

The Erotic

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Nowadays, the erotic is everywhere: the term is applied to works of art, advertising, clothing, gestures, and many other things. It is not, however, always used appropriately. The erotic, for example, is sometimes confused with what triggers sexual arousal. Causing sexual arousal is not sufficient, however, because direct stimulation, by genital friction or brain probe, would not plausibly be called erotic. Neither is it necessary: for just as one may understand why something is funny without being moved to laughter, so one might perceive that something is erotic without experiencing any arousal. What, then, is the erotic, and in what sense can one say that it is a value?

The erotic, value, and teleology

Is the erotic a value? Or does it have value? If something is a value, its presence can confer some degree of importance on other things. If it has a value, then its benefits derive ultimately from some characteristic which itself has intrinsic value. What nobody cares or could care about is necessarily devoid of it; thus, in order to understand the erotic as a value, we must understand to what states of mind and to what mechanism it is linked, as well as how we care about it and for what reason.

Although the erotic cannot be identified with either arousal or desire, the three are evidently linked. At the same time, arousal and desire can lead to reproduction. One might, therefore, be tempted to seek the point or aim of the erotic in the fact that selective pressure favors whatever facilitates mating. In this case, the positive value of the erotic would be derived from this biological imperative. It might then be thought that the biological role played by sexual arousal in reproduction ensures its positive valence. That would be a mistake. First, because many capacities or dispositions that have contributed to adaptive success in the broad biological sense are devoid of any distinctive positive value. But more importantly, because the erotic is not a biological category: it pertains, rather, to the quality of lived experience. This needs no more argument than the obvious fact that sexual arousal is typically uncorrelated with any thought of reproduction in the minds of those experiencing it. For these reasons, we need to look, instead, at the *experienced significance* of the erotic.

Although the erotic is linked to sexual desire, it does not share the latter's teleology. The inherent goal of sexual arousal is sexual pleasure. As we shall see, the teleology of the erotic is elsewhere: it lies in sexual desire itself, the teleology of which, in turn, is sexual pleasure.

The term, “sexual pleasure” is notoriously difficult to define. It typically designates specific sensations, which by nature tend to be pleasant and sometimes orgasmic. But the valence of those sensations is liable to shift from positive to negative depending on contextual factors. These include being with a particular person, in a particular place, violating or complying with a given set of norms, and so forth. For this reason, even when it is most focused on sensation, sexual desire is inevitably informed by the fact that it is presented in a certain way by the imagination. Even when they appear to aim at pure sensation (as in anonymous sexual encounters in places designated

for just such a purpose); it might be that the anonymity of the encounter is precisely part of the description under which it is desired. In sum, sexual desire almost never aims simply at a bare sensation: most if not all sexual desire posits an object that has been shaped by the imagination.

Given that both the erotic and the sexually arousing are shaped by the imagination, should we infer that the difference between them is illusory? Not at all. To see why, we must stress the fact that procreation, sexual pleasure, sexual desire, and the erotic are different phenomena. Each is characterized by its own teleology. Teleology is not transitive. Sexual pleasure (which has intrinsic value) has mating and procreation as its biological function; by contrast, reproduction has nothing to do with sexual desire, the aim of which is not procreation but sexual pleasure. As for the erotic, *its specific teleology aims at the experience of sexual desire*, but it does not inherit the latter's aim.

The fact that the erotic aims at desire without sharing the latter's aim has a number of consequences. First, it sheds light on the vexed difference between erotic art or 'erotica' and pornography. Pornography can be defined as sexual representation intended to produce sexual arousal for the purpose of securing sexual pleasure. That explains the instrumental value of pornography. By contrast, the contemplation of an erotic object comes from that of a desire which it engenders. It does not require to be completed by sexual pleasure or orgasmic satisfaction.

The erotic and objectivity

If that is indeed where we should seek the value of the erotic, can it be said to be objective? Or is it merely a projection of subjective preferences? If the erotic referred to a biological function, one might have a basis for claiming it to be objective. For it would exist independently of any individual's judgment. In virtue of the essential link between the erotic and the imagination, however, this quality cannot be defined independently of the subjective response which it elicits. Colours and aesthetic qualities, such as the beautiful, the comical, the tasty, are of this sort. And according to some philosophers, called "sentimentalists", moral qualities such as compassion, justice, or honesty are of the same kind. But properties of this sort are not necessarily devoid of objective reference. For they may still be theoretically identified with some physical property that explains the capacity of a certain image or entity to trigger the criterial emotional response. An object is red in color, for example, just insofar as it has a disposition to cause sensations of red in normal observers under certain circumscribed conditions of observation. Could we say the same about the erotic?

The crucial role of conceptualization and imagination in the erotic situates it in the domain of the symbolic. To speak of symbolism is to say that the effects produced by something are owed to the imagination, through which one is transported from one immediately experienced mental state to another mental state, which is hidden or belongs to another domain. The value of a symbol derives from that of what is symbolised (without being reducible to the latter). Thus, to say that Marianne symbolises France, is to say that the image of Marianne evokes the idea of the French nation, without, however, having a value identical to that of the latter. In the case that concerns us — sexuality — we can say, similarly, that the value of the erotic derives from what it symbolizes, without being reducible to it.

