

How Today May We Distinguish Healthy Sexuality from “Perversion”?

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Abstract

Continued use of the loaded term “perversion” is justified when instead of claiming this or that behavior is unnatural or abnormal we mean it entails a deflection away from constructive toward destructive aims—as when we speak, for example, of “a perversion of justice.” Perversion in general represents the hijacking of Eros (life, love and truth) by Thanatos (death, hate and lies); sexual perversion refers to any form of sexuality hijacked by destructive aims. Both Stoller and Kernberg argue that exciting sexuality necessarily entails transgressive elements. For Kernberg, if a couple’s sex life is not to descend into boredom, the puritanical superego of each must not be permitted to amplify that of the other such that sublimated forms of transgressive sexual play are inhibited. In a *dialectical* conception of healthy sexuality each partner simultaneously or in rapid oscillation relates to the other as both an exciting part-object to be selfishly used and a cherished whole object of love and concern.

Here are nine definitions of the verb form “pervert” provided by dictionary.com (accessed April 18th, 2010) at (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pervert>):

per·vert

–verb (used with object)

1. to affect with perversion.
2. to lead astray morally.
3. to turn away from the right course.
4. to lead into mental error or false judgment.
5. to turn to an improper use; misapply.

6. to misconstrue or misinterpret, esp. deliberately; distort: to pervert someone's statement.
7. to bring to a less excellent state; vitiate; debase.
8. pathology, to change to what is unnatural or abnormal.
9. to convert or persuade to a religious belief regarded as false or wrong.

It is usage number eight above--"pathology, to change to what is unnatural or abnormal"--that has brought the term perversion into disrepute due to the heterosexist claim that homosexuality is unnatural or pathological in its failure to serve the supposed "natural" goal of human sexuality: reproduction.

In *Psychoanalysis and Male Homosexuality*, Kenneth Lewes (2009) provides an excellent scholarly review of Freud's complex and ambivalent view of homosexuality. Freud admires the cultural contributions of homosexuals, insists homosexuality is not an illness and calls it an "inversion" precisely to distinguish it from "perversion." Yet at the same time he regards homosexuality as a developmental deviation or arrest. Due to his biologically reductionist, Darwinian view of human sexuality in which normative sexuality is intrinsically linked to reproduction, Freud can only regard homosexuality as a deviation from its "normal" reproductive aim.

In rightly rejecting this view and its associated notion of perversion—only one of the nine definitions provided above—we have regrettably lost sight of the other eight usages of the term. If instead of definition eight above we rely on definitions three to seven, we can say that to pervert processes like sexuality and psychoanalysis involves their deflection away from constructive aims—such as mutual love and pleasure in the case of sexuality, and self-understanding and emotional growth in the case of analysis—toward aims that are ultimately destructive of the self and others. Perversion ultimately represents the hijacking of *Eros* (life, love and, following Bion [1962] I would add truth) by *Thanatos* (death, hate and lies).

Today, there is no longer any need to be defensive about the moral judgment involved in valuing construction over destruction, love over hate, and truth over lies. Postmodern sociocultural relativism has been relativised: most philosophers and social scientists now acknowledge the existence of a universal ethic embodied in fundamental norms of justice, reciprocity and fairness: every culture and religion we know of has some variant of the universal ethic of charity (don't do to others what you don't want them doing to you). We now have strong empirical evidence from infant research that even year-old babies are able to distinguish right from wrong (Bloom, 2010), so we needn't belabor the point. The concept of perversion advanced here is certainly not "value-free"; but the value it embodies is not the biologically reductionist one that led Freud to privilege sexuality leading to reproduction over all other forms of sexual expression. What is privileged here is human behavior, including sexual behavior, in the service of love, life and truth, rather than hate, death and lies.

Whereas in "A Clinical Contribution to the Analysis of a Perversion," Betty Joseph (1971) speaks of a patient's "perverting of the transference by sexualizing it," I would prefer to describe this as an attempt at perversion of the analysis *through* the transference, since we understand the transference as the field in which patients more or less unconsciously display toward the analyst their central psychopathology. Displaying one's perversity in the transference is not a perversion of the transference, though it may well entail an attempt, via the transference, to pervert the analysis.

