



Sex and Emotion

Do we really communicate in the realms of the non-conscious?

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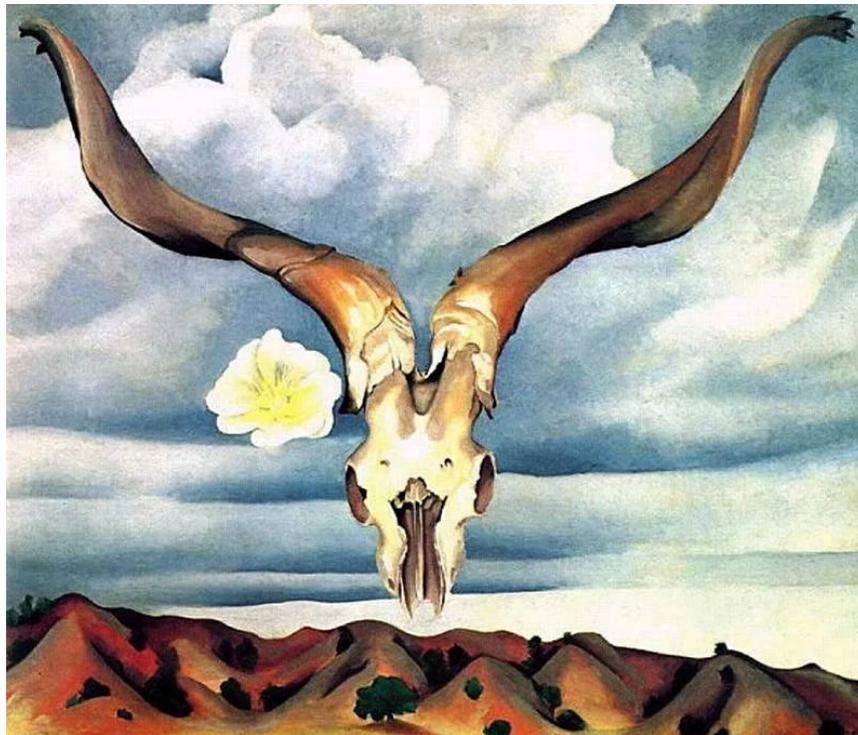
“Sex is emotion in motion.”

— Mae West

We control the conscious mind with our thoughts. The unconscious mind rewards us with instant attraction, repulsion, and gratification. The subconscious mind reacts with a complex brew of memories that bathes us in associations. Sex, like a small number of other activities, involves all of these. I don't think we really communicate on these topics.

Sex

I expect some of you have sexual thoughts at least once a minute, while others less than once a day. Habit, circumstance, and personality. This makes for people living in very different worlds, yet we rarely recognize, consider, or discuss this.



Ram's Head White Hollyhock and Little Hills, by Georgia O'Keeffe

Death

We often refer to death and sex in counterpoint. I'm not sure why. Perhaps they seem to float at similar levels in our unconsciousness. One emerges as a hunger, the other as a fear. On the face of it, they don't have much in common. I suggest it is because fear and lust are our biggest boundary issues.

Non-consciousness

Let's clarify the realms of what is not conscious. The unconscious consists of our instinctive reactions. Consider these to be chemical pathways below consciousness. All living things are attracted to food, sex, and security when they're in a state of need. They don't need to think about it. It seems like some chemical is doing it, though it could be hard-wired through some other means.

The subconscious is basically the realm of emotions molded by life experience, learned emotions triggered by circumstance. It runs its programs of its own accord, though we can reprogram the subconscious to varying degrees.

