips.

The pleasure of the moment can be understood only by considering its wider context: the overwhelming indifference against which any kiss is set. It goes almost without saying that the majority of people we encounter will be not merely uninterested in having sex with us but positively revolted by the idea. We have no choice but to keep a minimum of sixty or, even better, ninety centimetres' distance between us and them at all times, to make it absolutely clear that

our compromised selves have no intention of intruding into their personal spheres.

Then comes the kiss. The deeply private realm of the mouth – that dark, moist cavity that no one else but our dentist usually enters, where our tongue reigns supreme over a microcosm as silent and unknown as the belly of a whale – now prepares to open itself up to another. The tongue, which has had no expectation of ever meeting a compatriot, gingerly approaches a fellow member of its species, advancing with something of the reserve and curiosity exhibited by a South Sea Islander in greeting the arrival of the first European adventurer. Indentations and plateaus in the inner lining of the cheeks, hitherto thought of as solely personal, are revealed as having counterparts. The tongues engage each other in a tentative dance. One person can lick the other's teeth as if they were his or her own.

It could sound disgusting – and that's the point. Nothing is erotic that isn't also, with the wrong person, revolting, which is precisely what makes erotic moments so intense: at the precise juncture where disgust could be at its height, we find only welcome and permission. The privileged nature of the union between two people is sealed by an act that, with someone else, would have horrified them both.

Then again, if we lived in another culture where acceptance was signalled in other ways entirely – for example, where a couple who wanted to show one another signs of affection would eat a papaya together or touch each other's toenails – these actions might in turn also become eroticized. A kiss is pleasurable because of the sensory receptivity of our lips, but we shouldn't overlook that a good deal of our excitement has nothing to do with the physical dimension of the act: it stems from the simple realization that someone else likes us

quite a lot, a message that would enchant us even if it were delivered via another medium. Beneath the kiss itself, it is its meaning that interests us – which is why the desire to kiss someone can be decisively reduced (as it may need to be, for instance, when two lovers are already married to other people) by a declaration of that desire – a confession which may in itself be so erotic as to render the actual kiss superfluous.

The Undressing – An End to Shame

The man and woman drive back to her flat in a part of town he doesn't know well and together climb silently up to the third floor. Inside, the curtains are open and the bedroom is illuminated by the orange light of a streetlamp. They kiss once more by a cupboard. Emboldened by their privacy, he undoes the clasps on her beige blouse, she unfastens the buttons of his blue shirt. Their movements grow impatient. He reaches around to her back and grapples awkwardly with the hooks on her bra. With a forgiving smile at his ineptitude, she reaches around to help him. A few moments later, they behold each other naked for the first time and begin tenderly caressing each other's thighs, buttocks, shoulders, stomachs and nipples.

It can hardly be coincidental that in Genesis, one of the principal punishments visited by God on Adam and Eve in their expulsion from Paradise was a sense of physical shame. The Judeo-Christian deity decreed that the two ingrates should forever feel embarrassed about exposing their bodies. Whatever we may make of the biblical origins of this feeling of corporeal shame, it is evident that we wear

clothes not only to keep warm but also – and perhaps even primarily – for fear of provoking repulsion in others by the sight of our flesh. Our bodies never look quite as we would want them to; even in the most beguiling and athletic moments of our youth, we are rarely lacking a long list of features we would prefer to alter. Yet such anxiety is based on something more existential than a cosmetic distaste. There is something fundamentally embarrassing about revealing any kind of naked adult body – which is to say, any body capable of desiring and having sex – to a witness.

It wasn't always this way. The shame begins in adolescence. As our bodies mature and become physically ready for sex, so we run the risk of appearing obscene before the wrong eyes. A division begins between our ordinary public selves on the one hand and our sexual and private identities on the other. A large portion of who we are as adults, from our sexual fantasies to our parted legs, becomes impossible to share with almost anyone we know.

Let us return to our male lover, who is now passionately sucking his partner's fingers. For him, the division of selves and the feeling of infamy began in the middle of his fourteenth year. One month, he was happy to play cowboys and Indians in the garden with his brother and visit his beloved grandmother; the next, all he wanted was to stay at home in his room with the curtains drawn, masturbating to the memory of a woman's profile that he had glimpsed on the way out of the newsagent's. There was no way to reconcile his desires with what was expected of him by others. His era could countenance his thinking of holding the hand of or even kissing a girl he liked, but such benign and innocent activities seemed to have little in common with the macabre depravity unfolding daily in his runaway imagination.

Soon enough he was dreaming of orgies and anal sex, obsessing about obtaining hard-core pornography and fantasizing about tying up and defiling his maths teacher. How could he still be a nice person? His shame prompted him to develop an inner self that he feared he would never be able to introduce anyone to.

Something similar had happened to his partner, now on her knees before him. At thirteen, she too underwent a transformation. She had previously enjoyed needlework, horseback riding and baking banana bread. Then, all but overnight, her pastimes dwindled to one: going into the bathroom, locking the door, lying on the floor, pulling off her trousers and watching herself masturbate in the full-length mirror. How could such an activity fit in with what other people knew of her? Could anyone accept the whole of her? In the guilty, exhausted moments after reaching orgasm, she knew some of the pain felt by Masaccio's Eve as she was ushered out of Paradise by a punitive deity.

What is now unfolding between our couple in the bedroom is therefore an act of mutual reconciliation between two secret sexual selves, emerging at last from sinful solitude. The couple tacitly agree not to mention the stupefying strangeness of their respective physical forms and bodily desires; they accept without shame what once seemed so shameful. They admit through their caresses to being driven in unusual yet compatible directions. What they are up to is starkly at odds with the behaviour expected of them by the civilized world – it clashes, for instance, with the memory of their grandmothers – but it no longer seems either wicked or unique. At last, in the semi-darkness, the couple can confess to the many wondrous and demented things that having a body drives them to want.