I think there are good reasons to continue to use the term "perversion," provided we make clear in what precise sense we are using the term. The problem is not in the word but in the meaning sometimes given to it. It's true that sometimes people try to get rid of unwanted social practices by trying to get rid of the words traditionally associated with those practices. In *1984* Orwell (1949) describes the efforts of the Ministry of Truth to shape society by eliminating certain words from our vocabulary. In the present case, the

meaning of the word has changed for substantial numbers of analysts.

Psychoanalysts, of all people, should be inclined not to react immediately to a word before carefully inquiring into what the user of that word understands by it. To fail to inquire into what people mean by the words they employ would represent a considerable failure of empathy, would it not? Part of the problem with political correctness is that it, like any other form of fundamentalism, fails to distinguish the signifier and the signified, the map and the territory, the menu and the meal, the letter and the spirit, the word and what it means to particular people. I think we should expect practitioners of the talking cure not only to be able to make such distinctions, but also to be alert to the need to do so—in the name of empathy.

Certainly since Bion, if not before, the term "perversion" has lost any *necessary* connection with issues of sexuality and gender. So we speak, for example, of a "perversion of justice." My own use of the term, like that of a considerable body of analytic writers, refers primarily to the perverse preference for lies over truth and hate over love—and only secondarily to sexual practices that reflect such preferences and that hijack sexuality in the service of hatred, deception and destruction.

In keeping with definition two given above, perversion also has to do with revaluing what is evil as what is good and, conversely, what is good as what is evil. In *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, Milton has Satan speak as follows after being cast out of Heaven:

*All hope excluded thus, behold, instead
Of us out-cast, exil'd, his new delight,
Mankind created, and for him this world.
So farewell, hope; and with hope farewell, fear;
Farewell, remorse! all good to me is lost;
Evil, be thou my good; by thee at least*

*Divided empire with Heaven's King I hold,
By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign;
As Man ere long, and this new world, shall know.*

I believe the term sexual perversion remains valuable when understood to refer to *any* form of sexuality that is hijacked by destructive aims, by hate as opposed to love, and that is pervaded by the preference for lies over truth—for, as Bion insisted, the mind is an organ nourished by truth and sickened by lies.

This understanding of the nature of perversion is in keeping with that developed by Robert Stoller (1975) some thirty-five years ago in his classic study, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*. Stoller viewed perversion as rooted in early trauma, not merely preoedipal, but understood broadly to include the Oedipus Complex and the primal scene—the trauma of finding oneself the excluded third. The essence of the later perversion is the turning of passive into active. The painful scene is re-staged, only this time with the subject not as a passive victim but as the active director of a scene in which he or she is the winner and someone else is the loser. Excitement comes from risk, for there is always the danger that the staging may break down and the roles might again be reversed with the subject once again in the losing (castrated, rejected, abandoned) position after all. Sadism is indulged precisely by inflicting the dreaded trauma upon another. Even when subjects contrive to place themselves in the losing position once again, as in masochistic perversions, they are the active directors this time, no longer the entirely passive victims, and this makes all the difference.

According to both Stoller (1979, 1985) and Kernberg (1991a, 1991b, 1993), sexuality must be in some measure “transgressive” (i.e., naughty) in order to remain exciting (i.e., worth having). There are indications (e.g., Pope, 2009) that the phenomenon of marital “dead bed” is apparently not rare, among both heterosexual and homosexual partners who have cohabited for more than about four years, by which time, according to Fisher

(1994), the “sexy” chemicals generated in the earlier stages of the relationship are increasingly displaced by the “cozy” ones that mediate intimacy more than passion, unless creative ways are found to keep the latter alive.

Kernberg (1991b, 1993) has suggested that for marital sex to remain exciting the partners must avoid allowing the remnants of their puritanical superegos to amplify each other to the point where they are unable to discuss, let alone play with, their transgressive fantasies and desires (see also Hantman, 2008). When one’s “kinkiness” is entirely excluded from the marital bed, that bed will go dead over time. Some will seek fulfillment of transgressive desire elsewhere—in extramarital affairs, with sex workers of various types, or in pornography and masturbation. Others will live lives of quiet desperation or turn away from sexuality altogether. But if such mutual puritanical superego reinforcement can be avoided and the couple can explore together their respective transgressive fantasies and desires, mutually fulfilling forms of erotic drama may sometimes be constructed that can have the effect of maintaining a lively sexual bond over many years.

