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Saying how you Feel: Men and Women on Sexual Arousal and Desire

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Abstract: This paper explores various contemporary philosophic accounts of sexual desire and compares them to some recent psychological investigations into the nature of sexual desire. A number of suggestions are made on the basis of this exploration. Most importantly, it is argued that though women and men differ with respect to sexual desire and arousal in some respects, sexual desire represents an existential need in all humans, a point typically missed in psychological accounts. Sexual desire understood in this way involves a longing by both men and women for an intimate connection with another person.

Keywords: Sexual Arousal, Sexual Desire, Men's Desire vs. Women's Desire, Evolutionary Psychology, Social Constructionism

Introduction¹

THIS PAPER IS a comparison of some recent philosophical and psychological accounts of sexual desire. More fully, but still in brief, this paper will discuss: (1) different contemporary philosophical accounts of sexual desire and suggest a need to find a synthesis between them; (2) the need to distinguish between sexual arousal as a predominantly physiological response to stimuli, which social scientists call “proceptivity,” and sexual desire, which is best understood as a conscious and intentional desire directed to a whole person, and which social scientists refer to as “receptivity” or “arousability;” (3) that there are some genuine and important differences between men and women with respect to both sexual arousal and desire; (4) despite these differences, there are some commonalities between men and women on sexual desire—namely, that sexual desire represents an existential need in all humans, and (5) that current psychological accounts miss this feature of human sexual desire. Along the way to these claims, I will also suggest a need to address the origin of sexual arousal and desire, and the need to differentiate biological from environmental and social constructionist views on this issue. It will be on the basis of this discussion that I will argue that while sexual desire and arousal arise in part from a complex set of biological and environmental (and socially constructed) factors operating in a dynamic way, sexual desire also represents an existential need in humans that transcends our biology and our environment.

¹ This paper has been read at the following places: Northeast Popular/American Culture Association, New York City, October, 2009; Cape Breton University, November, 2009; University of Prince Edward Island, March, 2010 and the Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Conference, University of New Orleans, July, 2011. I would like to thank all audience members who made suggestions. I would also like to thank Margaret Chivers for sending me some of her work on this subject, and for helpful discussions with Lisa Diamond and James Giles on this topic. James Giles also made numerous comments on a draft of the paper. Of course, none of these people are responsible for the faults that remain. Finally, I thank Rod Nicholls, Dean of the School of Arts and Social Sciences at CBU, for funding my travel to some of the conferences where I presented this paper.

Contemporary Philosophy on Sexual Desire

Contemporary philosophical accounts of sexual desire fall within two broad camps, which Seiriol Morgan recently has called intentionalist views on the one hand, and hedonistic or reductionist views on the other.²

Intentionalist accounts maintain that “understanding the interpersonal intentionality that occurs during sexual intercourse is essential for understanding sexual desire.”³ On this view, human sexual desire is not an appetite, like the desire for food or water, since sexual desire requires that one “appreciate the significance of and respond to the mental states of others.”⁴ While their accounts of sexual desire differ in important respects, the theories put forth by Robert Solomon and Thomas Nagel both present us with paradigmatic examples of intentionalist conceptions of sexual desire.

According to Solomon, “sexuality is primarily a means of communicating with other people, a way of talking to them, of expressing our feelings about ourselves and them. It is essentially a language, a body language, in which one can express gentleness and affection, anger and resentment, superiority and dependence far more succinctly than would be possible verbally, where expressions are unavoidably abstract and often clumsy.”⁵ For Nagel, sexual desire begins as self-conscious desires for another that can only be completed in *mutual* desire. Simply stated, in experiencing full or complete sexual desire, I must not only be turned on by you, I must also be turned on by you being turned on by me, *and vice versa*. That is to say, sexual desire must not only involve awareness that another feels sexual desire towards you, but also that that awareness increases your sexual desire, and vice-versa: it is, then, a “multi-level interpersonal awareness” of escalating desire.

