

**HUMAN SEXUALITY**

**- AN ETHICAL REFLECTION -**

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Continuing its activity of ethical appraisal of problems relevant to our society, the National Council of Ethics for the Life Sciences decided to initiate an in-depth reflection on human sexuality, wherefore it invited Prof. Michel Renaud to elaborate a working document. The latter was assessed in the course of several plenary meetings. Taking into account comments and contributions that arose therein, Prof. Michel Renaud gave his text the form presented below, which the Council sees fit to publish, for it is an opportune contribution to a debate on this theme.

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## ***HUMAN SEXUALITY – AN ETHICAL REFLECTION***

### **Introduction**

Sexuality appears to human beings as a mysterious reality, springing since time immemorial from mythical ground. Among the multiplicity of dimensions inherent in sexuality, three appear to be particularly relevant, providing thus a starting point for a general reflection on the subject: the cosmic-vital force, the sacred aspect, and human presence. The mythical grounding of human sexuality maintained a strong interconnection between these dimensions; in our contemporary culture, by and large, they are seen in dissociation.

As a cosmic-vital phenomenon, sexuality is connected with the generation of new living beings. It is an instinctive force, thanks to which the perishable life of animal organisms perpetuates itself and evolves; resulting, over millennia, in both the permanence and the evolution of animal species. For human beings, sexual reproduction both animal and human carries an almost mythical and sacred connotation, by dint of its proximity to the mystery of the origin of all living things. But human sexuality specifically, inasmuch as it is not identified purely and simply with reproduction, introduces new parameters of experience and understanding, which interfere with the spontaneous cycle of generations.

The connectedness of those three dimensions in human experience characterises sexuality in primitive societies. In result of this interconnection, human sexuality is imbued with a cosmic dimension, making men and women parties to the reproductive and creative force of the world of life. This *life* is then perceived by the imagination as part and parcel of the “life” of the cosmos itself, benefiting thereby from the sacred aura that affects the cosmic totality. The birth of a new child evokes and reenacts the fascinating mystery of life. Thus, the three primordial dimensions that lend some intelligibility to sexuality appear to be present in all primitive societies. They are: the *vital force* that embraces the human species to the bosom of all living species, without particular privilege; the *sacred mystery* of this force, which has a cosmic dimension inasmuch as it is bound with the origin of the world; and lastly, the specific face taken on by *human sexuality* upon its institutionalisation by social and moral rules.

This solid interconnection no longer exists in contemporary societies deemed to be developed. Scientific knowledge of the mechanisms of reproduction contributes to the forced retreat of the *sacred* and mysterious dimension of human sexuality. Likewise, the spontaneous linking of human sexuality with the *cosmic* character of the vital force gradually loses its hold. As for the third of these dimensions, a latent conflict subsists between the effort to discipline human sexuality by its incorporation into the *institution* (the different forms of matrimony), and the rebellious character of a sexuality that seeks total freedom for the ways it is expressed. Nonetheless, we may consider that even in developed societies the dimensions pointed out still manifest their presence, however intermittent, residual or subconscious.

In the wake of these considerations, it is important to stress the impact of partial connections. When human sexuality is apprehended against the background

of the cosmic-vital force, its facet of anonymous life experience becomes more marked; the human presence is diluted in the vitality of this force, to such an extent that, upon awakening to the mystery of life, the adult human being feels overwhelmed by an anonymous, faceless and almost violent power. We are not far removed from Bacchanalia and the Dionysian undercurrent that illustrates the “nocturnal” side of life experience, that is to say, its pre-personal side. In the sex orgies of ancient Greece, or of our own time, human individualisation is erased, as if the essential goal were to let oneself be absorbed by or pervaded with the torrent of the sexual force. As it passes, it sweeps away everything in the human being that might recall the personalisation of the face. In the Bacchanalia of ancient times, the use of masks causes the face to disappear behind the body, from which emanates only erotic force or seductive power. But there is a heavy price to pay: so long as it is not oriented towards the person but to *objective* sex, as it were, human behaviour appears as sub-ethical, or more accurately, as guided solely by the value of “animal life.” Inversely, upon the emergence of an ethics of sexuality of a personal nature, the anonymous, “archaic sacred” dimension that underlay Dionysian orgies fell apart. This Dionysian dimension is still present nevertheless in other cultures and religions –in Hinduism, for instance – with a proliferation of the cosmic-vital symbolism, laden with hierogamies and acts of war and love.

According to Paul Ricoeur,<sup>1</sup> this historic transformation was brought on by the joint cultural impact of ethical monotheism<sup>2</sup> and technical reason. The violence of Eros must give way to order and discipline. Sexuality must accept not only the mould of the family Institution but also the consequences thereof concerning respect for the person, with sexual relations taking place under the marriage “contract.” Thus, the aim of the institutionalisation of sexuality is to transform the old cosmic-vital force into a *personal* and personalised encounter of bodies without a mask, as if the nakedness of the bodies were an extension of the transparency of the faces.

The force of the sex drive is not so easily tamed, however. A kind of struggle sets in between disciplined sexuality and the vigour of this driving force, which resists the reins of order and makes constant show of its overwhelming, quasi-chaotic energy. Moreover, it so happens in the human species that procreative ability or genital sexuality precedes psychological maturity; likewise, in Western societies, psychological maturity often precedes the social and economic ability to found a new family cell.

The difficulty of finding equilibrium in our sex life arises from this interaction of the driving force, the conscious meaning of an interpersonal relation, and the role of the institution. First of all, this drive operates involuntarily and it is not conscious at the origin. Were it fully unconscious yet readily isolated, like an internal body organ, our sex drive would escape the universe of meaning each of us *consciously* experiences; but in human beings that drive is never experienced in isolation from the sphere of meaning. In other words, Man does not and cannot experience sexuality in an exclusively animal way: representation and imagination intervene between drive and meaning. Reciprocally, representation in sexual experience is

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<sup>1</sup> Paul RICOEUR, “La sexualité. Merveille, errance, énigme,” in *Histoire et vérité*. Paris, Seuil, 1964 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), pp. 198-209.

<sup>2</sup> What is meant here by “monotheism” is not primarily the philosophical theory according to which there is but one God; it is rather the historical emergence of monotheism with the rise of the three religions of “the Book” – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. What is meant by *ethical* monotheism is the effect of this historical monotheism upon the ethical understanding of the individual.

never purely intellectual, for it is infused with the driving force. “Ni ange, ni bête” [*neither angel nor beast*], Pascal used to say of Man – and a French saying added, “qui fait l’ange fait la bête” [*playing the angel makes you beastly (i.e. a proper jackass)*]. The mystery of human sexuality lies in this knotting of unconscious drive with conscious meaning, in this crossing of two lines seeking, not quite successfully, to head their own way. That is why the several bodies of knowledge on sexuality are divided today into at least two mainstreams: on the one hand, the line of depth psychology (psychoanalysis); on the other, the philosophical and ethical description of the meaning of sexuality. One thing can be gleaned from these initial considerations, that neither of these two lines of investigation will be able to absorb the other completely: psychoanalytical theory is unable to substitute a philosophy of sexuality, but the latter, in turn, fails to integrate exhaustively and rationally the sexual driving force.

Paraphrasing a title by Ricoeur (1964), we might say that sexuality is at one and the same time wonder, wandering and conundrum. It is wonder as a discovery of the life that infuses us, impelling each of us to others; it is wandering or straying when it is experienced in anonymity disregarding the other’s face, as an unbridled pursuit of pleasure or as objectification and instrumentalisation of other bodies; finally, it is a conundrum because the equilibrium it seeks would entail – and this brings to mind trying to square a circle – a proper and definitive reconciliation of the unconscious and the conscious, of the unconscious vital force and the conscious commitment to meaning sprung from an ethical life.

The central theme of the present analysis is sexuality; primarily, it is not love. That is why the *starting point* adopted herein will not be the loving relationship between human beings; in effect, it is important to focus on sexuality to discern how love arises within it. A description of love would follow a different track, showing the incorporation of sexuality into the loving encounter.

An analysis of sexuality, however brief, raises the question of defining the points of view adopted and the initial meaning of the concepts. Since this analysis is oriented to the search for the *ethical principles* relating to sexuality, it will be centred on those aspects that are indispensable to such a search. Starting from a cursory glance at some sociological data to which the reader is referred (no. 1), the analysis will turn at length on a philosophical description of sexuality (no. 2), for ethical principles (no. 3) must be rooted on a theoretical and not purely pragmatic understanding of human existence. Finally, it will be opportune to highlight some consequences that apply to an education into sexuality (no. 4).

It is known that “sex” and “sexuality” are concepts whose definition varies according to one’s chosen point of view and current developed theories. Prior to any analysis, it is fitting to indicate we must distinguish: 1) chromosomal sex, determined by genetic makeup; 2) phenotypic sex; 3) hormonal sex (since the secretion of sex hormones, in some diseases, does not correspond to the subject’s anatomical sex); 4) psycho-social sex, i.e. the sex with which the human subject identifies. “Genital sexuality” will refer to the act of sexual union, even when cut off from its connection with the procreative purpose (except in no.1, where several quotes take genital sexuality as referring to the procreative purpose of sexual intercourse).

The present analysis will study sexuality in its specifically human aspect. The thesis put forward consists in showing that a rupture exists between animal sexual behaviour and human sexuality. For that reason, the theses of ethology (Lorenz,

Watson, etc.) and the more recent ones from sociobiology, whose methodology consists in comparing animal and human behaviour so as to show behavioural similarities (mating patterns, territorial demarcation, protection of the progeny, etc.) will not be studied or even mentioned herein. In terms of its methodology, sociobiology merits full attention. From the point of view of ethics, its sole merit is the analysis it makes of those facets of human behaviour that escape our free and responsible consciousness.

In keeping with its title, the aim of the present study – which of course makes no pretence of being exhaustive – is to stimulate theoretical reflection on aspects that are particularly relevant to the field of sexuality. Being much too brief to be considered even remotely as a sketchy “treatise” on the matter, it is yet too long to offer the ethics of sexuality any compact handy “recipes” divided into isolated topics. It banks on the patience of the reader who is interested in confronting, laid out in condensed yet pondered form, a quasi-synoptic overview of the chief aspects of sexuality which are neither biological nor medical but specifically human.

