

## How to Think More about Sex

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July 19, 2012

Love, Sex and Marriage are three separate things and should not be confused. I used to say exactly that during my first marriage, delighted in the cynicism those words seemed to convey. In retrospect I realize, what I must always have subconsciously felt, how utterly innocent I was, how inexperienced of how the world really is, meaning the world of social relations which some people claim is the only world there is. I was in a way parroting greater wisdom, just as the child gets a reputation for precociousness by mechanically repeating the words it hears around itself.

Alain de Botton voices similar sentiments in his most recent book. He certainly should be more savvy and experienced as a man in his forties than I was in my twenties, but I am not quite sure. The pictures of the author, a young bald man of slight build, as well as the persona conveyed by his steady authorial voice, that hardly differ from one book to another and never deviating from the low-key ironies of a detached, not to say excluded observer, do not inspire confidence on that account. What does he know of the world out there, save from what he has read in books and occasionally gleaned from the accidental and peripheral tryst coming his way? de Botton has touched upon the subject before in his career, as testified by the documentation of the vicissitudes a young, shy man invariably suffers in his early quest in his 'Essays of Love'<sup>1</sup>. So why read it, unless you have made a habit of reading the collected oeuvres of the author? As to the latter he has his charms. I first encountered him in connection with his book on Proust, the works of which I had just finished at the time. Subsequent reading of 'The Art of Travel' and 'The Consolations of Philosophy' confirmed my impression of a pleasurable author whose works may not be profound (and never meant to be either) yet not without delight. His commercial success has been palpable and he has recently founded something he calls 'The School of Life' intended to address the basic questions of how to lead your life, intended I guess to be a notch or two above the usual self-help books which are produced in such profusion<sup>2</sup>. The title should be catchy and titillate more than one potential reader. And in fact you pick it up and have a hard time putting it down, which is a testimony to the fluidity of the prose, which of course is not necessarily a good thing, unless speed is a premium, as in fast food. And sure enough, in an hour two the slight book is devoured. Any wiser?

What is so strange about sex? On the face of it, it is truly ridiculous and disgusting. To watch the act would be one of embarrassment and nausea, unless of course the act of watching is part of the act itself, such as in voyeurism. To engage in sexual congress is to transcend a deeply set taboo, that of the inviolability of physical integrity. To invade the

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<sup>1</sup> Accidentally bought, read and reviewed twice in my recent reading.

<sup>2</sup> But why hold your nose so high. Self-help as how to lead a full and satisfying life was in fact the ambition of Socrates to impart, with the one redeeming feature that he unlike his contemporaries, not to mention his modern followers, did not seek to be financially awarded for his efforts

intimate private sphere of an individual. True this is also done when you are subjected to physical violence, which thereby has an intimate character, that occasionally leads to a confusion, but in sex, the intimacy goes even beyond that. Among the possible myth of sex is that it is involuntary in the sense that desire is not willed but something that is descended on you. That the body has its own will beyond the conscious control of the individual. Thus, in modern Lawrencian myth, sexual union is truth, going beyond the mere pretense and posturing that characterizes polite social life. While in social intercourse you may not always be entitled to say no, it is imperative that you do so in sexual would the need to do so arise. Some people have more sexual charisma than others, and that has something to do more with energy than looks, although the author makes a lot of beauty, as an objective measure, in terms of procreational health and potential. If beauty, in terms of regularity and symmetry of feature would be the dominant factor, sex would only concern an elite.

What turns people on? It is often remarked that sex on a first date could often be more exciting and satisfying than on subsequent. We come to the connection between love and sex. The latter is often heralded as a complement to the first, that in fact without the grounding in love it is a purely physical manifestation, essentially not rising above an itch. This is clearly not true. As is often testified, you can feel sexual attraction to somebody you do not like at all. The bad guy often exerts a stronger pull than the good. Cruelty is often more of an aphrodisiac than gentleness and tenderness. There are various Freudian explanations of this, some of which the author cannot resist from regurgitating. But are those not beside the point? As we have already remarked, sex seems to take on a life of its own, running a parallel to our social personae. So why should there necessarily be a correspondence between the features we value as a responsible social being and those that excite our sexual desire.