In fleshing out his account, Nagel maintains that sexual desire essentially involves embodiment. “All stages of sexual perception,” he says, “are varieties of identification with the body. What is perceived is one’s own or another’s *subjection* to or *immersion* in his body....”⁶ However, Nagel also insists that sexual desire cannot be reduced to the level of generic bodies and certainly not to the level of body parts. “[T]he object of sexual attraction is a particular individual, who transcends the properties that make him attractive.... We approach the sexual attitude toward the person through the features that we find attractive, but these features are not the objects of that attitude.”⁷ According to Nagel, this has to be the case given his characterization of sexual desire as “multi-level interpersonal awareness.”⁸ “This would be incomprehensible if its object were not a particular person, but rather a person of a certain kind [or a mere combination of appealing body parts]. Attraction is only the beginning, and fulfillment does not consist merely of behavior and contact expressing this attraction, but involves much more.”⁹

Robert Nozick expands upon this last point when he writes that “[s]ex is not simply a matter of frictional force [It is] the most intense way we relate to another person... The

² Seiriol Morgan, “Sex in the Head,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Robert Solomon, “Sex and Perversion,” in R. Solomon, *From Hegel to Existentialism*. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 122–136.

⁶ Thomas Nagel, “Sexual Perversion,” *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 1 (1969): 12. Nagel’s emphasis.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

excitement comes largely from how we interpret the situation and how we perceive the connection to the other.”¹⁰ Indeed, Nozick argues that the excitement of sexual desire can be frightening because it is a way in which we open ourselves up to others: There is a “trust involved in showing our own pleasures, [and a] vulnerability in letting another give us these and guide them, including pleasures with infantile or oedipal reverberations, or anal ones [which] does not come lightly.”¹¹ Hence, Nozick concludes, in “sexual intimacy, we admit the partner within our boundaries or make them more permeable, showing our own passions, capacities, fantasies, and excitements, and responding to others.”¹²

The reductionist or hedonistic view of sexual desire maintains that the intentionalist view misses the essential and fundamental aspect of sexual desire by trying to explain sexual desire as a *mere means to something else*, such as interpersonal interaction or communication through body language. The problem here, as reductionists see it, is that such accounts miss the intrinsic value of pleasurable physical contact. For Solomon, this physical contact is merely an instrument used to communication through the language of the body. But, as Goldman points out, there is an important difference between the physical contact of sex and language: “When a language is used the symbols normally have no importance in themselves; they function merely as vehicles for what can be communicated by them.”¹³ But physical sexual contact is important in and of itself and need not be considered only within the framework of a total vocabulary and the communication of some message. Moreover, there may be cases where nothing beyond pure physical pleasure is communicated: indeed, one might think that truly intense sexual activities focus on the joys of the body in just this way.

Similar sorts of problem exist with Nagel’s account, according to Goldman, though it is easiest to see them by thinking of what would count as a sexual perversion for Nagel. These would be any sexual activities that fail to meet the ideal of multi-level interpersonal awareness. While this might include lots of things that we could all agree are perverse, such as pedophilia and bestiality, it would also seem to include such mundane and common things as masturbation and any ‘perfunctory’ sex. Hence, as Goldman puts it: while “one may receive pleasure in a sex act from expressing certain feelings to one’s partner or from awareness of the attitude of one’s partner, ... sexual desire is essentially the desire for physical contact itself: it is bodily desire for the body of another that dominates our mental life for more or less brief periods.”¹⁴

But this reductionistic account has difficulties as well, which becomes clear when we think of instances where the mental component of our sexual desire is central and physical pleasure taken on its own is relatively unimportant. Think, for example, of cases where the person with whom we have sex matters more to us than the actual physical contact of the sex acts themselves.¹⁵ For example, it might be the case that having sex with a celebrity or ‘the best looking person in town’ or the partner of my rival is essentially important to my sexual activity and the actual physicality of the act is relatively unimportant. Humans, after all, act intentionally and so it would be odd if human sexual desire could be fully understood without reference to those intentional elements.

¹⁰ Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989), 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³ Alan Goldman, “Plain Sex,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, no. 3 (1977): 276.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁵ Morgan, *op. cit.*, 7–9.