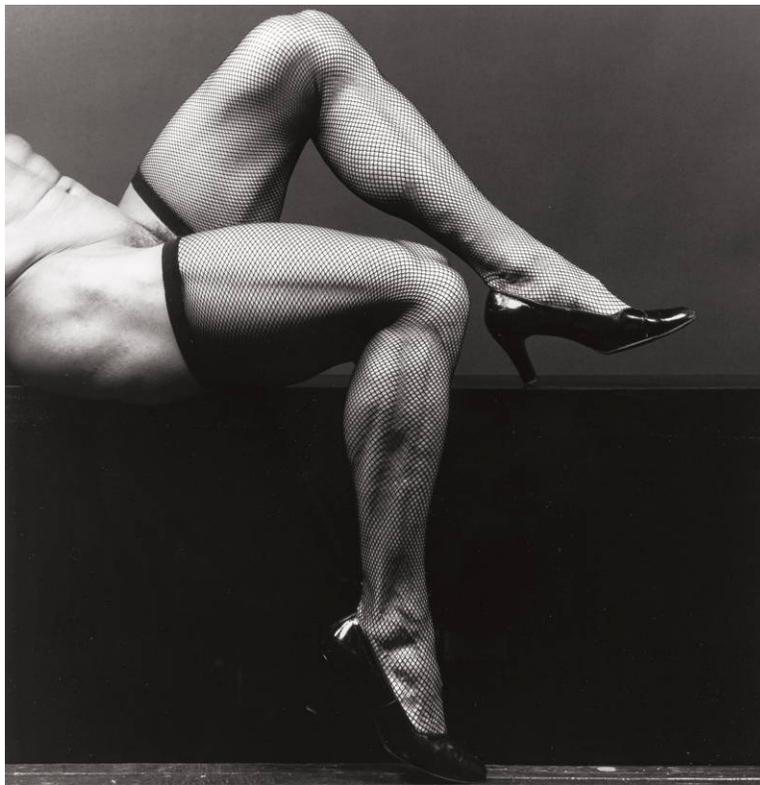
In the case of most feelings, there are both unconscious and subconscious triggers. A hunger for food can come upon you unbidden, simply because your stomach tells you so. At the same time, the mention of food can set hunger off. The craving may be in the stomach or in the mind, and it's the rhythm of the

two together that builds to a crescendo. One without the other envelops us to a lesser extent than when we experience both together.

Fear operates in a similar manner. You can feel fear in your body, as in a fear of heights, and you can feel fear in your mind, as when you ruminate on death. Fears in the mind can be allayed with reason, and fears in the body with small changes in circumstance, such as backing away from a steep drop. You can feel the difference: one originates as tension in the body, the other as panic in the mind.

We can talk about fear and hunger and we understand each other. We share similar feelings. We may experience them to different degrees in varied circumstances, but we have common ground. And it is on this basis that coming together for a meal has an all-around salutary effect, as does a roller-coaster ride. This is communion through gratification and exaltation.

We feel the separate effects of hunger and fear on the mind and body. There is mixing and cross-over, but we all seem to come out heading in the same direction in the end.



Roger in Fishnets, by Robert Maplethorpe

The Realm of Complications

This does not seem to be the case with sex. It's clearly not the case that sex effects each of us in the same way. We know this chemically, though the chemical measures are rather crude. Sex will stimulate different levels of the emotion-mediating chemicals oxytocin and vasopressin. It's difficult to untangle

the effects. We try to understand them using various means in humans and other animals. We have not succeeded.

The effects of these hormones are staggeringly contradictory, interacting, genetically and epigenetically controlled. They trigger feelings of love, attachment, safety, and bonding but also aggression, anxiety, defensiveness, and anger (Carter, 2017). Sounds like your average sexual experience, right? Why is sex so complicated? Those are rhetorical questions; no one knows.

Love can be accompanied by jealousy, erratic behavior, aggression, lack of awareness, irrationality, and other less-than-positive behaviors. Is chemical bonding a form of dumbness? Is love a form of stupidity?

This may make sense. Bonding is a form of dependence, implicit trust means that you are no longer thinking critically. When two entities merge they dissolve the boundary between them and, one expects, that they reform that boundary around them. Sex is the closest we come to metamorphosis, but, if an emotional metamorphosis is the goal, we mostly fail.

