

PAUL RICOEUR: ON SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY

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Introduction

This presentation looks at the relationship which exists between the psychological meanings of spirituality and human sexuality. It focuses on what is now coming to be understood as a break in the tie which has historically revealed an integral relationship between these two dimensions of experience. Further, it will be shown how this break reduces a vital essence in life which each person affords to the other in sexual experience through the communal nature of their relationship which transcends them both, the transcendent. From a historical perspective, it has been this bond between spirituality and human sexuality which has kept them in right relationship.

In “Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma” Paul Ricoeur discusses the relationship between spirituality and human sexuality. Assuming an existential point of view, Ricoeur addresses the topic of this break which has occurred in the lived meaning of what Sigmund Freud called primordial desire (*trieb*) and the meaning of one’s personal existence understood from a cosmic-vital tradition, human spirituality. One result of this broken tie has been the reduction in meaning of human sexuality to eroticism. Through this reduction, meaning which was once valued as one’s most natural expression of the personal potential to be a pro-creator of the universal and trans-cultural ongoingness of humanity has been lost. For if human sexuality bestows primordial meaning upon life itself, as Freud once stated, then any change in its meaning or structure will become manifest in dramatic ways. Ricoeur says:

All our problems concerning sexuality seem to have come from the collapse of an ancient understanding of the sacred which gave almost total meaning to human sexuality.¹

From a psychological perspective people live in a different sexual world, a whole new world. This includes a change not only in how a person is in relationship to oneself and others but in how one understands one’s own spiritual nature.

Sexuality and Identity

In contemporary times, the personal meaning of what is sacred and what is sexual in experience has been separated. This separation reduces and truncates their shared, communal tie, bringing sexual and spiritual

meaning in a personal sense to the point of dis-integration. The reduction of vital meaning of self introduces the experience of a lack, an unfulfilled dimension to one's overall understanding of human existence. As a result, many people now find themselves striving for and grasping at an emptied shell of meaning. In these situations, the person stands separated, dis-integrated not only from personal meaning but from the love which once characterized a quality of relating which imbued a sense of depth and profundity to sexual experience. In such situations, a person may now stand alone, anonymous and in many ways, responsible for one's own anguish, pain and fear. This means one now stands in new relation to the Divine.

Questioning the principles of religion has typically been one way by which people have sought personal and sexual liberation. Those who now want the right to give total meaning to experience themselves represent an existential break which has transpired between the sacred dimension of experience and the meaning of human sexuality. On the one hand, the break between them can be interpreted to mean a depletion in essential meaning. On the other hand, this break can be interpreted to mean a signal of sexual liberation, a movement toward personal freedom and toward personal identity. Referring to Freud for an understanding of how personal meaning and identity develop, basic conflicts inherent to the process are revealed:

...a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call 'egoistic', and the urge towards union with others in the community, which we call 'altruistic'.²

Within this process, Freud describes how each person is caught between two conflicting urges, struggling and searching for what today is called personal identity. The modern "myth" of human sexuality can be described as a quest for personal identity and a search for personal meaning. As mentioned earlier, one result of this conflict can be a reduction in the meaning of human sexuality in its fullest sense, to that of eroticism. Ricoeur thematizes this change in the following:

Now we have learned from Freud—principally from Three Essays on Sexuality—that sexuality is not simple, and that the integration of its multiple components is an unending task. This disintegration of components, no longer experienced as a failure, but sought after as a technique of the body, makes eroticism the opposite of tenderness.³

In eroticism, human sexuality becomes a goal to be achieved, an end in itself. Along with one's search for personal identity through the meaning of sexuality comes the possibility for disappointment in what is found. As Ricoeur says:

Once this threshold is crossed, man becomes responsible for giving life, as he is responsible for all of nature. The control of procreation is the undeniable sign of the death of the ancient idea of the sacred, the irreversible attainment of sexual culture.⁴

With the death of the ancient cosmological significance of a single life which gains clarity and depth of meaning through union with another by handing down future life, comes a subjugation and displacement of human sexuality by an erotic pleasure of the self. Eroticism, human sexuality in the sense of self-pleasure alone, becomes an end in itself for itself. This reduces the meaning of human sexuality. The sacred (divine) as a mode of self-transcendence is removed from the context of integral love, responsible love. Within experience, human sexuality and its ties with personal meaning becomes confined within the limits of human mortality, within the horizons of mortal finitude. This reduction in meaning destroys the mystery in the act of human procreation, since each person in the act becomes an end for the self-pleasure of the other alone.

