

Papers and articles

Discussion of Jonathan Webber's paper *Sexuality and Perversion*¹

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In discussing Jonathan's really interesting and provocative paper I will be bringing forward the pragmatic tools of my profession, in contrast to the purity of philosophical logic.

Jonathan argues for three claims. That the distinctive sexual feelings involved in desire, excitement, sexual activity and pleasure are what defines the sexual. This could be paraphrased as 'if it feels sexy it is'.

The second is that the concept of perversion arises from a paradigm of sex that has been dominant in sexual ethics

The third is that the second is invalidated by the first, that is to say that if it feels sexy it is and there is not a hierarchy of acceptable sexiness.

You probably won't be surprised to discover that I simultaneously profoundly agree and disagree with Jonathan's claims.

My own claims will emerge from a consideration of whether it is useful to bring in some additional elements to the debate about whether a conception of perversion has explanatory use. I will be arguing that in modern psychoanalysis, there is value in holding to a concept of perversion and I hope through the use of some clinical examples to convince you of this.

I also intend to give a little background to some of the psychoanalytic thinking about sexuality and perversion because I think it is often assumed that psychoanalysis is intensely moralistic, holding to sexual mores that derive from biblical commandments.

Thirdly, I would like to suggest that any concept of 'a particular kind of feeling instinctively understood by us all' actually defies meaning. Is this a feeling based around physical sensation? An Emotional state? A gut intuition? Whatever it is I believe that unless we consider both the conscious and that

special terrain of the psychoanalyst, the unconscious, we are not able to know what such a sexy feeling might be or from what it proceeds. I would also want to know more about what this sexy feeling is allied to; is it in the direction of love or hate, or humiliation or fear or pain or what?

Feelings do not exist in isolation, they are intimately linked with states of mind, they promote contentedness or anxiety. So I as a psychoanalyst would also be thinking of the relationship any feeling, sexual or not has to anxiety or the diminution of it.

Sigmund Freud himself would not, I think, be too uncomfortable with the paper Jonathan presented tonight. With his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' he set out his new psychoanalytic stall putting forward his radical ideas about sexuality, including the new suggestion of infantile sexuality which attributed to the infant a libidinal drive that sought satisfaction through all and any imaginable manner, through sucking and touching self and others and inanimate objects and which rendered the normal infant in a famous phrase 'polymorphously perverse'. Freud went to great lengths to state that many of the so-called perversions had their roots in fixation at infantile stages of psychosexual development, the famous oral, anal and genital phases. It is true that Freud believed that in adolescence the individual came to a more developed form of sexuality that involved another person but his views on the widest range of sexual practices remained extremely liberal and value neutral.

As you probably know Freud made libido and sexual drive the powering force of human emotional and intellectual development. He saw every aspect of human relating as a derivative of the libidinal instinct. But what he also did was to sketch out and discover the huge part of the human psyche that is unconscious. Much of the early work of psychoanalysis was about tracing the

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unconscious sexual significance of dreams, slips and the symptoms of the hysteric, the obsessional and the neurotic. For Freud the root of all unconscious life lay with the sexual drives and as his work developed the aggressive drives, culminating in his mythic conception of life as founded on a conflict between sex and aggression: love and hate. As we will see these binary oppositions have their relevance in pragmatic considerations.

It was Mrs. Melanie Klein who introduced the equally significant psychoanalytic concepts of unconscious phantasy and object relations to psychoanalysis. Mrs Klein held, and I hold here tonight, that behind every human action there is unconscious phantasy and that that unconscious phantasy contains the interaction of internalized representations of other people which are coloured with Freud's original conceptions of drives, sexual and aggressive, love and hate.

It is these unconscious phantasies and phantasy relationships that I investigate in my everyday work with patients. The people I see need help with relationships, with their sexual discomforts and their fears of misery and madness.

It is the balance between love and hate that we try to understand and through interpretation to shift people in the direction of love and life away from hate and death. And it is in this context that I make the claim based, as I said earlier, on the pragmatic everyday tools of my trade that keeping a concept of sexual perversion in mind is useful.

Turning to some later psychoanalytic views, it was the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller who proposed the formulation that **perversion is the erotic form of hatred** in the late 1960s. I suppose the activities that I find perverse are those that promote anxiety and diminish love or actively express hate and deathliness. How does smelling rubber, stealing from shops or indeed dressing up in women's clothing do this?

The patients about whom I will be talking have often had traumatic experiences that left their capacity to manage the fear of loss of love and death disabled so that what they find sexy is limited and truncated, in fact the more

humanity is removed from the sexiness the better.

I accept that perversion is a pejorative word and carries all sorts of moral connotations. The way I use it in this discussion is to connote a sexualized defence, something sexy created to fill in or over frightening and traumatic experiences.