This leads to the crucial question, is sex and marriage, far from being requisites of each other incompatible? The author does not exactly propose such a provocative statement, but he contends that happy marriages, in which love and sexual attraction are harmoniously and sustainably combined, are exceedingly rare. On what basis has he formed such a statement? From personal experience, but as with all such type of experience, one should be leery of extrapolation. It is true that for many couples, maybe most, the vicissitudes of modern marriage, with double jobs and childbearing are exhausting and invariably stress sexual relations to the point of their petering out. Variety and strangeness seem to be crucial components in sexual arousal, and married life mired as it invariably becomes in routines tend to smother and eventually obliterate the sexual impulse. Or at least so according to conventional wisdom, thus self-help manuals focus on new techniques and such marginalia to enhance latent curiosity.

So what about adultery? Why is it both generally disapproved of and held up as an exciting adventure? Of course the one attitude tends to enhance the other. The author suggests that one should take a more liberal attitude. Why is adultery bad, is it not natural? Why deprive yourself of sensual opportunities, you only live once, and the window of sexual adventure is actually much narrower than that of life itself. Of course you cannot have it both ways. An extra-marital affair will corrode any true intimacy between two married partners. So de Botton suggests that instead of having such high

expectations of marriage, in particular its zero tolerance for straying, one should admit at the very onset that one person can not be sufficient to satisfy all the needs of another. This sounds good, but is of course a truism, proving nothing implying little. Regardless of the social standards of sexual behavior, unfaithfulness hurts at least one partner, unless of course both are pretty indifferent to each other. It would only work if marriage was based not on mutual love but on parental blessings. And indeed arranged marriages have much to say for themselves, and probably life would be easier for most people, would their choice of partner not be their own responsibility. This leads to another question, as to whether sexual mores today are different from the past, that we indeed live in a more liberal and tolerant atmosphere than the repressed one suffered by our forefathers. I guess this is a modern myth, but one which the author does not question, at least not openly. However, it is true that by being so publicly held, the view, based on myth or not, does have consequences. People may expect more of marriage than before and above all see pleasure and happiness as entitlements to be sustainably enjoyed, and when not they have the responsibility to act and rectify. This does indeed put a burden on peoples relations, which might not have been the case before, at least not in the same form. But this is of course just another aspect of modern consumer society with its emphasis on instant gratification out of an inexhaustible supply.

What is so bad about adultery? Most married people do not engage in it, although it is safe to assume that most may have entertained and dreamt about the possibility, either desperately or merely as an adjunct to sexual daydreaming. But is faithfulness a virtue or merely a necessity? Can the proud husband congratulate himself on his steadfastness or is it merely a case of absent opportunities? Is sexual life, that undercurrent of our quotidian existence, so strong a force, that once tempted anyone will succumb regardless of moral principles. The flesh is indeed weak and unable to meet the challenge. Is it true? Impossible to ascertain. What may seem as a rejection of a sexual advance, may merely just mean that the attraction was not strong enough, just as anyone can survive a fall no matter from what height, provided that the faith in ultimate survival is strong enough. Could it be that most people possess little sexual charisma, and are hence protected from temptations and their disastrous consequences?

The issue of adultery ties in with that of jealousy, clearly not a modern phenomenon. Jealousy is often equated with a desire for control and possession, and as such frowned upon as being immature at best and tyrannical at worst. This is clearly a one-dimensional picture. There are many aspects of such a complicated emotion. It is tied up with envy, in fact in many cases the two words are used as synonyms<sup>3</sup>. Most people worry about their sexuality, according to de Botton, few think that they are normal. Some of the worry takes the form of fearing that their tastes may be perverse and that they are freaks<sup>4</sup>. But underlying this worry lies, I believe a deeper one, namely of not being perverse and freakish

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously in English, but not necessarily so in other languages. In Swedish there is a strong distinction between 'avundsjuka' and 'svartsjuka', the latter by its very name carrying dark connotations.