Morgan suggests a way out of this impasse. To do so, we must avoid the outmoded radical dualism that is assumed by both intentionalist and reductionist accounts. Such a dualism creates a false dichotomy between mind and body. We would be much closer to the truth if we thought instead of sexual desire as falling on a continuum with body on one end and mind on the other. On such a view, though there will be cases where sexual desire in its essence is exclusively (or almost exclusively) either a physical or mental event, in almost all cases, sexual desire will be a combination of the two.¹⁶ I suggest later that sexual responses that are entirely physiological are best thought of as sexual arousal and not sexual desire.

There are, however, features of sexual desire that are missing from Morgan's account as well. Since all of us have a sex and a gender, we must take these features into account when describing sexual desire, which James Giles has done in his recent work on the subject. According to him, such desire can be described in part as "a need based ... on ... an awareness ... of having a gender, which implies a sense of incompleteness that calls out to be fulfilled by the gender of another person." Reason acts upon this "self awareness (together with the awareness of others)" to make "me see this as a problem that needs to be resolved, and imagination enables me to picture or fantasize ways—namely, baring and caressing of the desired gender—of trying to solve it."¹⁷

In effect, Giles combines several threads of the accounts provided by Nagel and Nozick, but adds gender as a central component of it. Sexual desire necessarily involves, he says, a component of mutuality in which each person is revealed somehow. This opening of oneself to others is actually a display of our vulnerability, and is a signal to them, as it were, that we want to be cared for; indeed, that we need to be cared for.¹⁸ As such, sexual desire has much in common with romantic love. The difference between the two, according to Giles, resides in the level of mutuality. In romantic love, not only do I have a certain desire "toward the other person concerning our mutual vulnerability and care," ... I also "desire that the other person have similar desires toward me, that is, that I have desires concerning the other person's desires."¹⁹ Giles maintains that in sexual desire, "the schema is not so complex. For although I have certain desires directed toward a mutual baring and caressing of the other person's body, I need not also desire that the other person has desires for a mutual baring and caressing directed toward me."²⁰

Clearly, Giles account is intentionalist and hence, if Morgan (and/or Goldman) is right, it suffers from accentuating the mental component of sexual desire too much. I shall come back to this point toward the end of this paper when discussing the difference between arousal and desire, but for the moment I want simply to stress the importance of gender and its relation to sexual desire. With this in mind, I turn to some recent psychological accounts of sexual desire that emphasize just this feature of sexual desire and point to the differences

¹⁶ Ibid, 9–12.

¹⁷ James Giles, *The Nature of Sexual Desire* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008), 181–182. Although Giles' claims seem suited only for heterosexual relationships, he goes to great lengths to apply his view to homosexual relationships as well. To be very brief, Giles maintains that for homosexuals the difference between you and your sexual partner is a felt or perceived shortage of your own gender. "The homosexual is someone who intensely admires the attributes of same-gender persons. The homosexual does this because he feels himself to be lacking in these attributes" (Ibid., 128). In this way, then, hetero- and homosexual desire is the same experientially, Giles maintains, because it is based on a felt shortage that can only be completed in another.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Ibid., 174.

²⁰ Ibid.

between men and women vis-à-vis sexual desire. In the end, I shall argue that these psychological accounts emphasize differences between men's and women's sexual desire too much and miss a central component of all human sexual desire.

Male Specificity and Female Fluidity

In a series of fascinating experiments, psychologist and sexologist Meredith Chivers, along with others, has measured both physiological and subjective responses of males and females to various videotaped sexual stimuli. These experiments all showed self-labeled hetero- or homosexual men and women videos of humans (and in one experiment of bonobo chimpanzees) in various scenes, ranging from non-sexual ones to explicit sexual intercourse. More specifically, these scenes displayed (i) clothed men and women in non-sexual activities, (ii) naked men or women engaged in non-sexual activity, (iii) naked men or women engaged in solitary masturbation, and (iv) explicit sexual activity between two men, between two women, or between a man and women. Finally, one experiment added video of copulating bonobo chimps.