Think of Max Moseley who was born in prison to a Nazi sympathizer and persecutor of Jews and his collaborator wife. His recent exposure as someone innocently using the services of prostitutes for sexual pleasure where they inflict pain on him in a sadomasochistic manner, could be seen as one method of managing confusing painful and frightening aspects of his early life through sexualizing them and acting them out in some loveless dungeon-like place. It could be seen as an evolution of his father's cruelty transformed into masochistic attacks on himself.

This perversion, although an acting out of internal conflicts, contributed I think to his great success in formula 1 racing where he brought safety to a very dangerous sport. (If you have seen the film 'Senna' you know what I mean). Under Moseley's regime, accidents in motor racing were reduced to almost zero. The moral being that if you want someone to manage a dangerous sport that had death at its core, employ a sadomasochist who sexualizes danger and aggression to do the job.

Mr. D came into analysis because he was a great kisser. He said he felt like Rodin's statue of the kiss, he was permanently frozen in time as the statue kiss. He was such a great kisser he said, and gained complete sexual satisfaction in this way, indeed he had many girlfriends but they left disappointed when they discovered this was all he could or wanted to do.

He was good at creating desire in his objects but unable to consummate relationships because he seemingly he got caught stuck in mouth contact, unable to progress further.

It is important to note the effect he had on his partners. He excited them with apparently mature kisses but then left them aroused and frustrated when they wanted more. Perhaps his partners could be seen as having too much

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attachment to a paradigmatic view of sexuality and should have been more amenable to his limited sexual interest, but as he found to his pain, this was hard to find, even on the internet.

This preoccupation with one aspect of sexual contact could also be, as Jonathan says, the smell of rubber or stealing from shops, or a man I saw years ago who was turned on by stealing alarms from an alarm shop, but in my view the apparent limited involvement with these things always involves a much more complicated unconscious phantasy scenario than that created by the vehicle of sexual pleasure with another person.

Don Giovanni and Valmont from *Liaisons Dangereuses* seem only interested in conquest and these conquests could be seen as the ultimate status symbol of the freedom seeking libertine except for the effect they have on their victims or accomplices. Why does the Don only want to conquer and leave and why is Valmont so excited by the conquest and seduction of a virgin? This sort of sex seems driven by something else other than sexual pleasure, something that promotes anxiety and fear in the other.

I recently gave a paper on the subject of objectum sex, about a woman who thought the Eiffel Tower so sexy that she married it or another who was married to the Berlin Wall and was devastated when it was demolished. In those two cases the women involved felt that there was something sexual going on, but I saw something psychotic and tragic.

So whilst I agree that sexuality should be divorced from conventional moral judgement, as did Freud, I would say that a perversion is often an enactment whereby sexuality is used to carry far more complex feelings and emotions other than just sexual pleasure.

I think this dynamic is a part of working with all perverse and addicted patients, who fill up the black holes in their psyche by destroying any need for another by creating triangular relationships with substances, as in the addictions, or perverse activity, creating loss and pain in their objects, as with Valmont and the Don whilst pursuing preoccupations that fill their minds and bodies with desire, though

the human other is excluded, controlled and diminished.

Today's emphasis in the psychoanalytic study and treatment of perversion is the connection between eroticism and perversion. What now differentiates more everyday sexuality from perversion is the intention toward the other. Thus we might say perversion is specifically an aggressive intention that is sexualized and gives pleasure.

It is the desire to humiliate and to be humiliated that I am interested in. What differentiates the non perverse from the perverse is not so much to do with biological reproduction and the turning away from it, as Freud thought, but the level of intimacy that the individual is capable of achieving with the other, given this more emotional context.

Perhaps a few brief clinical examples will further illustrate what I have in mind.

Many sexual practices have distance management of 'the other' at their heart. The voyeur reverses his frightening paranoid anxiety by becoming the secret watcher so it's other people who are vulnerable to his look, such as Mr D who was terrified of his own sexual anxieties and impotence with women, and who conquered them by installing tiny cameras in the women's showers. Or Mr C with his terrors of a promiscuous mother with her many violent lovers who reversed the frightening primal scene by watching his wife having sexual contact with other men, so that he could reverse his feelings of humiliation as a child by controlling the unreliable couple. Or Dr D whose early life was so replete with morbidity that she sexualized death, finding the ending of relationships and their demise more exciting than the possibility of a life enhancing love. Or the exhibitionist who reversed his own anxieties and isolation by flashing at innocent by-standers who were then shocked by his sexual behaviour, usually conducted whilst they are in lonely places.

I could go on with example after example but I hope that I have said enough to convince you that it is possible and perhaps essential for a psychoanalyst to retain a conception of perversion without retreat into conventional morality.