It is the dissolution and reformation of boundaries that gives some sense to this combination of seemingly contradictory emotions and behaviors. Lust is synonymous with the need for gratification. We often imply that lust is negative while sex is positive, but I see no difference. Both seem to be a potential trigger for boundary reformation when they work correctly.



Attraction versus Attachment

“Attraction appears to be a distinct, though closely related, phenomenon [to lust]. While we can certainly lust for someone we are attracted to, and vice versa, they can occur independently of one another. Attraction involves the brain pathways that control ‘reward’ behavior, which partly

explains why the beginning of a romantic relationship can feel so exhilarating. People ‘in love’ experience a range of intense feelings, such as intrusive thoughts, emotional dependency and increased energy, especially in the early phases of the relationship...

“Attachment is the predominant factor in long-term relationships. While lust and attraction are pretty much exclusive to romantic relationships, attachment mediates friendships, parent-infant bonding, social cordiality, and many other intimacies as well. Romantic love appears to be universal, but the extent to which romantic or sexual love forms an important part of long-term relationships may vary. For example, only 4.8% of Australian university students report that they would marry without romantic love compared to over 50% of those in Pakistan.”

— Clinical Knowledge Network, from “Cupid’s chemical addiction—the science of love.” Retrieved from <https://www.ckn.org.au/content/cupid%E2%80%99s-chemical-addiction-%E2%80%93-science-love>

Empathy versus Understanding

You may not be attached to someone with whom you empathize, but you must empathize with someone with whom you are attached. We’re told empathy comes in two forms, cognitive and emotional, but this is not sufficient. There is more than just one kind of cognitive empathy.

Because he is so cogent, you can understand Edmund Kemper’s explanations of how and why he killed people, but you would not be guided by his logic. You certainly cannot emotionally empathize with him.

Well, that’s not exactly true. There are human elements in Kemper’s story that will find some resonance in most people, but not enough to create full empathy. It gets back to the twisted nature of sexuality, fear, and attachment. There are confused elements in all of us, but we hold it together. Kemper did not.

We lack a shared understanding of the unique emotions of sexuality because there aren’t any. We explore this in our personal relationships to some extent, though we do a poor job of it. We don’t explore this therapeutically, to my knowledge. The emotions of sexuality are a dark area not only because we lack a theory, but because we lack a language.

We find some clarity from the perspective of multiple personalities. Multiple personalities are applied to explain pathology, but dissociation exists on a spectrum. Dissociation is basic to hypnosis and, to a less recognized extent, in other modalities such as Internal Family Systems and Active Imagination. Dissociation is implicit in the concept of working to integrate your personality.

In these approaches, you create a space to allow separate and divergent aspects of yourself to organize and speak. You don’t try to understand them, and you don’t try to reconcile them with who you feel yourself to be. These aspects of yourself lie outside of the belief system to which you subscribe, yet they have a right to exist.



Orville Cox and Georgia O'Keeffe

Unity versus Separateness

When you engage in this process you are attempting to bring allies together, move antagonists apart, and untangle the conflicts within yourself. The great impediment to this process is a lack of honesty, as it is in any negotiation. There are various reasons for a lack of honesty and we will explore those at some other time.

The exploration and unfolding of the emotions of sexuality precedes our integration of them. Understanding and integration are different. There are some things that you may understand that you don't want to integrate. Some emotions exist in counterpoint to others, such as such as the ability to feel separate and the ability to feel united.

Your object is growth, health, and strength. You achieve these by engaging, empowering, and expressing those emotions that embrace your situation and enlarge you awareness. Release, reframe, or decompose those aspects of yourself that suffocate your growth. You can only do this with their permission. They must be recognized. Ultimately, they release themselves.

Following Wilhelm Reich, as I understand him, sexual health is emotional health which is a combination of the most creative personal growth with the deepest interpersonal sharing. It is a metamorphosis.

C. Sue Carter, C. S. (2017). The Oxytocin–Vasopressin Pathway in the Context of Love and Fear, *Frontiers Endocrinology (Lausanne)*, 8: 356. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5743651/>

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