Psychological Meaning of Sexuality

The psychological impact of such a loss in meaning experienced in this transformation in human sexuality and its meaning is described by Ricoeur:

The removal of sexual prohibitions has produced a curious effect, which the Freudian generation has not anticipated, the loss of value through facility: sexual experience having become familiar, available, and reduced to a simple biological function, becomes rather insignificant. Thus the extreme point in the destruction of the cosmo-vital notion of the sacred also becomes the extreme point of the dehumanization of sex.⁵

Reducing the meaning of human sexuality dehumanizes human experience. This loss also identifies a point of separation in experience which eventually widens into a gulf between the meaning of my own being and that meaning which transcends me. This dis-integration in personal meaning as the result of dehumanization cuts the person off from the transcendent dimension as an integral part of the sexual experience. The experienced meaning of one's sexual nature is separated from the spiritual dimension, from meaning which flows directly into personal life from beyond the self.

One consequence of the separation between dimensions of experience as described above is that people are more inclined to perceive the meaning of the "I" and the body as separate entities, when in reality, no separation

exists between “me” and “my” body. I am an embodied consciousness, as incarnated subject. Human sexuality is one experience which best illustrates the integral connection, particularly from a psychological standpoint, between self and other in experience. From a phenomenological point of view, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes this in the following way:

Even in the case of sexuality, which has nevertheless long been regarded as pre-eminently the type of bodily function, we are concerned, not with a peripheral involuntary action, but with an intentionality which follows the general flow of existence and yields to its movements.⁶

Ricoeur points out that efforts have been made to re-establish the vital link between each person and the sacred (cosmic) dimensions of meaning in experience by focusing on the marriage ethic. For Ricoeur this is:

...a limited but partially successful effort to reconstruct a new sense of the sacred, based on the fragile alliance of spiritual and carnal in the person.⁷

The relationship between the spiritual and the carnal helps to develop the psychological context within which a person understands one’s own potential to love. Any deterioration in the quality of the relationship between the personal and the Divine will be reflected in the quality of the relationship between the self and the other. This is depicted by the search of many modern day youth for a sense of freedom and the fulfillment of personal meaning through sexual liberation. In this way of thinking, sexual liberty means that it is one’s personal decision and responsibility to choose between the regeneration or non-regeneration of humanity. This decision also affects the relationship one shares when the historical question and value of human potential in relation to the cosmic bond uniting person, world, nature and Divine is posed. As a result of this freedom gained there arises the question of not only sexual preference and choice but of one’s personal participation in humanity’s ongoingness. The person stands at a new crossroads of choice. Ricoeur speaks to the issue in the following way, “Our age seems to me to be torn by two movements in opposite directions, one to resacralize love, the other to desacralize it.”⁸ Going back to Ricoeur’s earlier statement in regard to the possible results of these choices:

...the extreme point in the destruction of the cosmo-vital notion of the sacred also becomes the extreme point of the dehumanization of sex.⁹

From this point of view, it is possible to see the relationship between not only the psychological but the existential and integral meaning of human

sexuality and the quality of one's relationship to the Divine. Contemporary trends toward what is called sexual liberation denies the depth and profundity once discovered in the meaning of sexual union consecrated by the Divine. This approach excludes a dimension of experience which is one's *own* potentiality and the sexual nature becomes an object which must, in some way, be achieved in order to arrive at some comprehension of personal meaning and the being of one's own identity. The expression of sexuality becomes something that one *has* rather than something that one already *is* and what one can *become* only by what is shared with an other.

From a psychological standpoint, the experience of depersonalization (dehumanization) of any type frequently leads to a sense of self-disintegration. These experiences leave the person in a state of self-experienced anonymity and isolation. Today's fervent search for personal meaning in sexuality is only a reflection of changes to be found within the quality of interpersonal relationships and the struggle to re-define the modern version of the marriage ethic. As a result of this experience of self-disintegration, the deepest meanings of one's own being are precluded, along with the experience of openly and freely affirming meaning of that which transcends the self. This typifies the existential meaning of sexual union for only one single purpose, self-pleasure. This leads, of course, to the search for some way to find a balance between the two opposing possibilities, for an interpretation of spirituality and human sexuality which offers an integrated point of view, transcendence.