Chivers found that while men are "category specific," women are not. That is, men's physiological and subjective responses regarding sex match. Hence, a heterosexual man will typically get an erection only when he is shown video of women alone, and of lesbian or heterosexual sexual activity. Moreover, when asked, this is what a man says arouses him. Women, in contrast, display a marked difference between their objective and subjective reactions. Women typically say that videos do not sexually arouse them, and yet they vaginally lubricate at displays of almost anything—not just of both male and female sexual activities but even to presentations of bonobo chimpanzees having sex.²¹

Consistent with other studies, she has found that women are more "flexible" than men with respect to their sexual orientation.²² That is, while men identify strongly with their sexual orientation, women "are more likely to experience and express same-sex attractions and less likely to engage in exclusively heterosexual or homosexual contacts."²³ Hence, heterosexual women as well as homosexual women "reported greater sexual arousal to stimuli depicting female targets than to stimuli depicting male targets."²⁴ Indeed, sexual response for women is much more the result of the level of sexual activity displayed—the greater the activity, such as intercourse, the greater the arousal—while men's arousal tends to be the result of the gender of the actors in the video.²⁵ This is exactly what Lisa Diamond

²¹ Meredith Chivers, M. Seto, & R. Blanchard, "Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences in Sexual Response to Sexual Activities Versus Gender of Actors in Sexual Films," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93, no. 6 (2007): 1108–1121; Meredith Chivers, G. Rieger, E. Latty, & J.M. Bailey, "A Sex Difference in the Specificity of Sexual Arousal," 15, no. 11 (2004): 736–744; Kelly Suschinsky, M. Lalumière, & M. Chivers, "Sex Differences in Patterns of Genital Sexual Arousal: Measurement Artifacts or True Phenomena?" *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 2008.

²² Meredith Chivers, M. Seto, & R. Blanchard, "Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences in Sexual Response to Sexual Activities Versus Gender of Actors in Sexual Films," op. cit.

²³ Ibid. Also see, J.M. Bailey, M.P. Dunne, & N.G. Martin, "Genetic and Environmental Influences in Sexual Orientation and its Correlates in an Australian Twin Sample," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78: 524–536; A.C. Kinsey, W.B. Pomeroy, & C.E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948); A.C. Kinsey, W.B. Pomeroy, C.E. Martin, & P.H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1953).

²⁴ Chivers et al., "Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences," op. cit, 1117.

²⁵ Ibid.

argues in her recent book, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*.²⁶ She describes sexual fluidity as a “situation-dependent flexibility in women’s sexual responsiveness,” which “makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation.”²⁷ Although there can be some overlap between bisexuality and fluidity, they are not the same thing, according to Diamond. Bisexuality is a “consistent pattern of erotic responses to both sexes, manifested in clear cut sexual attractions to men and women” whereas fluidity is a kind of “potential for non-exclusive attractions.”²⁸ Hence, for example, Anne Heche’s same-sex involvement with Ellen DeGeneres within a lifetime of other-sex engagements is best thought of as fluidity and not as bisexuality.

Having said this, Diamond is at pains to argue that the existence of sexual fluidity does not entail the non-existence of sexual orientation. Nor does fluidity mean that one’s orientation can change, is the result of choice, or that it is purely the result of environmental influences. Rather, fluidity is best thought of as “an additional component of a women’s sexuality that operates in concert with sexual orientation to influence how her attractions, fantasies, behaviors, and affections are experienced and expressed over the life course. Fluidity implies not that women’s desires are *endlessly* variable but that some women are capable of a wider variety of erotic feelings and experiences than would be predicted on the basis of their self-described sexual orientation alone.”²⁹

Explaining the Gap between Men and Women

How can these differences be accounted for, and what do they say about sexual desire in men and women? First, we need to distinguish between various types of sexual response. The physiological responses just referred to—male erection and female lubrication—are not necessarily and typically aren’t conscious reactions.³⁰ As such, they are not examples of sexual *desire* since, as I have argued above, sexual desire must include a mental and intentional element in addition to a purely physical one. Clearly, however, the responses are sexual since they involve the genitals and are responses to genital, sexual activity. Since it is reflexive and unconscious, there is good reason to believe that the responses are biologically based. Call this type of sexual response, sexual arousal, or, following social scientists, it could be referred to as “proceptivity.” As Lisa Diamond explains it, “[p]roceptivity, or lust, can emerge spontaneously across a wide variety of environments and so can be thought of as situation independent. A straightforward example of proceptive desire would be a general feeling of ‘horniness’ that might emerge for no particular reason...”³¹ There is also sexual desire, or what social scientists refer to as “receptivity,” or “arousability,” which, Diamond says, “is quite different. It represents a person’s capacity to become interested in sex as a result of encountering certain situations or stimuli ... even if the individual did not initially