Modern Kleinian theory has abandoned the old linear notion of emotional growth as progression from PS→D in which PS (paranoid-schizoid position) is bad and D (depressive position) is good. It is now recognized that this is itself an instance of PS splitting. Hence, mental health has been reconceived as PS↔D, a *dialectical* view that understands that there is both good and bad in both PS and D. In addition to the extremism, literalism, poor reality-testing, etc., there is also passion, intensity and excitement to be found in PS. And in addition to the capacity for concern, enhanced reality-testing, etc., in D, it can also give rise to an excessively dispassionate and unsexy rationality that can at times induce paralysis—e.g., the kind of liberalism that holds a candle for both St. George and the Dragon. Mental health necessarily involves a flexible cycling between the two positions rather than fixation in one or the other.

Although he himself does not develop it in Kleinian terms, Kernberg's (1991b, 1993) argument is that in order to maintain passion, the partners must relate to each other simultaneously in both PS and D. (I think rapid cycling is more accurate.) On the level of D my partner is a whole object, my cherished beloved, a person whose welfare I care about and whom I seek to protect from all harm and danger—Buber's (1970) "I-Thou" relation. But on the level of PS she or he is my sexual part-object, a "thing" I seek to use aggressively as a means to the end of my selfish pleasure—Buber's "I-it" relation. It is admittedly a tall order: to be able to love, cherish, hate, and exploit more or less simultaneously or at least in rapid (PS \leftrightarrow D) cycles, but this is what seems to be necessary for sexuality to be both responsible and exciting.

Can we distinguish perversion from the type of transgressive drama operative in the kind of exciting and yet responsible sexuality that Kernberg describes? In order to qualify as a perversion as distinct from a mutually acceptable and pleasurable type of transgressive play, the staging of the perverse drama must be excessively costly or risky in terms of the potential physical and/or social pain and danger to which it exposes the subjects involved. An exciting sexual drama that is mutually fulfilling and non-perverse would be one that, in contrast to the perversion, is not excessively costly or risky, while sufficiently maintaining the elements of transgression, risk and danger that Stoller argues are essential components of sexual excitement. In other words, whereas in creative, transgressive, exciting sexuality the dialectic between PS and D is maintained, in perversion it breaks down and paranoid-schizoid functioning predominates.

In this definition, there is no privileging of genital intercourse, let alone of reproduction. The criterion concerns the level of danger and risk of physical and/or social harm to which the self and the other are exposed. When partners genuinely care for each other and work out an exciting drama that is socially and physically safe and at the same time thrilling because it subsumes transgressive psychosexuality, a mutually fulfilling sex life

is their reward.

Here the concept of sublimation (Hegel's *Aufheben*) applies. Although the conception of the dialectic as a three-step movement from thesis to antithesis and finally synthesis is Fichte's rather than Hegel's, this model legitimately articulates the Hegelian dialectic provided one understands that both thesis (the immediate) and its negation (which is not necessarily its contrary) are cancelled and yet preserved and elevated in the synthesis (mediation) that represents their sublation (sublimation).

The idea is not as complicated as it sounds. As Freud explains, if the wish to be dirty (thesis) is opposed by the wish to be clean (antithesis), out of this conflict there may emerge a synthesis in which both wishes are transcended and yet preserved, being elevated to a higher level—as in the case of the sculptor who might be said to have found a way to be dirty and clean at the same time. Whereas sublimation negates, preserves and elevates, in the neurotic compromise-formation involving “reaction-formation” the immediate (thesis, the wish to be dirty) is overcome by an intensified wish to be clean (antithesis) that negates it through repression. Although in a sense the negated wish to be dirty is preserved in a state of repression that gives rise to a return of the repressed in disguised forms, there is no negation of the negation leading to art as mediation or sublimation, leaving only the exaggerated need to be clean that often results in obsessive-compulsive rituals and symptoms.

A similar dialectical model may be applied in order to enable us to distinguish perversion from non-perverse forms of play, erotic and otherwise. If the immediate, the thesis, the transgressive desire, is negated by the puritanical superego through repression, this will result in “the return of the repressed” in such forms as sexual dysfunctions, loss of desire (“low libido”), psychosomatic disturbances, sexual prudery and judgmentalism, not to mention possible occasional outbursts of dangerous acting-out. But if the transgressive desires are not merely negated, but also preserved and

elevated into a symbolic drama that can be played with in relatively safe and mutually enjoyable ways, the result may be a tolerably transgressive, thrilling, and enduringly happy “partnership in (sublimated) crime.” This, I submit, is how today we may distinguish a healthy, creative and vital sex life from perversion.

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