<sup>4</sup> In the liberal vogue of the sixties a very frank and open columns for sexual advice were opened up in the Swedish press, the most notable being that provided by an imported Danish couple, Denmark at the time seen as even more liberal and advanced than Sweden. The frankness, not to say the rawness of the

enough. The traditional exultation of woman as pure and innocent, a virginal madonna, is but a disguise for a deeper awe, namely woman as equipped with an insatiable sexual appetite and the power to sustain it, maybe indefinitely. Thus, at least for the male, the pangs of jealousy may take the form of being marginalized, of being innocent of true sexual charisma, of not knowing the depth and wonder of true sexual feeling, being a mere hapless tourist in the realm, unable to follow his partner to the lower depths, and thus her need to take on a more knowledgeable lover, able to deliver what he cannot, and share what is forever beyond him. A similar case may also be made for women, but I abstain from such speculations as to details. It is a form of envy clearly.

Are there any possible shortcuts to the mystery of sex for the innocent? Pornography is an obvious answer. Sex divested of love, purified desire, softened maybe in the soft version, but hardened and stiffened in the serious, thereby maybe allowing a glimpse. With the advent of internet and the option of secret, anonymous on-line consumption, this presumptive shortcut has become a social problem, according to the author, who seems to have had some extended personal experience himself as when it comes to porno-surfing. Pornography was initially censored but now seems to be freely available. It should of course like everything else benefit from freedom of expression, but is it to be considered as expression? The distinction between art and pornographic representation is notoriously subtle, and obviously much of classical painting was intended to titillate. Yet, the author proposes some kind of censorship and curtailment of the wasteful phenomenon. He obviously has a point, but there are technical problems of delineation. But a pornography image works differently than an artistic image, the problem is to specify more or less exactly how in order to make the distinction amenable to legal articulation. The essence of pornography, as with prostitution, is to impersonalize and make the act public. With a prostitute there is no privileged access, she belongs to everyone willing to pay. Thus in engaging her services, the customer automatically connects himself<sup>5</sup> to an undifferentiated mass of coupling, just as in a crowd he relinquish personal responsibility in order to be subsumed in something bigger. By prostitution or pornographic consumption, the customer in some sense takes part, if by proxy, to that larger underground stream of impersonal carnal passion, to which he ordinarily feels shut out from. Closely relate to those issues, although not so connected by the author, is the case of impotence. Impotence does not seem to extend to masturbation and is thus purely psychological. According to de Botton rather than being feared and ridiculed it should be praised, because the man suffering from impotence merely displays his sensitivity. He has too much respect for his partner, does not want to intrude and hurt, and thus takes exception, at least subconsciously, to the notion of raw, impersonal sexuality and the myth and mystery with which it is imbued.

Should there be no sex, in view of how ridiculous the act is, and how much hurt it may cause. Is it really worth the trouble? The author definitely thinks so, how would life be without the allure of sex? It is a pre-eminently adult occupation (pace Freud), in

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interchanges, meant to provoke earlier public attitudes, may be exemplified by the advice to enhance desire directed to a man. Drink some champagne and peruse some pornographic magazines. But the underlying message of most of the queries boiled down to whether they were normal or not .

<sup>5</sup> For practical purposes there is always a question of 'he', few women enlist the services of male prostitutes.

fact the one consolation given after being expelled from the paradise of innocent childhood. How boring would not life be without the irrational element of sex (the biological rationale is another matter, and hardly relevant to actual human consideration)? How many occupations do not ultimately rest on the satisfaction of desire? When roaming a city in the evening, taking in the vibrant energy of people walking around, open stores and restaurants. What is the source of all that energy? If not from sexual tension and expectation? A world without sex would be a dull place indeed, deprived of emotional gradients, very little would indeed matter.

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