The first part, using the support of recent works, attempts to provide some information on the experience of sexuality in Portugal. The second part, more extensive, proposes a philosophical-anthropological analysis of sexuality. This analysis provides grounds to support the two parts that follow, dedicated respectively to ethical analysis – presented in the form of general principles – and to the elaboration of guidelines for an education into sexuality.

Since the part developed at greatest length is turned to philosophical analysis (no. 2), it seemed useful to provide a brief synthesis of this same part (no. 2.12). If convenience demands it, this synthesis obviates a full reading of the second part.

## 1. Some data relating to the experience of sexuality in Portugal.

In Portugal, recent information is available thanks to several high-quality studies. Three of them merit special mention: chapter six, “Love life and sex life,” in *Generations and Values in Contemporary Portuguese Society* (1998);<sup>3</sup> chapter five, “Conjugalinity and Sexuality in Portuguese Youth: Practices and Discourses,” in *Portuguese Youth Today* (1998);<sup>4</sup> lastly, the dissertation by Valentim R. Aferes, *Sexual Role-playing and Behaviour. Towards a Social Psychology of Sexuality* (1997).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Vida amorosa e sexual” in José MACHADO PAIS (Scient. Coord.), *Gerações e Valores na Sociedade Portuguesa Contemporânea*. Lisbon, Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa and Secretaria de Estado da Juventude, 1998, pp. 407-465.

[JHN: In the text, I have rendered into English the Portuguese titles described in the original footnotes. In note 8, exceptionally, the titles are given only in English. This is done for the sake of convenience and does not indicate the existence of translations of these works.]

<sup>4</sup> “Práticas e discursos da conjugalidade e de sexualidade dos jovens portugueses” in Manuel VILLAVERDE CABRAL and José MACHADO PAIS, *Jovens Portugueses de Hoje. Resultados do Inquérito de 1997*. Oeiras, Celta, 1998. Pedro Vasconcelos wrote chapter 5 (pp. 215-305).

<sup>5</sup> Valentim R. AFERES, *Encenações e comportamentos sexuais. Para uma psicologia social da sexualidade*. Porto, Afrontamento, 1997 (thesis carried in 1995 before the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education of Coimbra University).

While it is impossible to convey the richness of these works, to which the present analysis addresses the reader, it is fitting to highlight at least some aspects of their quite pertinent conclusions.

“The great continent of sexual normality, surrounded by small islands of disorder, has been transformed, it would seem, into a pluralistic, diversified archipelago of *styles* of sexual behaviour. This is an interesting finding, that sexuality should have been discovered as a structuring element of a certain lifestyle. On the other hand, as we have seen, a considerable *heterogamy* prevails among the youngest of the interviewees. Most young people – with women tending to approach men’s levels – now arrive at marriage carrying a substantial haul of sexual experience and knowledge. Among the older generations, sexual activity was understood to be adult behaviour. Today, sexual initiation usually takes place during adolescence. On the other hand, now that the birth of children can be controlled and even produced artificially, sexuality has become more autonomous, contrary to the situation in the old days when birth control depended on an exaggerated discipline of pleasure. Notwithstanding this, the available information does not allow us to prognosticate a de-conjugalisation of matrimony, even though sexual initiation outside a matrimonial context is regarded as normal and the procreative aspect is only loosely associated with sexual intercourse.”

“(…) The changes in sexual behaviour that have brought, or will bring, the greatest repercussions are perhaps those introducing the possibility of greater sexual autonomy among females, although the consequences of these changes to male sexuality are evident, too. To conclude, young people are apparently the bearers of a new sexual ethics, much more uninhibited or tolerant than the one that characterised previous generations. One might say – though this is but an hypothesis deserving more in-depth work in future investigations – that while the older generations are guided by values rooted in an ideational framework [*ideário*] of *societal collectivism*, the younger generations embrace more fluctuant values based on *societal individualism*. In the first case, individual aspirations are apparently subordinated to collective causes: social rights, communal identities, ties of emotional dependence. In the second case, collective causes are apparently subordinated to individual aspirations: self-fulfilment, private rights, individual initiative. Now, these two value frameworks are likely to support two different ethics. Among the older generations, the ideational framework of *societal collectivism* is conducive to conservative sexual ethics, defending institutional matrimony, lasting ties, sexual Puritanism. Among the younger generations – since “modernity” is associated with a “breakaway culture” – the ideational framework of *societal individualism* appears to be more strongly connected to an experimentalistic, fragmented sexual ethics, with room for ephemeral romantic relationships, for pre-marriage and cohabitation experiments, for precocious sexual initiation and heterogamous relationships; lastly, one may also observe a relative tolerance to diverse forms of sexuality considered to be socially or ideologically on the fringe.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These two long excerpts come from the two concluding pages of the chapter “Love life and sexual life” in the book *Gerações e Valores na Sociedade Portuguesa Contemporânea*, *op. cit.*, p. 462-463. What is meant by *ideational framework* [*ideário*] is a coherent set of implicit or explicit representations that allow an understanding of a certain type of concrete behaviour. The expression corresponds roughly with the expression “interpretative mold” used in the next section, “Elements for a philosophical analysis of sexuality.”

The conclusions reached by Pedro Vasconcelos on conjugality and sexuality among young people, though they do not disagree with the considerations just quoted, add important complements on the attitude of young people with regard to marriage and setting up a new family.

“We may verify, with respect to conjugality, that Portuguese young people show clear propensity to matrimonial arrangements, for the overwhelming majority wishes to live with the partner and get married. We have seen that the legitimisation of marriage resides in an ideology of “love,” which leads – in terms of public declarations – to downplaying the social attributes of possible partners, for young people (at least ideologically) regard “love” as being socially de-contextualised. Even so, most young people reject in a possible partner certain traits – such as the threat of being sexually promiscuous and begetting children with someone else – traits that might represent a threat to the obligation of conjugal faithfulness. In fact, the majority regards unfaithfulness as grounds for rupture. Thus, the conjugal models conveyed by many young people do accept, albeit conditionally, the possibility of divorce – which seemingly indicates that the formal tie binding the partners has lost a great deal of its traditional importance. Indeed, this hypothesis is supported by the abstract acceptance (total or partial) of informal cohabitation. We also verify the subsistence of a view of the woman’s role that places her professional achievement second to traditional maternal tasks. Lastly, we verify that the matrimonial projects of young people are at the same time parenthood projects.

“Thus in Portugal we still verify some linearity in the models of transition into adulthood – *grosso modo*, a standard pattern (familial) life cycle still exists, although we know that, nowadays, the passage into adulthood takes place later than before (due to the historical construction of a Youth that becomes more protracted with each new generation, and to putting off marriage and parenthood to a later age). Young people leave the family fold to set up new families. In fact, one family leads to another. Thus, contrary to what F. de Singly affirms, referring to a different cultural context, Portuguese young people do not show at present an attitude of distance and indecision regarding marriage. Whatever distance and indecision they may experience relate to the stages of courting and informal cohabitation – these are indeed characterised by a principle of reversibility consubstantial with an ethics of experimentation, particularly in matters of sexuality.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus we verify that, from a sociological point of view, the attitude of Portuguese young people towards sexuality before marriage and the constitution of a new family is not identical with their attitude after marriage.

Aferes’s study on the “social psychology of sexuality” is set in the intersection of sociology and psychology; for that very reason it chooses a different pace, also marked by the style proper to a dissertation addressed to a more exclusively scientific audience. Among its many good qualities, we might highlight the great interest of its opening section, dedicated to a historical and typological study of behaviour vis-à-vis sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This excerpt is taken from the conclusion of the chapter by Pedro Vasconcelos in *Jovens Portugueses de Hoje*, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-302.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Valentim R. AFERES, *op. cit.*, first chapter (“Sexuality, sexology and social psychology”), whose index deserves transcription: “1. Sexuality. 2. Sexology: The persistence of the biological postulate (2.1. Protosexology: Sex as reproduction. 2.2. Psychoanalysis: Anatomy as fate.



Merely as an example, we shall register here a few pointers extracted from the conclusion of the chapter “Beyond the differential psychology of the sexes: the persistence of the double standard.”<sup>9</sup>

“The results (...) [<sup>10</sup>] clearly bear out the existence of a double standard on sex before marriage [i.e. one applying to males, another to females]. Thus, in the age range under study [18-25], the percentage rate of virginity among males is always inferior to that among females. While the latter falls below 50% (48.1%) at ages 20-21, the male rate in the same age bracket is 16.7%. Likewise, in the 18-19 bracket, only one-third of boys against three-quarters of girls are virgins. On average, the first sexual experience of the men precedes the women’s by about one year. The men had more sexual partners during the preceding year as well as over their entire life cycle; likewise, they had more “one-night stands,” they wish to have sexual relations with a greater number of partners and entertain hopes of having them in the future. They think more about sex, masturbate more often and have a greater experience of and predisposition to orgasm;<sup>11</sup> they show greater permissiveness, admitting more readily to occasional sex, sex without commitment and impersonal sex. Women, on the other hand, show greater knowledge of contraceptive methods and, as regards attitudes, they are openly more receptive to sex education and family planning.

“As for the first sexual intercourse, less men than women declared they were in love with the partner, although the percentages for both were above 50% (62.7% for men and 88.5% for women). In situations where passion exists, the age of the first partner also conforms to the classic pattern: the man is older than the woman. If we turn to the histories of courting, we find no difference between the sexes as regards the total number of boy/girlfriends, nor as regards the number of those with whom they engaged in sexual congress; unfaithfulness, however, both real and imagined, is higher among males.

“Lastly, there is a marked convergence of both sexes on the plane of normative orientation: both men and women adhere to conjugal heterosexuality, subordinated to pleasure and relatively non-centred on genitality. Ideally, such sexuality is to be lived within the institutional framework of a Catholic marriage. (...)”