The Symbolic and The Sacred

Freud tried to show that psychological disturbances (and many physical maladies as well) are the result of energy forces which are in conflict and which push toward expression but which remain buried deep within the unconscious. These unconscious forces are kept in place and prevented from emerging into conscious awareness by psychological mechanisms which defend the personal understanding and meaning of self. Freud asserted that many phenomena found in everyday life, such as dreams, fancies, forgetting, mistakes, lapses in behavior, hysterical immobility (paralysis), are common examples which reveal this imbalance in psychical energy. Artistic, literary and other culturally significant works of art are also attributed to these same imbalances in energy. Accordingly, each person is caught within the tension generated when the outward push of creative energy is met by those in the social environment which strive to push inward in an effort to keep these impulses and promptings below the conscious horizon. The push toward expression is stifled in the unconscious and sublimated, transformed into another form of expression and thereby providing substitute satisfaction. The conflicting energy forces are mediated, directed and sublimated in some symbolic fashion.

The expression of energy in either one form or another is a reflection of what Freud termed the symbolic function. Ricoeur explores the nature of symbols in an attempt to reveal the double function of the creative potential by saying that symbols have two vectors: 1) They disguise; 2) They reveal. “Insofar as revealing and disguising coincide in it, we might say that sublimation is the symbolic function itself.”¹⁰

Returning to Freud’s original position, it is found that the symbolic function can best be examined through the interpretation of dreams, whereby that which cannot or will not be revealed openly is disguised. It is revealed in a symbolic way. Ricoeur goes on to say that:

The sexual etiology of the neuroses enabled Freud to center this symbolization on sexuality and to link the fantasizing of the body with the general finality of dreams, that is, with their function of substitute satisfaction.¹¹

As a phenomenon which shares the nature of creative energy, sexual energy, libidinal forces push toward outward expression of self-meaning. In cultural, artistic contributions this creative energy appears to be directed toward something other than the self as it has been described in sexual experience. Freud says, the fundamental nature of this energy is disguised in symbolic function:

It involves a revival of dream-interpretation by means of *symbolism*—the same method that was employed in antiquity, except that the field from which interpretations are collected is restricted within the limits of the human body.¹²

Freud found that dreams reveal only a part of the *whole* of what can be called unconscious activity. From this description of the effort to understand the transmutation of sexual energy through the processes of sublimation by means of symbolism, it is shown that the presuppositions which support this position arise from assuming an objective attitude. This is the result of basing any understanding achieved upon Freud’s conceptions of experience based upon the physical function of the body. This thought gained prominence through the idea of energies which were in conflict and which, as a result, were a movement of a self-ward push outward in relation to the other-oriented (societal) push inward of the same energies. The personal meanings of self develops and evolves as a result of the person’s attempt to somehow cope with the opposing forces which lie deeply buried within and which are not available at the conscious level. Within this theoretical framework, the person is caught, there is no option or choice found in Freud’s conceptualization, it is value-less and pre-moral.

Human sexuality cannot be designated as a value, as either “good” nor

“bad,” as a pre-moral function it remains within the context of societal valuing for its meaning. As Freud says:

The elements of the sexual instinct are characterized by a capacity for sublimation, for changing their sexual aim into another of a different kind and socially more worthy. To the sum of energies thus gained for our psychological productions we probably owe the highest results of our culture.¹³

Going back to the discussion first given describing the contemporary movement toward realizing an existential break between the historical interpretation of spirituality and human sexuality, we find that Freud’s thought has provided the foundational perspective from which many contemporary theorists assume their stance. It can also be seen that there is, regardless of the position assumed theoretically, some integral and inextricable relationship between the two phenomena. This also shows that trying to consider the meaning of spirituality and human sexuality apart from the emotional, cultural and aspiring dimensions of human self understood in terms of identity is a forbidding prospect. Conceiving sexuality as a simple biological function, depleted of meaning apart from the relationship shared with that which is cosmic, vital, transcending and Divine within the concept of human potentiality, dehumanizes personal comprehension of self. Sexuality when considered in this manner becomes reduced to a pure function of the body in search for pleasure of the self without regard to the dignity and meaning of the other. This meaning disregards what is common to humanity in one of the deepest existential senses found in human experience. It is trans-cultural.

