

Chapter 8

Meaningful Pleasures: The Many Dimensions of Sexuality (synopsis)

Healing sexual shame involves reclaiming the meaningfulness of our positive sexual experiences, but this meaning may be obscured by traditional moral beliefs. To break through the barrier represented by the moralistic phrase “meaningless pleasure,” we need to understand that philosophically and historically, traditional sexual morality is based on a dubious assumption combined with a non-existent principle. The dubious assumption is that reproduction is the only purpose of sexuality. The non-existent principle, unspoken but implicit in the logic of many moralists, is that enjoying an activity for its own sake, without its practical purpose, is immoral (curiously, sex is the only activity this principle is ever applied to).

Based on the discussion of childhood sexual development in the previous chapter, this chapter suggests that the primary functions of human sexuality are personality development; physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being; and reproduction, in that order. This theory has the advantage of corresponding to actual human sexual behavior, most of which does not have reproduction as its goal. Non-reproductive sexual activity, considered unnatural by traditional morality, is in fact commonplace in nature, among both animals and humans, and a possible evolutionary explanation for this fact is discussed.

The benefits of touching and sex for physical and psychological health are surveyed, as well as the damage caused by tactile deprivation. Moralists who are eager to warn about the health risks of sex are curiously silent about the health benefits, and this attitude spills over into the funding of scientific research, which tends to focus on sexual disorders, dysfunctions, and diseases, but not on the benefits of healthy sexual activity.

Pleasure, our natural guide to what is good for us, is intrinsically meaningful, and sexuality has a variety of meanings in human life. Sexual behavior may find itself in the service of love, affection, self-expression, self-esteem, relaxation, celebration, beauty, playfulness, humor, consolation, nurturing, security, camaraderie, admiration, vitality, ecstasy, psychological and spiritual growth, sensory awareness, etc. To a person burdened with toxic shame, sex may provide only physical pleasure. But to a person liberated from such shame, sex can also provide psychological, social, aesthetic, and spiritual pleasure, with multiple meanings in a variety of situations.

It is strange that sex is the only pleasure that we are traditionally forbidden to enjoy for its own sake, as if the separation of pleasure from practicality were sinful. In fact, the separation of pleasure from practicality is one of the foundations of human culture. What we do because we enjoy it, rather than for some practical purpose, is considered recreation, sport, or art, and these cultural activities are considered essential for a well-rounded personality. By condemning recreational sex and the erotic arts, traditional morality tries to banish sex from culture, but the result is that some people—the perpetrators of sexual abuse—are left sexually uncivilized. Telling people that sex is obscene teaches them to behave obscenely. If we want to civilize sexuality, we need to integrate it into our culture, and that means actively cultivating healthy sexuality, not just leaving it to chance.