“In synthesis, as regards both prevailing behaviour and prevailing attitudes and norms, the two sexes agree that sexuality before marriage is to be pleasure-oriented and experienced in the context of a lasting emotional relationship. The majority therefore shares the script of “sex with affection.” Adherence to “sex for the sake of sex,” on the other hand, continues to be almost exclusive to males. In other words, the data obtained allow us to conclude that a conditional double standard on sex exists.”<sup>12</sup>

It is important to recall that the *sociological* analysis does not use the terms “norm” or “normative” to say what is *ethically* advisable or imperative, but only to describe what is held as normative by the subjects of the experiment. It is a matter of

2.3.Modern Sexology: Physiology as rule. 2.4.From the naturalisation of sex to models of sexual development). 3.Social Psychology: Social construction and personal meaning of sexuality.”

<sup>9</sup> “Para além da psicologia diferencial dos sexos: a persistência do duplo padrão”.

<sup>10</sup> “The empirical analyses in the present investigation are based on responses by 587 undergraduate students (563 at Coimbra University and 24 at Coimbra’s Higher College of Education) to three questionnaires (...) filled out in collective sessions held between 1990 and 1993” (*ibid*, p. 104).

<sup>11</sup> [JHN: “(...) masturbam-se mais e têm maior experiência do orgasmo do ponto de vista atitudinal”]

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.139-141.

describing “opinions” about the normative and not of making a philosophical stand about the contents of ethical norms. The error of a superficial ethical reading would consist in operating, almost spontaneously, an undue logical jump, as exemplified by the sentence, “Just about everybody does it, so I can do it, too.” This sophism hides an undue jump from the sociological plane to the ethical plane. This simple example makes it evident that a sociological analysis may never replace an ethical and philosophical analysis, just as the latter may never dispense with sociological investigation.

## 2. Elements for a philosophical analysis of sexuality

Sexuality is primordially a human phenomenon rooted in the body, not an objectively biological experience upon which a conscious and ethical superstructure imposes. This proposition or thesis contains an affirmative component and a negative one; the negative component refutes the existence in human beings of a form of dualism between their body and their consciousness, a dualism which contemporary philosophy – at least in the thinking of its most accredited representatives – can accept no longer.

The philosophical description of a human phenomenon is to be done on the basis of an understanding of how it appears as a *whole*. It is not, therefore, through the decomposition and isolation of its dimensions or of its constitutive elements that we shall make sexuality intelligible; likewise, it is not the study of sexual perversions that must serve as gateway to the understanding of healthy sexuality. An example removed from the problems under study will confirm this methodological standpoint. We understand the use of a motorcar when it functions correctly; but it is when a malfunction occurs that we have the obligation to open the engine and check the state of each component part. Knowledge of the function of each of the motorcar’s constitutive elements still does not provide an understanding of how the motorcar is to be used, much less of the direction it will take. Thus, sexual perversions may be construed as malfunctions in our sex life, but it won’t be the knowledge of all possible malfunctions that will direct us to the meaning of healthy sexuality. Hence, it is by focussing on what is proposed as healthy sexuality that the present analysis must proceed. It is true that, as in crystals, invisible planes of cleavage exist even when they are not apparent; it is equally true that diseases or perversions will not become manifest in purely chaotic fashion but along pre-established cleavage planes, discernible perhaps to the clinical eye of specialists. Our task, however, consists in discerning subtly such cleavage planes starting from the practice of healthy sexuality, sexuality considered to be “normal.”

The concept of normality is complex and ambiguous. From the noun “norm” two adjectives were derived, each with a different meaning: “normal” and “normative.” While normality refers to what is normal, normativeness implies a certain model or procedure that *must* be conformed to. On the other hand, “normal” may also denote the mean, the intermediary point among several cases either extreme or merely different; it may refer to a standard behaviour that actually might not exist anywhere, yet works as a referential axis that permits determining the possibility of a non-normative ideal. For example, although a man is not “normally” bald (before the age of 40), that does not mean that a given bald man is not “normal,” for we are not using a normative ideal but a statistical datum. We shall attempt, then, to understand the “human” phenomenon of “normal” sexuality.

## 2.1. The sexed body<sup>13</sup>

The evolution of sexual practices over the centuries and the changes that have taken place as to their social admissibility raise a far-reaching question. What is the meaning of human sexual differentiation? We must return to this side of the classic issue of the end purposes of marriage to try to understand sexuality as a human phenomenon. Evidently, sexuality is rooted in the body. Hence, it will be understood in terms of the relation between the human person and its body. If human beings were but objective bodies, biological machines, the understanding of sexuality would be achieved by the biological analysis of how it functions. But here our supposition is that the specificity of human beings resides in a fundamental modality of their existence: humans are beings who experience in their lives the possibility of seeking to understand themselves and reflect on the meaning and value of their acts. Thus some distance is introduced between experiencing life and reflecting about it; and this *reflexive* use of intelligence is a distinguishing attribute of human beings.

Thus, the meaning of human sexual differentiation involves consideration on two levels: as it is spontaneously perceived and experienced, and as it is reflected by thought. Indeed, reflexive thought tries to make explicit and shape into a theme [*tematizar*] the meaning that has already been experienced immediately and spontaneously by the human being. It is not our intention, therefore, to affirm that only reflexive thought is able to discern the meaning of human behaviour, of sexual behaviour in this case.

Now, regardless of their wishes, human beings spontaneously attribute to sexuality a meaning that is always beyond the purely biological. As a force or drive, sexuality is a search for the pleasure that will allay internal tension, but human beings, given the capacity for representation and imagination that inhabits them, “graft” onto this driving force, as it were, the universe of representations. We shall forgo an in-depth commentary of this affirmation, noting only that it states the problem Freud came across in his attempt to explain “primary repression.” It is at this level that, keeping to the terminology of the initial considerations above, *driving force* twines with *meaning*. The meaning is represented and imagined in non-reflexive manner, and for that very reason it will be possible to make it explicit in reflexive manner at a later moment.

Following these considerations on the interweaving of driving force and meaning, we must discern how sexuality is rooted in the body, that is, show that the body is by its constitution a *sexed body*. This expression, strongly emphasised by the phenomenological school, signifies that human sexuality is more than just a function connected with the sexual act, its representation or its specific pleasure. By their bodies, human beings open out to the world, to objects, to others. Thus, human sexuality affects our every gesture, which convey this opening out; it stamps all our behaviour, not only that relating directly to the sexual encounter. Actually, this provides the feminist movement with the most solid grounds for its action; it feminist

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<sup>13</sup> We speak of the *sexed body* and not of the *sexed person*, first of all, because the “sexed body” was developed as a theme by the phenomenological theory of the body, precisely to emphasise that the body is not reducible to the objective and objectifiable organism. Furthermore, the expression “sexed body” brings into relief just what was meant by “sexed person” or “sexed human life,” i.e. that sexuality, though rooted in the body, affects all the constitutive dimensions of the person.

action were confined to isolated protests of a socio-political kind (e.g. the “quotas” in Parliament and various other institutions or organisations), it would never rise above the level of circumstantial and possibly debatable demands. The sexed body is coextensive with the human mode of opening out to the world – this is the reason why the world-visions of females and males do not coincide and never will. We can understand then the correct import of Merleau-Ponty’s statement, which forcefully conveys the discovery of the human being as sexed being: “If the sexual history of a man is the key to his life, it is because in a man’s sexuality is projected his manner and attitude toward the world, that is, toward his time and other men.”<sup>14</sup> This statement does not mean that everything in life is sexual, or that sexuality suffuses every type of behaviour; it means that a reciprocal relation of expression exists between the sexed body and subjective life. It will be worth our while to look into a few corollaries of this interpretation.

The first consequence has to do with encounters between people. When they enter into a relation of proximity – not necessarily sexual – their bodies are never neutral from the point of view of their emotive charge. In other words, it is never a matter of bodies as they are described in manuals of anatomy or physiology. Each of the bodies is charged with a force of desire that emanates from it and, consciously or unconsciously, calls to the other, which likewise is not a neutral body. The encounter of two sexed bodies is at the same time an encounter of two desires. The spontaneous attraction or repulsion between those bodies, which often generates sympathy or antipathy for no conscious reason, attests to the presence in those bodies of something that is not purely rational. Thus, the concrete encounter (not via *Internet* !) between two or more human beings will never be purely rational, since the conceptual language used in their dialogue originates and develops from the affective dimension of existence.<sup>15</sup> Even an encounter mediated by writing, through a book or the *Internet*, implies a previous imaginary projection of the male or female identity of the interlocutor, with repercussions on the expectations about his/her responses, aggressiveness or affability.

We have just introduced the concept of affectivity. Human beings are “affected” through their sexed body, in such way that this affectivity touches every register of their personality. Affectivity is not, before all else, a feeling of pleasure or repulsion, but the ability to be affected by the presence of the other, by the events that concern him/her, as well as the ability to invest with feeling the response to the other’s presence. Before we talk of friendship or love, of courting or aversion, we must try to understand the significance of the presence of affectivity in connection with the sexed body. Robots built by human beings are able to simulate affectivity (as we may verify in TV series), but they are unable now and ever of rooting genuine affectivity in a sexed body. *Affectivity* is intimately connected with the *sexed body*, inasmuch as it constitutes the meeting-point between the driving force and subjective consciousness. That is why affectivity introduces some opacity in relations between human beings. The impossibility of transforming into full conceptual light the affective opacity arising from the driving force is often responsible for the distortions of meaning that crop up in attempts at dialogue and mutual understanding (for example,

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<sup>14</sup> Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945 (1st ed.), p.185. [JHN: “(...) o seu modo de ser para com o mundo, isto é, para com o tempo e para com os outros homens.”]

<sup>15</sup> [JHN: “uma vez que a linguagem conceptual no qual se constitui o diálogo se erige dentro da e por cima da dimensão afectiva da existência.”]

the same words uttered by two different people might be received differently, according to the trust or suspicion each interlocutor inspires: we may take them in one case as an attempt at manipulation, in the other as a genuine offer to collaborate). In every dialogue, the climate of trust and of previous understanding is conditioned by elements of an affective nature which, ultimately, spring from the expression of the sexed body.