What is the mechanism responsible for this process of "evocation" which links the erotic to sexuality? We can think of it in one of three ways, which might be called the Freudian, the Platonic, and the Pavlovian. The Platonic mode, which one might also ascribe to the psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung, postulates a fundamental reality that is independent of the mental content which apprehends it. It is that external reality — universal archetype or Platonic Form — that is endowed

with intrinsic value. For Plato, sexual desire is only a secondary and imperfect form of our desire to contemplate the Form of Beauty. For Freud, it is the other way around: art, spirituality and symbolism in general are 'sublimations' of sex. (Freud understands by this term a mechanism which replaces the original purpose of the sexual instinct with a spiritual or intellectual aim.) The third conception of symbolism, which we have called Pavlovian (but which encompasses other forms of learning or conditioning) traces symbolic relations to contingent associations generated by lived experiences. Which model is the right one? To what extent is the symbolism inherent in the erotic innate, and in what measure is it the result of contingent and idiosyncratic associations?

One likely candidate for the status of innate symbol is gender. Gender identity is formed surprisingly early, and the symbolism of gender—masculinity or femininity, typically involving relations of power— influences most people's erotic fantasies. Thus the representations of the human body are often felt to be erotic only if they are of the "correct" gender according to the sexual orientation of the individual who contemplates them. Hence the fact that most art, which historically has been made by men, privileges the erotic appeal of female bodies. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that even gender and gender identity are to some extent learned, not in the sense that the right environment can make any individual child arbitrarily masculine or feminine, but in that a strongly normative category of gender is imposed very early on. When children feel that their bodies are of the wrong sex to fit their self-identity, we must assume that they have absorbed a stereotype which doesn't fit their self-image (Butler 1990).

The role of learning is also confirmed by the sheer diversity of what people find erotic. How else could we explain, if not in terms of associations which the trace has been lost, the more bizarre forms of fetishism (agalmatophilia, formicophilia, zoophilia)? The diversity of these tastes makes it highly unlikely that there is any generally identifiable concrete property on which the erotic supervenes. We seem, on the contrary, to be in the presence of a psychological phenomenon that is determined on a purely individual basis by the vagaries of individual experience and the process of association.

The erotic, death, and disgust.

The distance between the erotic and both sexual arousal and desire suggests some remarks on the relations of eroticism to disgust and death.

Those paradoxical relations entertained by the erotic have inspired in several thinkers some more or less outrageous speculations. One might recall the provocative hypothesis put forward by Sabina Spielrein – anticipating the notion of death instinct in Freud – which evoked the destruction of gametes fusing to form a zygote. According to Spielrein, this destruction might explain the loss of the sense of identity that some people report feeling at the moment of orgasm [Spielrein 2013].

Such speculations are surely fantastical. Given the unlimited range of possible associations, however, it is quite conceivable that in some persons, the analogy between sexual union and the union of gametes into a zygote might produce an arousing effect attributed to the idea of death.

More generally, sexual relations sometimes arouse negative emotions such as shame and disgust. But not everyone experiences such emotions. When they do, they are plausibly attributed to the repression to which sexuality has all too often been subjected. In itself, disgust is the antidote of sexual arousal; however, the *representation* of disgust can be integrated without contradiction into the representation of what is sexually arousing. It is, therefore, possible that in certain cases the

thought of disgust would make certain objects desirable. First simply by contrast (as white is more brilliant when set on a black background), or by association, as mentioned above, and perhaps also, as some have suggested, because the thrill of violating a norm is produced by the very thought that what is disgusting should exclude what is sexually arousing (Bataille 1957). However that may be, there are many examples of things normally considered disgusting which can be the object of pleasure: it suffices to mention coprophilia, urolagnia, and hematolagnia on the origins of which it is pointless to speculate here. We should look instead to empirical psychology for the explanation of the relation of the erotic to disgust [Freud 1905]. The same goes for the role of pain and humiliation, of the exercise of power or violence, for exhibitionism, voyeurism, and other forms of eroticism such as those described by Sade (1990) and Sacher-Masoch (2013).

Eroticism and morality

The erotic is a valenced experience, generally pleasurable in itself. Some practices that are morally deplorable can be positively charged by the association with experience of the erotic. This fact can attract a general condemnation of the erotic. For example, the eroticization of gender, which takes as ideals the most extreme types of femininity and masculinity, may contribute to inequality between men and women. Finding pleasure in rape fantasies, and other thoughts of violent activities subject the erotic to moral opprobrium. Even in our reputedly sexually liberated age, when we enjoy unprecedented freedom of thought and sex, the power of the erotic to switch from positive to negative valence remains potentially destructive. One of the most disquieting manifestation of this power is the fact that politicians, going beyond moral disapproval, have been led to reinstate what we might not long ago have relegated to medieval theocracies or modern totalitarian states—namely a new category of thought crimes.

The erotic, in short, differs essentially from the other phenomena to which it is linked – desire, pleasure, and arousal. It refers to what induces the experience of sexual desire mediated by imagination, enjoyed for its own sake, and without necessarily requiring fulfilment in either sexual pleasure or reproduction. For these reasons it falls in the category of aesthetic value. It is in itself devoid of moral significance, although it can sometimes be exploited in morally objectionable ways.

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