As the forerunner who provided the foundations for psychological thought in regard to the mutually interdependent nature of psychical energies, Freud introduced the concept of sublimation by which to maintain in some symbolic fashion the relationship between the two phenomena:

...the process of sublimation...enables excessively strong excitations arising from particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields, so that a not inconsiderable increase in psychical efficiency results from a disposition which in itself is perilous. Here we have one of the origins of artistic activity; and, according to the completeness or incompleteness of the sublimation, a characterological analysis of a highly gifted individual, and in particular of one with an artistic disposition, may reveal a mixture, in every proportion, of efficiency, perversion and neurosis.¹⁴

Ricoeur elaborates in regard to the nature of the symbolic function’s double nature of disguising and disclosing:

The most innovative figures that the artist, writer, or thinker can produce call forth ancient energies originally invested in archaic figures; but in activating these figures, comparable to oneiric and neurotic symptoms, the creator reveals man's most open and fundamental possibilities and erects them into new symbols of the suffering of self-consciousness.¹⁵

As an expression of accumulated, archaic energies, the symbolic function transforms and directs psychological energy. This includes the developing and evolving sense of self-identity. Within this field of therapeutic work this has been particularly insightful. From a philosophical perspective and especially in relation to the meaning of personal experience, the potential to "find" personal identity must also include the dimension of meaning which transcends the temporality of one's own being, of one's own life. Ricoeur addresses this failure in the following way:

The fall of sexuality into insignificance is both the cause and effect of this affective failure, as if social anonymity and sexual anonymity helped to activate each other.¹⁶

Without the potential to experience transcendence of self, anonymity is the paradoxical result. The problem becomes the question. Mutual affirmation in personal existence has always been seen as one opening for contact with that which is transcendent, be it in symbolic function, religious sanction or through archaic figures who are endowed with energies of the ancients. It seems proper to question the value of any theory which attempts to separate faith, personal identity and human sexuality based on a physical interpretation of human experience. The fall of sexuality into eroticism truncates the experience and fullness of the transcending dimension of personal meaning of self. This results in a deterioration of meaning which then affects the quality of interpersonal relating shared with others.

Problems are not something people have but are something that people have become, something which expresses one aspect of a personal identity. This would include the value and quality of one's potentiality for expression of human sexuality. The sexual dimension of human existence cannot be understood in isolation from the whole of experience or from any of the other dimensions of personal existence. It is quite the reverse. One's sexual orientation is intimately intertwined with one's wider *value* context thereby introducing an integral connection between self and other. This also introduces the possibility for transcendence, whereby the person's relationship shared with another opens the possibility for transcending not only the boundaries of personal identity but the boundaries of mortal finitude through experience which can come into being only with another person.

Interpersonal and integral love transcend the mortal bonds of sexual

union, allowing an intersubjective participation in meaning which then transcends the personal meaning of both participants. Spirituality and human sexuality can be understood as life projects, as something which leads to deeper and deeper discovery of self. Ricoeur says, "Sexuality is the flotsam of a submerged Atlantis."¹⁷ It is enigmatic, irreducible and a mystery. It denotes the non-transferability of human existence *as my own* but at the same time portrays the essential dimension of freedom found in one person's relationship with that which is transcendent:

...sex participates in a network of powers whose cosmic harmonies are forgotten but not abolished; that life is much more than life—that is, much more than the struggle against death, or delaying the time when the debt must be paid, that life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery; that man does not become a person, ethically, juridically, unless he also plunges again into the river of Life—such is the truth of romanticism as well as the truth of sexuality.¹⁸

Human sexuality, once reduced to eroticism and considered as a purely biological function, becomes "explained" and consequently confined within the boundaries of human finitude. It is stripped of the profound depth and potentiality which opens the person to experiences of self-transcendence. Any break in the tie of meaning with the integral connection in meaning between spirituality and human sexuality identifies an act of depersonalization of either one or both persons involved.

Notes

- 1) Paul Ricoeur, "Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma" *Cross Currents*, 14, no. 2 (Spring 1964), p. 133.
- 2) Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 87.
- 3) Ricoeur, "Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma", *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 6) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 157.
- 7) Ricoeur, "Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma", *op. cit.*, p. 135.

- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 10) Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 497.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 499.
- 12) Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 259.
- 13) Sigmund Freud, *Uber Psychoanalyse* (Leipzig: Deuticke, 1910), pp. 61-62.
- 14) Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 144.
- 15) Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 522.
- 16) Ricoeur, "Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma", *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 18) *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.