The root of affectivity bears closer examination. The possibility of being affected implies the existence in human beings of a primal want. The fact that one is man only or woman only means that all others condense in him or her but *one* aspect of humanity. This situation has repercussions not only on sexual behaviour but also on the whole of one's existence. The want experienced is not only something lacking, which impels men and women to the opposite sex, it is also want as a division within each human being. In other words, the cleavage within me that is coextensive with this want cannot be resolved by the other. The other, no matter how deep the friendship or love that binds me to the other, or the other to me, will never be able to fill the void, the want I may experience as existential and affective loneliness. How many love affairs have foundered because they expected from love what love cannot and must not give, lest it reduce the other to the function of an "object" used to fill my want? Failure to accept this element of the human condition may lead to a misguided escape forward: such as seeking a solution to this want by means of an indefinite multiplication or diversification of sexual encounters. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of the sexed dimension leads to acceptance of both "my own" invincible solitude and my orientation towards the other, the human being who is different from me. The historical and cultural manifestations of this solitude and orientation undergo constant, unstoppable evolution, but do not change what, in our eyes, appears to be the fundamental consequence of sexuality in a sexed body.

## **2.2. Sexuality, desire and time**

When we speak of sexuality, we must not confuse the terms instinct, desire, drive, and need. After Freud – however we might assess the pertinence of the concepts he made central to his theory – we may no longer speak of a "sexual instinct" in human beings. Instinct implies, in effect, the presence of a pre-determined, stable behaviour in seeking the object that allays tension in the animal organism. The introduction of the concept of drive into the analysis of sexuality allows us to understand that sexuality undergoes an evolution from birth and the infant stage up to the development of genital sexuality. It is unnecessary to comment at length the Freudian drive thesis: "the notion of drive (...) is analysed in terms of the model of sexuality, but from the start in Freudian theory the sex drive opposes other drives. It is known that Freud's theory of drives always remains dualist in nature; the first dualism invoked is the one between the sex drive and the ego drive or self-preservation drive; by the latter, Freud means the great needs or great functions indispensable to the preservation of the individual, apprehending his model from hunger and the feeding function."<sup>16</sup> Later, Freud would group those drives into two categories: the *life impulse* in contradistinction to the *death impulse*.

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<sup>16</sup> LAPLANCHE, Jean and PONTALIS, J. B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris, P.U.F., 1971, p.361.

What is important to emphasise is the evolving character of the forms the sex drive assumes; the search for gratification is the key to understanding this evolution. The stages of infant sexuality hinge on the areas of the body where that search for gratification is localised. One might object that this evolution is still unconnected with sexuality, relating only to attempts to allay tensions in the body; likewise, one might denounce the so-called Freudian “pan-sexualism” that analyses infantile evolution in the light of sexual behaviour. But this double objection would not do justice to Freud, who wanted to emphasise how rooted was the sex drive in the search for gratification: not sexual at the start, this search will eventually become sexual due to a development whose stages Freud describes. For the purposes of the present analysis, it will suffice to accept a result of great importance: the sex *drive* differs from *instinct* in that it has no immediately pre-determined object – alike to a force, it invests different representations and objects in the course of its long evolution. Thus, what common sense calls “sexual desire” corresponds to the dynamic fixation of the sex drive upon an object, with this object “normally” taken to be, in adulthood, another human being.

This brief detour into Freud had the advantage of showing the dynamic and temporal character of human sexuality. Sexuality, not fixed once and for all, becomes capable of evolving through time and of channelling its driving force to serve non-sexual ends; all facets of human creativity, be they affective, scientific, cultural, aesthetic or professional, may be understood in general, *from the point of view of this driving force*, as derivatives and sublimations of this force. Nonetheless, we should err in limiting ourselves to this point of view, as if human achievements were *reduced* to being an expression of a driving force of sexual origin.

The task we face at once upon gaining awareness of the vicissitudes of desire is at least twofold: we must understand that, due to multiple representations and multiple encounters with living people, the driving energies of human beings intersect in the sphere of the “symbolic order” with the various spheres of desire – especially the desire to own, the desire for power, the desire to be known and achieve recognition, the desire to love and be loved –; secondly, we must administer our time of life in such way that our existence be not a gyrating weathervane, as if it were at each moment but a passive expression of the force of the winds of desire, blowing from whichever quadrant.

In simple terms, one might say that all human beings, as they construct their existence, face the task of unifying in some way their desires and giving them a measure of continuity. In the domain of the affective and sexual life, this unification and continuity in time is called faithfulness. Even before its due recognition as an ethical quality, as faithfulness to another, faithfulness is before all else, *faithfulness to oneself*. In the domain of their sexual and affective lives, human beings cannot pursue a thousand different goals, and will destroy themselves if they try to live their sexuality in purely animal fashion – unable to be animal and no more, the human being cannot abdicate from the ethical work inherent in living the experience of human sexuality.

Faithfulness, as administration of affectivity and sexuality *through time*, is not therefore a matter of chance or option; it is a fundamental condition of human existence. The forms and duration of this faithfulness are not the same in different epochs and cultures, but a sexuality and an administration of affective desire stripped of all preoccupation with faithfulness can only be self-destructive. Prior to being

ethical, faithfulness, from the point of view of sexuality, is personal coherence through life's experiences.<sup>17</sup>

### **2.3. The prohibition of incest as basis of culture**

Animals feel no concern in their sexual behaviour with the problem of the turning of generations, but human beings planted an interdiction: incest. What does this prohibition mean?

Sexuality is important in that it lies at the crossroads of nature and culture. As driving force, it springs from organic life, but as human social experience it is basilar to culture. This time round, what is at stake is no longer the "individual" meaning of sexuality, as it were, but its social relevance. That is why one of the chief and primordial tasks of human culture consists in organising "rules of kinship." Such rules structure family law and constitute a kind of *a priori* uncontested by the Law. Of course, the taboo on incest is not always respected; the infractions reach frightening proportions at times. Still, all cultures contain rules for the choice of sexual partner.<sup>18</sup>

In the past, the most current arguments used to justify the prohibition of incest were based on the biological protection of "the blood." Those reasons, drawn by and large from biology, to which accrued similar ones drawn from psychology, would be interpreted today in terms of genetics. However, after works such as Levi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*,<sup>19</sup> it seems clear that we can no longer look to biology for the fundamental reasons of the prohibition of incest. The thesis by Levi-Strauss is entirely valid at the level to which it keeps, that of the structural analysis of society. In a way not consciously perceived by its members, there is a kind of *a priori* underlying human society: the obligation to look for one's sexual partner outside the given family group. This *a priori* is a dynamic structure of social organisation, but "in its dynamics, the structure brings forth a principle that is no longer of a structural nature. (...) (Now,) the organising principle of kinship systems is the law of alliance."<sup>20</sup> The prohibition of incest is the other side of the coin to the opening out of human beings to a dynamics of *alliance*: matrimonial rules since primitive societies to the present conform to a dynamic structure that operates as an "organising principle" we may interpret in terms of alliance. This principle conducts human society from nature to culture. We are dealing here, as Jean Ladrière pointed out, with the "emergence of the properly human world," because alliance is the expression, in the social domain, of the human opening to the universality of reason. Everything takes place as if this opening to the universal implied a negative threshold, short of which human beings would shut themselves against the necessity of opening out socially.

It is possible to transpose to the psychological and ethical domain this necessity of opening out to the universal. One of the founding *a priori* of ethics is the rejection of fusion. What is meant by fusion is an attempt at symbiosis that inverts the dynamic trend of the construction of the individual person. This theme has multiple

<sup>17</sup> [JHN: "Antes de ser ética a fidelidade é, do ponto de vista da sexualidade, a coerência da pessoa na vivência do tempo."]

<sup>18</sup> "Sexual partner" is the most appropriate expression, for lack of a better one, when pondering situations that have not yet been clarified, as to the partner's sexual identity or the institutional status of the sexual relationship.

<sup>19</sup> Claude LEVI-STRAUSS, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris, Payot, 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Jean LADRIÈRE, "Le structuralisme entre la science et la philosophie," in *Vie sociale et destinée*, Gembloux, Duculot, 1973, p. 189.

expressions: the Freudian nostalgia of a return to the maternal bosom, the cultural theme of the voracious and omnipresent mother, the blind obedience parents exact from their children. Fusion may exert damage at psychological, ethical, religious or spiritual level (e.g. through domineering forms of counselling); in any case, it impedes the unfolding of human alterity.

Thus the social prohibition of incest twines with the psychological rejection of fusion, as if both incest and fusion acted as a lock impeding the necessary opening of the human being to alterity. The mere minimum of the search for alterity on the sexual plane, therefore, is the search for a sexual partner outside the immediate circle of the family. Nothing could express better that sexuality will not be humanly healthy if does not place and accept this first damper on the sex drive. The presence of a principle of reciprocity and universality in the rules of alliance is incompatible with sexual relations unfettered by any rules.

#### **2.4. Sexuality and reciprocity in relations of affection**

Is it possible to speak of sexuality without speaking of affection and love? As we verified, it is not convenient to approach the complex problems of sexuality through the doors of love. Yet these doors must not remain closed too long, on pain of shutting us out from the most human of the meanings of sexuality. A passage from Merleau-Ponty will ease our transition from the preceding considerations: “It is not only the object of love that escapes all definition in terms of instinct, but also the very way we love. It is known that adult loving, based on trusting tenderness – which does not demand at every instant new proof of absolute attachment, and takes the other as he or she is, allowing for distance and autonomy – is a conquest, according to psychoanalysis, over the kind of childish “fixation” (*aimance*) that is all-demanding at every instant and is responsible for whatever may subsist of the voracious and the impossible in all loving.”<sup>21</sup>

The maturity of a relation of affection blossoms with the ability to enter into a relationship that respects the alterity of one’s sexual partner. To this effect, the other may not be but an object of “my” drive, on pain of being merely a means to the end of “my” satisfaction. That is why we might say, in quasi Hegelian fashion, that the other is respected only if I desire in the other his or her own desire; in other words, it is the reciprocity of the acceptance of desire that constitutes the genuine relation of affection. Here we find, then, the nexus between sex and affection – physical sexuality spontaneously seeks physical sex, but sexuality infused with affection and attachment meets sexually with the other mediated by the other’s affection and attachment. The cosmic-vital force that evolved in human beings as sex drive meets with the other as body inhabited by a face or, reciprocally, as a face expressing itself through the totality of its sexed body.