²⁶ Lisa Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity*, op. cit.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁰ M. Chivers, “Leading Comment: A Brief review and discussion of sex differences in the specificity of sexual arousal,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 4: 377–390; E. Lann & W. Everaerd, “Habituation of female sexual arousal to slides and film,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 24: 517–541.

³¹ Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity*, Op. cit., 204. “Horniness” can be described as a generalized feeling for sexual gratification, or a generalized lustful feeling.

feel sexually motivated. The defining characteristic of arousability is that it is triggered by external cues or situations. As such, it can be thought of as situation dependent.”³² And we need to engage our mental faculties, sometimes in incredibly complex ways, in order to decipher the meaning of the situation we are in.

In addition to this distinction, we need to examine the basis of sexual arousal and desire. Here, we find two widely divergent theories. On the one hand are the biological essentialists, such as sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, who maintain that the origin of human sexual desires lies in their genes and is directed to reproduction. According to this view, human sexual desire is universal, and while there may be changes over time and place regarding what particular things give rise to particular preferences or behaviors, sexual desire itself exists independently of time and culture. Social constructionists deny these claims and insist instead that human sexual desire is entirely the product of what we make of it. In its most radical form, social constructionists maintain not only that such things as societal perceptions of homosexuality, monogamy, and fetishes are constructed, but also that sexual desire itself is radically amorphous and open to any inscription, independently of any physiological function.

But are biology and social constructionism necessarily dichotomous? Many researchers now think that they are not. Jacobsen, for example, argues that “Social constructionism need not deny biological realities; more plausibly, it often contends that what qualifies as sexual desire emerges only after our biological urges are subjected to socialization.”³³ We can see this more clearly if we differentiate between ultimate and proximate biological causes: “Ultimate causes refer to our evolutionary history, while proximate causes refer to the biological mechanisms that directly cause sexual desire.”³⁴ This is important since ultimate proximate causes allow room for a diversity of proximate causes, and in humans at least, many of these will be culturally based and thus open to the sorts of explanations proffered by social constructionists, so long as social constructionism is conceived in its more moderate forms. Hence, it can be argued that much of our sexual behavior is biologically based in the sense of an ultimate cause, such as vaginal lubrication in response to a wide array of stimuli in human females, but have proximate biological causes that allow for social constructionist explanations. Framed in this way, it becomes understandable, as Lisa Diamond puts it, that there is a growing trend amongst social scientists “who view sexual feelings and experiences as simultaneously embedded in both physical-biological and sociocultural contexts that require integrated biosocial research strategies.”³⁵

Keeping all of this in mind, we can entertain various explanations regarding why women tend to lubricate as a result of almost any sexual stimuli—irrespective of whether it is even a welcome sexual stimuli. Chivers et al. suggest that it may be an evolutionarily selected for trait that protected women from injuries caused by rape: “Ancestral women who did not reflexively lubricate would have been more likely to experience injuries or infections that

³² Diamond, op. cit., 204–205.

³³ Rockney Jacobsen, “Sexual Desire,” in Alan Soble, ed., *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*, 2 volumes. Greenwood Press. Vol. 2: 224.

³⁴ James Giles, *The Nature of Sexual Desire*, op. cit., 179. Despite using Giles distinction here, it is important to note that he does not agree with what I say in the following paragraphs regarding the compatibility of biological and constructionist accounts of behavior.