Thus, sexual love takes on a thousand forms: passionate love, with its devastating character, fairly resembling short-lived fireworks; serene trusting love, which is able to let the other to follow his or her path because, even far away, the other carries me within, just as I keep the other present in me; first love, still unsure of itself, which tries to offer guarantees of stability and profoundness quite beyond its real capacities, etc.

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p.289.



No description exhausts the mystery of love or even of sexual love. The phenomenon of orgasm, through its ecstatic aspect, opens the human being to a dimension of the sacred, and to one of death, too – losing momentarily their self-control, man and woman feel united in an escape from themselves, as if it were outside their bodies that they reached together to the origin of life and to one moment when life stops, immobilised in a seemingly timeless instant. Indeed, the Lacan School of psychoanalysis strongly emphasised the subterranean link of the sexual union with death, as identity between absolute repose and exiting the Self.

On the other hand, mark the interest manifested by every religion in the phenomenon of sexuality. The desire for plenitude imagined or sought in the sexual encounter may be interpreted as being syntonetic or as being antagonistic to the happiness expected from divine transcendence; in that regard, the positions of the various religions vary,<sup>22</sup> and within one religion – e.g. Christianity – the emphases laid on this or that aspect also vary, evolving with the times. For the purposes of the present analysis, it will suffice to mention the symbolic proximity of sex, the sacred and death. Inverting our perspective, it is quite understandable that all religions should feel challenged to deal with the complex problems of sex and the sexual union. Since religion contains a promise of happiness or self-fulfilment through a relationship with Transcendence or through the exercise of asceticism, it must sooner or later enter into a dialogue with the more profound forms of human happiness.

In one of his stimulating books, *The Art of Loving*,<sup>23</sup> Erich Fromm interrogates the necessity that impels human beings to love. He considers it clear and almost self-evident that the human being “emerged from the animal kingdom, from instinctive adaptation, and transcended nature – although he never abandons it.” The state of separation and loneliness is the hallmark of the human condition, so much so that life becomes an “unbearable prison. [The human being] would slip into madness if he were unable to escape this prison and forge ahead, uniting in some way or another with other men, with the outside world.” According to Fromm, it is the anguish of separation that originates the search for love. Without love, the differences between the sexes make men and women total strangers to each other; that is the message of the story of Adam and Eve: “by becoming aware of themselves and of each other, man and woman also become aware of their separation and of their difference, inasmuch as they belong to different sexes. But when they recognise their separation, they remain strangers to each other (which is brought out by the fact that Adam defends himself accusing Eve instead of trying to defend her). *The awareness of human separation, without love’s reunion, is a source of shame. It is at the same time a source of guilt and of anguish.*”<sup>24</sup> Fromm proceeds to describe the three partial solutions, felt to be inadequate today, used to satisfy the need to love: “orgiastic states (abolition of the separate I);” “conformity,” with the abolition of differences and with every sphere of public and private life being invaded by uniformity (everyone hears the same music, dresses alike, flocks to the same holiday

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<sup>22</sup> Cf., for example, the Tibetan mandalas figuring as sexual congress the union of the Buddha with wisdom. It is well known that Hinduism attributes cosmic value to sexual representations of its theogonies.

<sup>23</sup> Erich FROMM, *The Art of Loving*, Harper & Row, 1965. [JHN: The following excerpts are rendered from the author’s Portuguese version of the French translation (*L’art d’aimer*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1995).]

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, French edition, p. 25. Cf. also Marie BALMARY, *La divine origine. Dieu n’a pas créé l’homme*, Paris, Grasset, 1993 (chap. 6).

spots, watches the same TV channels). Thus the anguish of separation is apparently overcome. The third partial solution is “creative work”: “in all kinds of creative work, the person who creates unites with his subject matter, which represents the world external to that person.” But these partial forms used to remedy the separation are not the same as true love. Nor must sexual relations be confused with love: “loveless sexual intercourse never fills the distance between two human beings but for an instant.”<sup>25</sup>

Reciprocity of affection in shared sexuality entails acceptance of the other, embracing the other while recognising his or her invincible, uncontrollable difference, and valuing it. All relations of domination are neutralised, in the reciprocity of love, by game playing, which negates the dimension of exercise of power over another. That is why genuine reciprocity of affection makes for vulnerability: not expecting from the other, at least to start with, any gestures of domineering superiority or an overbearing possessive objectification, every human being experiences as aggression all forms of affective relationship that do not respect him or her as a unique individual. The kind of objectification that reduces one person to an instrument or means to the other’s pleasure has multiple modes, not all of them physical. Objectification may be psychological, biological, medical, economic, cultural, etc. Common to all these possibilities is an ethical default: they fail to recognise the inviolable *alterity* of the other human being.

Sexual union reveals thus its first genuinely *human* meaning:<sup>26</sup> as union, it is a *reciprocal* union, that is, “a union with” another human being mediated by the language of the body; in short, it is a “communion” of life. This communion of life goes beyond the biological, for the sexed body, as analysed above (cf. 2.1., “The sexed body”), affects all registers of human existence.

### **2.5. The roles of the third person and of the Institution**

In the animal kingdom, sexual unions obey the force of instinct: their objective function is the perpetuation of the species – programmed by its scheme of instincts, the sexual pleasure of the animal is the means used by nature to prevent the extinction of the species as individuals die. If human beings were primordially or merely “animal,” their sexuality would also have as its first “objective function” the perpetuation of the human species. But when we consider him or her as person, each human being appears as a self-aware consciousness that integrates all the dimensions it is composed of. Now, it is evident that the body “organises” itself by the multiplicity of its “objective” functions, but what constitutes a human person as person is not the simple set of its organic functions. Those functions constitute but the *biological organism* of the person, or, more accurately, the person as organism and not yet as person. That is why we may not, from a philosophical point of view, approach sexuality *primarily* as the biological function of procreation.

We face, therefore, an exemplary instance of the case in which the most evident fact (“it is from the sexual union – up to the advent of medically-assisted

<sup>25</sup> Erich FROMM, *L’art d’aimer*, (op. cit.), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> The same idea may be enunciated in terms of *end purpose*: since meaning (sense) has an orientation and a specific dynamics corresponds to this orientation, we may say that the first *end purpose* of human sexual union is a communion of life. This idea will be taken up again in the ethical part of this analysis.

procreation – that human beings originate”) is not the fundamental principle for understanding the phenomenon under analysis, namely human sexuality. But having stated it, this observation does not allow us to dismiss the no less genuinely human purpose of procreation that is attached to sexual union.

The birth of a child brings forth a third person that “stands in the middle” of the relation of affection between two human beings of different sex.

From what kind of love comes the child? Surely, the importance of the *relation of affection* in our sex life does not entail the impossibility of separating affection from genitality. In other words, it does happen – perhaps in innumerable proportions – that a sexual union, in opposition to its primordial purpose, be totally or in part unconnected with a relationship of affection. However frequent, that fact may not be considered as conforming to the fundamental purpose of human sex life. It also happens that the sexual union, usually within institutional marriage, has been sought for the exclusive purpose of procreation – it is legitimate to think that the cultural standards of Western societies contributed, albeit laterally (and on a scale we need not analyse here), to render this fact “normal” or “usual.” The result, then, is that the sexual partner “serves” the end of procreation, is a means to reproduction, being reduced implicitly to the role of “co-genitor.” When taken to the extreme, which happily seems not to be the usual case, this situation means that the sexual partner is viewed in terms of its animal or biological breeding function. As everyone knows, the technological advances made available by science and medicine made it possible to disconnect the reproductive function from the sexual act; but if the case in point has to do with a way to remedy some disfunction in the reproductive function, the separation of the sexual act from procreation may not be considered as an instrumentalisation of the sexual partner. Still, it is hard to see, from the perspective of an anthropological analysis, how the separation of the sexual union from procreation outside the scope of a medical treatment does not presuppose a separation of affectivity and sexuality. In effect, it is just this separation that lies at the root of the reduction of sexuality to an exclusively biological function, be it one of organic pleasure or one of procreation.

The presence of the newborn in the midst of the relation between man and woman attests to the indispensability of the social institution. On the one hand, the fact that the child does not spring immediately during the act of generation introduces the possibility of the father’s skirting responsibility [*desresponsabilização*], when he does not assume the paternity. In such cases, the institution is called to exercise its “regulating” function, in the imputation of responsibility as well as in the assistance it offers towards the education of the children.

Yet, was not the institution already present even before the child was born? Indeed it was somewhat artificial to have put off until now the intervention of the *social institution of marriage*. But here is what we gained by waiting: on the one hand, it is *alliance*, in the full human meaning of the concept, that grounds the sexual relationship of man and woman and explains the social and institutional forms of marriage; on the other hand, the social institution as a whole is announced by the presence of the “third party” incarnated in the newborn. The generation of a new human being, in effect, does not only concern the progenitors but also the whole of society. That is why, though the alliance between a man and a woman only concerns them, the external, visible institutional form must be regulated by society. Not for the end of applying fetters to this alliance, as often thought today, but, at least ideally, to

help and facilitate this alliance, as if its social officialisation acted as a stimulant to overcome the obstacles of time. Such is the institutional form of marriage. It is then understandable that, in societies wherein this assistance and protection are no longer real or perceived as real, marriage should enter into a crisis. In truth, it is not the alliance that is in a state of crisis but its institutional form – that is, *marriage* as an institutional form. Then, social policy makers attempt to remedy the situation by the invention of other institutional forms that will circumvent the crisis: *de facto* union, economic communion, the covenant of social union, etc.<sup>27</sup> The difference resides in the more or less stable form of social commitment assumed in the alliance between two sexual partners. From the point of view of a theoretical analysis, such socio-political measures relating to forms of union that do not bear the name “marriage” do no more than confirm the impossibility of dispensing with the social institution when it comes to living sexuality over a long time. The role of the institution is not only to promulgate the fundamental prohibitions, such as incest, but also to organise the rules of alliance, so as to make the latter feasible, stable and fecund. From this point of view, the “crisis in marriage,” so often stigmatised today, reflects the crisis in a society that has lost sense of the assistance it can and must render to protect the alliance and the family cell.

Within the institutional scope of the alliance there exists an aspect of the institution *qua* institution that has not been sufficiently considered. Is it or is it not in the best interests of society that there be children? Is it or is it not in the best interests of society that these children should be able to grow in a healthy, stable environment, rich in affection? It is highly probable that no society would give a negative answer. But Western societies seem rather blind when it comes to the consequences of seeing to their own survival: in effect, a deeply individualistic *a priori* underlies the demand of equal rights for institutional marriage and for other forms of union between sexual partners. This demand, which might be understandable if only the interests of individuals were at stake, ceases to be understandable when the “best interests” of the social and political community are brought to the fore. It is by the mediation of the institution, therefore, that sexuality interferes directly with the common good. Now, though it is true that the common good is the good of everyone, it is not equated with the *immediate* and *apparent* determination of the individual good. The issue demanding urgent examination, therefore, concerns the consequences in terms of “social” interest of the *institutional* forms of sexual union.

## 2.6. Sexuality and politics

The understanding of sexuality must be mediated by politics on several counts. As we verified at the end of the analysis of affective reciprocity, the “successful” human sexual union is the one that exorcises aggression, transforming it by and by into amorous play. But this success is never definitively assured; that is why a relation of affection is, in its constitutive vulnerability, threatened with regression to an encounter of *domination* and *power*. The domination of the body and mind of the sexual partner may attain to great perversity, as is well known.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> [JHN: *união de facto, comunhão de vida económica, pacto social de união.*]

<sup>28</sup> Cf. François DUYCKAERTS, *La formation du lien sexuel*, Bruxelles, Dessart, 1964 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

Faust myth, a fundamental myth in Western culture,<sup>29</sup> is never far removed, even if its *peripeteia* is other than political.

The introduction of the issue of power and domination is not limited, however, to the intersubjective experience of individual sexuality. At stake are the history of culture and the slow transformation of usage and custom. The most prominent facts, from a cultural point of view, are the centuries-old subordination of women to men, as well as the repression of sexuality among the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century.

The first phenomenon, that of domination within the relation of affection (domination of man over woman or [emotional] blackmail of man by woman), appears as a fact that is sufficiently known and illustrated – in literature and cinema, for example – thus dispensing commentary at length; it is an instance of power exercised at the *private* level of the relationship more than at the *public* level of the culture. One must point out nevertheless that the political dimension intersects the private exercise of domination through the codes of the institution. Until recently, the man was “lord” of his wife; male infidelity had not the same weight as female infidelity, etc. The evolution of jurisprudence and legislation concerning the family contains, undoubtedly, much new information likely to prove the intersection of the private character of domination with its public and political character.

One other political fact extends across all episodes of the hard-won conquest of equality between the sexes. This conquest is still far from reaching safe harbour, but its motion is so dynamic that the next century is already prefigured as the century of women!<sup>30</sup> In Portugal, there is a “Committee for the Equality of Women’s Rights” but it has not seemed necessary to institute a “Committee for the Equality of Men’s Rights” – which is in itself quite symptomatic. On the other hand, there are numerous studies on the evolution of women’s place in society (on girl’s education, the right to vote, etc.). Well worth mentioning in this regard are the five volumes of the *History of Women in the West*, from which the following passage by Françoise Collin was extracted:<sup>31</sup> “The constitution of a space that was truly common to men and women, this being as ever the principal goal of feminism, inevitably calls upon the theories of equality. But this equality must be understood as an equality of rights, not as an equalisation of identities, which actually would turn to the benefit of the existing male identity. And it must also permit an articulation of the individual or collective differences, without thereby defining them *a priori*. The democratic space is heterogeneous and creative. Thus the twentieth century has modified the conception of equality developed by the eighteenth century, based on a vision of the sexes alike to that of races, cultures or even religions, and requiring now a redefinition of democracy and citizenship.”<sup>32</sup> The compass of feminism is wider than the struggle against male domination; in effect, its intention is to circumscribe anew nearly every facet of citizenship and work organisation in civilian society. Here, it is not important

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Georges THINÈS, *Le mythe de Faust et la dialectique du temps*, Paris, L’Âge d’Homme, 1989.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the statistics in the Reports of the *Fundação das Universidades* [Universities Foundation] assessing the various university degrees. In nearly every one – save for engineering – females predominate by a large number.

<sup>31</sup> Georges DUBY and Michelle PERROT (dir.), *História das Mulheres no Ocidente*, 5 vol., Lisbon, Afrontamento, 1993-1995 (transl. from the Italian *Storia delle Donne*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1990-1991).

<sup>32</sup> Françoise COLLIN, “Diferença e diferendo. A questão das mulheres na Filosofia,” in *História das Mulheres no Ocidente*, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 346. Cf. also (pp. 583-611) “O sujeito mulher. O feminismo dos anos 1960-1980”.

to highlight the historical steps of this progression but the mutation in the mental schemes, symbolic representations and linguistic expressions that underpin the understanding sex, Eros, pleasure and sexuality itself.

In the history of sexuality, a few breakthroughs are usually emphasised. The most important took place in the course of the nineteenth century – the political rupture of the French Revolution was accompanied by other ruptures, literary as well as social. As regards the manner of living sexuality, take the writings of Sade and Fourier, one before, the other after the revolution. “Thus the alternative between sublimation and libertinism is somewhat eroded; something is introduced into the language that lends new importance to writing of sex. ‘Sade, love liberated from the mud of Heaven,’ says René Char about the same time.”<sup>33</sup>

This revolution in the referential axes of sexuality was differently described by authors such as Adorno and Horkheimer, of the Frankfurt School,<sup>34</sup> or Michel Foucault, whose relatively recent *History of Sexuality*<sup>35</sup> is an obligatory detour regarding the mutations in the symbolic referential axes of sexuality. We shall try, in a few brief considerations, to discern some of the principal elements of those two lines of analysis, which would merit commentary at greater length.

According to the two classic representatives of the Frankfurt School, it is the connection between Logos and Eros that suffers a marked mutation in the early nineteenth century. The concept of “Logos” signifies the type of rationality developed in the philosophies of the modern era, culminating with Hegel’s. Furthermore, the intention of the interpretation by Adorno and Horkheimer is to show the connection between metaphysics and politics, in that rational thought carries implicitly and at the same time expresses the will to *master [dominar]* rationally all spheres of existence. Thus Logos subjugates Eros; sexuality is not at liberty to give free rein to its energies, which stand repressed. But the rupture brought on in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche and his transmutation of values consists in denouncing the “contradictions” of reason, so that both the force of Eros and the will to power are freed from the tutelage of a reason which levels all things under the apparently Apollonian light of the Logos. Reciprocally, the heightened value accorded to the rational “no” and to sexual energy become a means to detect the contradictions of modern rationality. This is not saying that the theme of the equality of men and women arose in *direct* dependence of the critique of modern rationality; but this critique did provide the difference between the sexes with a mental scheme it could use to set out on a promising path. What in any case seems novel in this new interpretation of the theories of Enlightenment, disseminated immediately after WWII, is the triple and reciprocal linking of the critique of modern rationality with the denunciation of the politically dominating power of reason, and with the demand of sexual freedom as expression of the non-rational.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Geneviève FRAISSE, *La différence des sexes*, Paris, P.U.F., 1996, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Max HORKHEIMER and Theodor W. ADORNO, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt, S. Fischer, 1969 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (French transl.: *La dialectique de la raison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974.)

<sup>35</sup> Michel FOUCAULT, *Histoire de la sexualité. 1. La volonté de savoir. II. L’usage des plaisirs. III. Le souci de soi*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, 1984, 1984. (Port. transl.: *História da sexualidade*, 3 vol., Lisbon, Relógio d’Água, 1994.) [JHN: English transl. by Robert Hurley: *The History of Sexuality: 1 – The Will to Knowledge. 2– The Use of Pleasure. 3– The Care of the Self*. Penguin Books, 1998.]

<sup>36</sup> All interpretations are not in agreement, although the linking of political domination with the avatars of the sexual drive has given rise to new readings of psychoanalysis from the standpoint of

Michel Foucault died before he could conclude his immense project of inquiry into sexuality. The second and third books of his *History of Sexuality* constitute a priceless analysis of sexuality in the Greco-Roman world, but the first volume, *The Will to Knowledge*, already indicates the orientation of the global project. Without going into the details of this thesis, we may let it speak for itself quoting the concluding reflections of the first volume. "(...) We can understand the importance assumed by sex as a political issue, for upon it hinge the two axes along which developed the entire political technology of life. On the one hand it [sex] is tied to the disciplines of the body: the honing, intensification and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of energies. On the other hand, it relates to the regulation of populations, through the global effects it brings about. It fits in both categories at once, giving rise to infinitesimal surveillances, to controls for every moment, to extremely meticulous orderings of space, to indefinite medical or psychological examinations, to an entire micro-power ruling the body. But it gives rise as well to mass measures, to statistical assessments, to interventions aimed at the entire social body or at groups taken as a whole. Sex is a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It is used as a matrix for disciplines and as a basis for regulations. That is why in the nineteenth century sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was hounded in behavior, tracked down in dreams; its presence was suspected behind the least follies, it was traced back into the earliest years of childhood; it became a quantifier [*cifra*] of individuality – what enabled us to analyse it and at the same time compile a census of it."<sup>37</sup>

Two observations illustrate and complete this excerpt. Between 1974 and 1976, Foucault introduces the concepts *bio-history* and *bio-politics* [or *bio-power*]. At a time when "bioethics" had not yet attained the citizenship status it enjoys now, Foucault was already stressing the importance of other aspects, contemplated today only in part by bioethics and bio-Law. It is clearly from a bio-historical and bio-political standpoint that Foucault analyses sexuality.