³⁵ Lisa Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass & London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.

could have rendered them reproductively sterile or resulted in their deaths.”³⁶ Strange as this may sound, examples in other species can be found where the female has evolved traits to protect herself against male aggression and violence during mating. Male bean weevils, for example, have a barbed “intermittent member” that can cause considerable damage to the female during copulation. To protect against such damage, the female bean weevil repeatedly kicks the male during mating to shorten and reduce her risk of harm.³⁷

The fact that the female body responds to certain external situations by vaginally lubricating, then, does not necessarily entail any sexual desire or arousability in women. Hence, while there appears to be a disconnection in women between their physiological and subjective responses to sexual stimuli, there is in fact nothing of the sort. Lubrication can be a reflexive, preconscious purely physiological response, and hence a matter of sexual arousal or proceptivity that may have absolutely nothing to do with how one feels. Of course, this doesn’t rule out the possibility that a woman could lubricate on the basis of her desires as well where sexual desire or arousability is thought of as a conscious response and is centrally involved with feelings, emotion, and cultural context. It certainly could be, as Nagel, Nozick, and Giles have all said in their various ways, a longing for an intimate connection with another body.

Is an erection in a male analogous to vaginal lubrication in women? Yes and no. Erections can be mostly unconscious or involuntary, which is something many of us (men) know as we remember those embarrassing moments during our adolescent years when we could, seemingly, get an erection at absolutely anything (or nothing). But, as with female lubrication, erections can be an indication of male sexual desire (and not just arousal). Indeed, Chivers’ evidence indicates that there is at least often a match between arousal and desire in men since post-adolescent males do not become erect at just any stimuli: they are, in contrast, quite category specific. Video of heterosexual sex typically does not produce an erection in a homosexual man, and video of gay sex typically does not produce an erection in a heterosexual man.

What of sexual desire? Here again, there appear to be differences. For example, women’s desire can even mitigate one’s sexual orientation to such an extent that heterosexual women can become sexually involved with other women in some circumstances where their relationship is close enough. In other words, as both Chivers and Diamond have found, with respect to women’s sexual desire (as opposed to sexual responses) gender becomes less determinative of desire than emotional and social factors. This is rarely or never the case for men. As Chivers et al. say, “social and emotional factors are more salient than sexual arousal to the development of [women’s] sexual interests”³⁸ while in men “sexual arousal is more salient

³⁶ M. Chivers et al., “Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences,” op cit., 1118.

³⁷ Helen S. Crudginton, Mike T. Siva-Jothy, “Genital Damage, Kicking and Early Death,” The male’s member is barbed as a way to dissuade the female from mating with others.

³⁸ Chivers et al., “Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences,” op. cit., 1119; also see L.M. Diamond, “Passionate Friendships Among Adolescent, Sexual Minority Women,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 10, (2000), 191–209; L.M. Diamond, “Sexual Identity, Attractions, and Behavior Among Young Sexual-Minority Women Over a 2-year period,” *Developmental Psychology* 36, (2000), 241–250; & R. Knoch, K. Boyd, & B. Singer, “Empirical Tests of Sexual Selection Theory: Predictions of Sex Differences in Onset, Intensity, and Time Course of Sexual Arousal,” *Journal of Sex Research* 24 (1988), 73–89.

than the other factors.”³⁹ Men and women also seem to differ on a whole range of topics associated with sexuality. For example, men tend to be more promiscuous, watch more pornography, and engage prostitutes far more often than women do. In general, male sexual desire often appears to be more impersonal than female sexual desire and hence tends more to the physiological side of sexual desire while women tend more towards the mental end of that continuum.

Once again, explaining these differences probably requires a combination of biological and social constructionist responses. With respect to promiscuity, for example, we might say, from a biological point of view, that human babies need a great deal of care, and women while pregnant and caring for (including breastfeeding) newborns and young children are incredibly vulnerable. As a result, they need to choose a mate who will form a close bond with them and their children. Males, on the other hand, can produce lots of offspring and not necessarily be bound by rearing them. Hence, they may biologically be pushed more towards promiscuity. In addition, however, women and men in our culture continue to be socialized into quite different sexual behaviors where a woman’s promiscuity (however defined) tends to label her in negative ways while the same promiscuous behavior is positively reinforced in men.⁴⁰