According to Foucault, the rupture brought on by the nineteenth century consists in a *substitution of sex for blood*. What is meant by "blood" is the lineage that maintains the identity of the wider family group; sexuality is then viewed through the prism of the generations that belong to the same group (blue blood, bourgeois families, etc.). The guiding concepts of this outlook are those of authority and law. The political dimension of sexuality resides, according to Foucault, in this symbolic mold that directly associates sexuality and power. That is why women are the "beautiful sex," being reduced to their breeding function. Now, the transition from

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Marxism, and of Marxism from the standpoint of psychoanalysis. Herbert Marcuse contributed to this line, whose success stamped the 50s and 60s, with several works, such as *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955). But Marcuse's optimism seems rather naïf today: the goods and services distributed by capitalism, by spreading inertia and egoism, would prepare the way of the revolution; the revolution, in turn, would be able to free human beings economically by satisfying their desire for well-being, at the same time permitting total and free satisfaction of their sexual desires. In this way, the desire would not be defined in the first place by the presence of a want seeking a satisfaction that is always arbitrary, but by the satisfaction of that want, always possible so long as the obstacles in the path were removed. Marcuse's Utopian vision is in fact contested by more recent thinkers, such as Hans Jonas: on the one hand, the advances of science have not ushered in an inevitable revolution; on the other hand, the liberation and satisfaction of sexual desire do not bring about spontaneously the *affective* happiness of the human being. That is why Marcuse's Utopianism hardly seems convincing today.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. FOUCAULT, *op.cit.* Vol.1 (Penguin 1998), pp. 145-146 [JHN: my translation, starting from the Portuguese version given in the text, diverges in several points from Hurley's.]

“sanguinity” to “sexuality” wrings changes in the symbolic order that underpins thinking on sexuality; sexuality ceases to be absorbed by reproduction and invades all psychic life, in fact the entire culture. Foucault lays stress on the conquest, during the nineteenth century, of the separation of the medical theory of the body from the theory of sexuality. Psychoanalysis is included in this conquest, but, according to Foucault, psychoanalysis still refers back to a theory of law, of authority – in this sense, it still shares to a large extent the old assumptions of the “symbolic order” of blood.

It would be possible and interesting to extend Foucault’s reflections in inverse direction: could not the exercise of politics be a form of expression of sexual experience, too? It is not only Freud’s study of the case of President Wilson that suggests this idea, but also the analysis of other collective phenomena. The enthusiasm or even delirium that moves groups of demonstrators (say, those in May 68 in Paris, or April 74 in Lisbon) raises one question that merits close attention: to what extent is political power an expression of sexuality? This question, however, has more direct relevance to an analysis of political power than to one of sexuality, so it is sufficient to stress its pertinence without attempting to answer it.

This brief synopsis of the relations between sexuality and politics allows us to draw two conclusions. One thing is the style of concrete subordination of women that a certain culture may foster unconsciously. In this case, the relation between sexuality and politics merely reflects generalised *cultural assumptions*. The application of these assumptions to the *private* lived experience of sexuality often transforms this subordination into violent acts of *machismo* or domineering submission. Quite another thing is the detection, by philosophers, psychologists or sociologists of the molds or “symbolic schemes” that these assumptions interpret.

At this point it is in place, as we did before to round off the preceding analysis of the institutional dimension of sexuality (2.5), to descend from the theoretical plane to that of concrete praxis. When a young couple faces the necessity of putting off marriage or their living together because they cannot afford to “set up” house and this phenomenon is widespread in a given society; when the available housing is built to accommodate no more than one or two children; when the privileged means of the social prevention of AIDS is the distribution of condoms almost from the end of primary school; then we verify that sexual union is no longer an issue concerning only individuals, concerning rather the *political* organisation of that society. All theories aside, concrete aspects subsist that compel the incorporation of political analysis into an understanding of sexuality.

### **2.7. *Pleasure, joy and happiness***

Is it not somewhat strange to introduce only at this late point the theme of sexual pleasure? Does not this delay reflect an analysis that ignores concrete realities, confirmed by statistics, and takes refuge in philosophical aspects of lesser relevance to everyday life? What justification is there for this delay?

An analysis that seeks to understand a phenomenon does not and must not set out to reproduce the order of importance of factors as it may actually be experienced. It suffices, in the end, that the analysis be able to show why it could not start from what was most obvious.



Sociological studies<sup>38</sup> indicate that seeking pleasure and the desire to have children are two factors in sexual relations that evolve differently, according to age brackets. The youngest set (15 to 45 years) clearly gives priority to pleasure (a priority that diminishes with age), while the statistical equilibrium of the two factors is found in the group aged 45-54.

Before it was considered *per se* in sexology, sexual pleasure was approached, at least in the course of the second millennium of Western society, within the theoretical confines of the purposes or goals of marriage. Whatever its denomination, pleasure always came third, after procreation and communion of life. Like all “interpretative schemes,” this theory generated, in terms of concrete consequences, lives that achieved notable forms of equilibrium in the conduct of their sexual experiences, as well as others that manifested equally patent imbalances. What matters here is not to indicate a rigorous definition of this equilibrium or of its contrary, but to bring to the fore the relation – quite stark in this last century of the millennium – between the liberation and the repression of sexual pleasure.

We observe today, however, the demise of officially repressed sexuality, that is to say, of a sexuality all hushed up or only talked about in private. Sexuality hit the streets; even if it subsists as an often secret, hidden side of individual personality, sexuality is analysed, debated and dissected in popular weeklies.<sup>39</sup> The theme of sexuality “sells”; likewise, direct or distant allusions to sexual pleasure are commercially pushed to the limits of banality, both in advertising and in TV shows. Is then sexual pleasure the “core” of sexuality?

If human beings were but objective animal bodies, pleasure would be indeed the centre of sexuality, a centre serving mindlessly the survival of the species. But for the human being as person, pleasure brings deep satisfaction only if it is more than mere pleasure. In other words, pleasure must be open to another dimension, which, without denying in the least the reality of sensory pleasure, contains a constitutive opening out to something that exceeds pleasure and we may call “joy.”

The difference between sensory pleasure and joy resides in the ability that joy confers to the person (*qua* sexed body) to open out to the other, to the other’s desire, the other’s pleasure and joy. Joy expands the possibility of real encounter with the other human being, while unshared sensory pleasure may reduce the tension of the body but it does not slake the yearning for intersubjective sharing that sets human beings apart from other animals. This is no moralising discourse, indicating what is good or bad in individual behaviour; it is a matter of discerning what, in terms of an understanding of the human being, fits into the dynamics of personality construction and what leads away from such dynamics.

“Well,” one may object, “who decides which kinds of behaviour, sexual behaviour in this case, fit or do not fit into the dynamics of personality construction? Does not the autonomy of the person imply having the power to choose the dynamics of one’s personal construction?” Apparently, according to this objection, the underhand intention of a self-declared philosophical analysis is to impose a determined behavioural mold on sexuality.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. *supra*, no. 1.

<sup>39</sup> On the cover of the May 1999 Portuguese edition of *Cosmopolitan*, advertised on large billboards, the feature article was “Orgasm in the open air.”

The question is simple, the answer complex. We find ourselves, in effect, on the borderline and intersection of anthropological-philosophical analysis and ethical analysis. Well, when we devolve to the human being the dynamics of his or her self-fulfilment, we operate an act of projection into the future, as if what each human being will become were incorporated in the analysis of what he or she is now. But since human freedom is necessary for the accomplishment of what “will become,” we are no longer in the strict domain of anthropological analysis when we broach “the dynamics of personality construction.” That is why we cannot impose on anybody the fulfilment of his or her personality. Each human being chooses him or herself in a unique way of being person. Even so, this choice does not mean it is impossible to analyse the richness of contents inherent in being a person.

The psychological example of the amorous relationship may enlighten us in this regard. On the one hand, it is true that each human being has “freedom of choice” to live love as he or she wants it (even if freedom of choice is not equated with the richest or most profound meaning of freedom); on the other hand, this freedom of choice does not replace the “laws” psychology discovers in the development of the amorous relationship and describes as the dynamics of its evolution. This relationship has its laws – its laws for *beginning*, for facing up to the obstacles time piles on, laws predicting a possible end to this amorous relationship when it fails to overcome such obstacles.<sup>40</sup> The spontaneity of the throbbing heart involved in an amorous relationship does not escape the laws or the *psychological “regularities”* that rule affective and sexual behaviour.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the philosophical analysis of the sexual relationship has likewise the capacity to indicate the how pleasure, joy and happiness interrelate. It is in this sense that there may be joyless sexual pleasure, as well as joy without sensory pleasure. Merely to facilitate the onset of sexual pleasure – with or without “techniques,” with or without new drugs – does not produce *automatically* a supplement of joy in sexual relations; it may do so if other factors of an affective, relational or ethical nature are also present. For human beings, endowed with consciousness, sexual pleasure should not be disconnected from responsibility. If responsibility implies in the first place a manner of “responding” to the other or with regard to the other, sexual pleasure is genuinely human when it incorporates a dimension of responsibility.

Happiness implies a more stable state of the soul; one that, for that very reason, establishes a certain unity of lived experience in the midst of time’s dispersion. Even when one instant fills existence to plenitude with its richness, we will only speak of happiness if that one instant is able to project its shadow – or its light – over a measure of the future. Likewise, looking back on the whole or part of the past to evaluate it, we will speak of happiness not in relation to an act, however repeated, but to a temporal unit.<sup>41</sup> How this bears on sexual pleasure is then evident, even if not always easily applied in the various stages of human existence: sexual pleasure

<sup>40</sup> Cf. in this regard the brief but remarkable synthesis by LEMAIRE, J. G., “Amour. (Psychologie),” in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol. 1, Paris, 1968 (1<sup>st</sup> ed.).