However these differences are explained, there certainly do appear to be differences between men and women with respect to sexual arousal and desire. Yet, there is a commonality that I believe psychological accounts have missed but which has been discussed by some philosophers. James Giles in particular has maintained that “sexual desire is ... an existential need that has its roots in specific experiential features of the human condition.”⁴¹ An “inherent and universal feature of the human condition,”⁴² is that we are all aware that we are only one gender: as such, we suffer from a feeling of “disequilibrium.” “Sexual desire is a need that is based precisely on such an awareness (the awareness of disequilibrium)” and drives us toward a completion with others.⁴³ Hence, both men and women seek sexual intimacy with another as a existential need despite being pushed biologically, environmentally, and culturally in different ways. This seems inconsistent with what I called the more impersonal nature of male sexual desire. And yet while there are indeed differences between men and women in this regard (generally speaking), the differences are more in degree than in kind. Some evidence for this can be found in the most unlikely place—commercial sex. It is an unlikely place to look for evidence of males seeking intimate connection with another whole person because we typically think of commercial sex as completely impersonal and not intimate in Giles’ sense of “a mutual baring and caressing.” Some recent research, however, points to some surprising facts about what men seek in commercial sex. A surprising number seek commercial sex because they can find no alternatives. This is particularly true of men who perceive themselves as both physically and socially unattractive. More importantly, however, a surprising number of men claim that they lack intimacy in their lives and

³⁹ Chivers et al., “Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences,” op. cit., 1119; also see R.C. Savin-Williams & L.M. Diamond, “Sexual Identity Trajectories among Sexual-Minority Youths: Gender Comparisons,” *Archives of Sex Behavior*, 29 (2000), 607–627.

⁴⁰ None of what I have said here implies any sort of strict determinism, either biologically or culturally since men and women can act contrary to the biological and/or social pressures placed upon them.

⁴¹ Giles, *Sexual Desire*, op. cit., 180.

⁴² *Ibid*, 181.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

seek it in commercial sex relationships. As one client put it: "It's more for intimacy... I am a hermit if you like, I am a lonely guy. I don't have many real time friends or I don't see them that often. There you are for five years, most of the time sleeping in your own bed alone... it's very nice to have a cuddle."⁴⁴

Concluding Remarks

In his recent book, *America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction*, Brian Alexander spends almost 200 pages detailing the sexual exploits of contemporary Americans, many from America's conservative heartland. His point there is that, despite its Christian fundamentalism, America is currently engaged in lots of sexual activities that would have been thought of as immoral or perverse even twenty to thirty years ago. Alexander ends his book, however, by claiming that what Americans are really looking for in their pursuit of sex is escape from American (or more broadly, 'Western') culture, which is increasingly characterized by bewildering technology and increased loss of community, which has led to a sense of personal isolation. Sex, then, provides them with a way in which they can connect with others and escape their loneliness. Hence, though many practicing 'unconventional' sex would deny it, they are still looking for intimacy and indeed for love, regardless what sexual package it is found in. Having said that Alexander also claims that many within and indeed at the forefront of the sexual revolution in America are increasingly bored with it. "That is why I think the sex explosion is just about over. People will still watch porn, and we will certainly still have sex, and some people will still want to be tied up as some people always have, but the hypersaturation of it all is about to fizzle."⁴⁵

Perhaps Alexander is correct and we are moving to a world where we turn away from sexual arousal toward sexual desire. That world, though, is not yet here for today it seems clear that men and women do differ in both sexual arousal and desire despite the fact that deep down all of us desire a mutual, intimate interaction with another whole person.

About the Author

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Scott Stewart is a Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. He completed his Ph.D in philosophy at the University of Waterloo in 1991, where he wrote a dissertation on John Stuart Mill. He has published widely in the areas of applied philosophy, biomedical ethics, and philosophy and literature. He has served for many years on both the Research Ethics Board and the Ethics Committee at his local hospital. Currently, he is co-editing and contributing to a book tentatively titled, *Food For Thought: A Multidisciplinary Look at Food in Our World*. For four months in the fall of 2008, he taught for Semester at Sea, a program sponsored by the University of Virginia, which teaches over 700 university students per voyage while sailing round the world.

⁴⁴ Teela Sanders, *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex*, (Devon, UK: Willan Publishing, 2008), 40.

⁴⁵ Brian Alexander, *America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction* (Three Rivers Press, 2008), 302.

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