<sup>41</sup> “One swallow makes not Springtime,” as a Portuguese Fado lyric puts it. Or we may open Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1 (1098 a 16), and read: “the good of man will be an activity of the soul according to his virtue, and if there be many virtues, according to his most accomplished. And let us add: in a life accomplished. For one swallow alone makes not springtime, or even a single beautiful day, nor may a man be made happy and saintly by a single day or even a short lapse of time.”

contributes to human happiness only through its incorporation into other affective and ethical dimensions that are part and parcel of human existence. Inversely, the realisation of “happiness” does not imply necessarily or indispensably the intervention of sexual pleasure.

It would be philosophically wrong to repress sexual pleasure *a priori* in the name of “joy” or genuine “happiness”; but neither may we reduce joy or happiness to the exclusive dimension of physical pleasure.

## 2.8. Sexuality and eroticism

Many are the discourses on eroticism. On the one hand, eroticism evokes everything that arouses sexual desire. In that sense, it is not limited to acts, extending also to texts, works of art, representations and behaviour relating closely or remotely to genital sexual activity. On the other hand, eroticism is considered, in many books or articles, as that dimension of existence that encompasses the “art of loving” *latu sensu*, physical or spiritual.

Any pretence at exhausting in but a few words the phenomenon of “eroticism” would be aberrant, but it would be just as serious an omission to treat of sexuality while overlooking the importance of this matter. There is no disagreement as to etymology: the Greek *Erôs* designates “love, the god of Love, amorous desire, sometimes desire in general terms.”<sup>42</sup> A lot of water flowed under the bridge between the discourse on Eros in Plato’s *The Symposium* and the Freudian theory of Eros. Likewise, comparing the understanding of Eros in the West with its representation in the various Asian cultures, we shall find as many similarities as divergences.

According to Plato, the nature of Eros is multiple, but in a more elevated and positive sense, Eros is the elation [*élan*] of the soul that arrives at the plenitude of knowledge; being an “*élan* that does not satisfy the multiple, erotic delirium, once it reaches its term, generates discourse and knowledge through plenitude, not through any lack. After Plato, no philosopher will attribute so much weight to the notion: reduced to the phantoms connected with sexual desire, *Erôs* will be henceforward but an obstacle to the ataraxy of the wise man.”<sup>43</sup> The sense of plenitude gives way to want and expectation of desire, so as to allow Eros’s disturbing spell and twilight to suffuse the sexual emotion. The confrontation with Christianity eventually forced a definition of the frontiers separating “erotic” love from Christian love. If *Agapê* characterises God’s love for His creature, what then is the difference between the two loves, *Erôs* and *Agapê*?<sup>44</sup> Scholasticism built a set of themes round this idea, which was actually in currency before the great syntheses of the nineteenth century. *Erôs* love seeks the good of the beloved with its own good in mind, whereas *Agapê* love seeks the good of the beloved exclusively with the beloved in mind. Only *Agapê* love is truly altruistic. That is why *charitas*, translation of *Agapê*, is the paradigm of Christian love, of that love which, without self-interest, is entirely turned to the good of the beloved.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre CHANTRAINE, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1968 (reprinted 1990), vol.1, p. 363.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the entry “Eros et Erotisme,” in *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle*, Vol.2. *Les notions philosophiques*, Paris, P. U. F., 1990, vol. 1, pp. 830-832.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the classic work by NYGREN, *Eros et Agapê* (Fr. transl.) Paris, Aubier, 2 vol., 1945 and 1952.

Today, in the wake of the analyses of the sexed body (2.1. above), the prevailing understanding accords a more positive value to eroticism. To this effect contributed literature, the fine arts and cinema.<sup>45</sup> Admitting that the domain of the “erotic” stands aside from the obscene and the pornographic, then eroticism appears as a “charge” of affective attraction arising from body “language,” in a subtle game of hide-and-seek, of offering and holding back.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, all human sexuality includes eroticism to the extent that it is mediated by imagination. That is why *immediate* genital sexuality and eroticism do not grow in parallel, as if the short-circuit of immediate physical satisfaction eliminated the imaginative and erotic dimension of the amorous game.<sup>47</sup> The difficulty with eroticism at present resides in its utilisation for commercial or advertising purposes. Will the eroticism that invades social and public life be able to resist this onslaught that threatens to kill it, fighting it with the creative powers of imagination? When everything is flaunted directly, it is hard to still conjure up a little “mystery.” Maybe that is the noblest role of eroticism: to preserve the “aura of mystery” that is part and parcel of sexuality.

### **2.9. Sexuality and tenderness**

Sexuality that unfolds in duration, resisting the erosion of time as well as the force of habit, generates reciprocal tenderness. Tenderness might be approached globally as an affectionate bond that manifests, through active and inventive verbal and gestural expression, a form of love respectful of the other. It is important to point out at once that tenderness is not confined to the realm of genital sexuality, even though there is no need, in the framework of a synthetic analysis of sexuality, to discriminate the several forms of tenderness. Just as there are diverse forms of love – conjugal love, parental love, filial love, friendship love, love marked by Eros, *Agapé* love – the forms of tenderness are also diversified in conformity with the expressiveness and the respect specific to each form of love. Moreover, the manifestations of tenderness evolve with time: it would be rather odd if a couple’s expressions of tenderness after 30 or 40 years of life together were identical to those between two human beings whose love or courtship is six months old.

Unrestricted to the sphere of sexuality, tenderness, which hails from another dimension of the affects, also intersects with the sexual manifestation of love. As the years wear on, it is normal that the physical force of sexuality should diminish, although it is pertinent to observe that the affectionate expression of love is able to invent ever richer and more profound forms of tenderness.<sup>48</sup>

### **2.10. Sexuality and failure**

No sphere of existence is exempt from failure. It lies beyond the scope of the present analysis, however, to define precisely what is meant by failure in the domain

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. BATAILLE, *L’erotisme*; ALBERONI, *Il erotismo*.

<sup>46</sup> The evolution of “high fashion” illustrates at present this kind of game, which consists in wanting to draw attention to what it purports to screen off.

<sup>47</sup> It is possible that the “courting” of young people often misses out on one of the dimensions of sexuality, becoming banalised into non-erotic love, either through lack of imagination or through too quick a discovery of physical pleasure.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Eric FUCHS, *Le désir et la tendresse*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1979 (a historical analysis from the point of view of Protestant theology).

of sexuality. Failure, not necessarily definitive, may be felt subjectively due to an individual inability to administer sexual desire or to integrate in balanced manner the components of genital sexuality. It may also be perceived subjectively as rupture of an affectionate or sexual relationship that had begun with the intention – or presumed intention – of achieving a gratifying stability. Finally, it may be diagnosed objectively or from the outside when we see a striking inability to integrate one or several of the dimensions of sexuality analysed above.<sup>49</sup>

Before we analyse the assumption or imputation of responsibilities, we must point out that not only our affective or professional life but also our “psycho-sexual life” – an expression that is not meant to indicate the isolation or watertight character of this “life” in human existence – proceed through stages of education, evolution and maturation. “Desire undergoes, like man himself, an infancy and an adult age; it may get lost or stuck at some point on the road to maturity; at the same time, it *desires* and *does not desire* what might fulfil it. This is the case with the desire to love and be loved, the most decisive of all. Yet our first and immediate way of loving consists in incorporating the other into ourselves, so as to make him or her alike to us. Thereby the other forfeits autonomy; thereby love loses its partner. But this failure will be a passing one, because it incites us to seek another way of loving.”<sup>50</sup>

Sexuality is the domain where the voluntary and the involuntary intersect in complex ways. That is why it is best to avoid an immediate, facile moralisation of that which, being so intimately tied to individual history, cannot be understood without long and benevolent listening.

Besides, what appears outwardly as failure may originate in conscious and responsible personal factors, or conscious but compulsive factors; just as it may originate in external or objective events that altered the capacity for action or reaction. It may originate in multiple affective disturbances, or finally in simple psychological incompatibility in that relationship.

Nonetheless, we must not conceal the existence of genuine perversions in the domain of sexuality. It is no mystery to anyone that there is a high number of individuals struck by psychological disturbances of all kinds in the domain of sexuality. The matter must then be referred to psychiatry even before it is presented to moral reflection. In such cases, ethical help will be a complement, no more.

As a final note and going beyond the scope of psychiatry, we must draw attention to a frequent cause of failure in sexual experience in contemporary society. When genital sexuality, affectivity and the institutional dimension in an amorous relationship do not achieve proper harmony – i.e. when any of these dimensions is lived to the exclusion of the others – the seed of fragmentation and failure is already present in the relationship. And since a relationship is a shared experience, any failure in one of the two parties to the relationship will, unfortunately, affect the other one, too.

### **2.11. Sexuality and sublimation**

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<sup>49</sup> With the possible exception of the institutional or political aspects (cf. *supra*, 2.5 and 2.6).

<sup>50</sup> Pierre DELOOZ and Pierre-Philippe DRUET, *Le présent de l'amour*, Brussels, F. F. E., 1985, p. 117.

Today, sublimation is a concept that immediately evokes psychoanalysis.<sup>51</sup> It matters little to mention that sublimation, according to the Freud of 1915, is one of the four outlets of the sex drive. It matters little to mention that the sublimation of the drive through artistic creation is, according to Freud, a simple means to avoid neurosis, that sublimation through religion does no more than constitute a collective neurosis that offers dispensation from individual neurosis.

In a wider sense, sublimation designates the channelling of sexual energies to the performance of other activities, of a cultural, artistic or professional nature. Its unconscious cause might lie (according to Freud, it does lie) in an attempt to avoid displeasure or suffering at the level of our drives (for the “reality principle” places an insurmountable barrier to the “pleasure principle”).

It is permissible, however, to transpose the Freudian meaning of sublimation to endow it with wider reaching contents. Sublimation acquires then a twofold function. On the one hand, it shows that all the energies that human beings bring to their experience of affectivity or love, to the pursuit of their goals and the fulfilment of their desires, have their roots in an opaque, non-transparent substrate of driving energy – viewed through the prism of driving energy, every human activity, be it trivial or eminently spiritual, springs from a substrate of drives or libido.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, in the concrete forms which conscious activity invests (e.g. in professional matters, in manifestations of tenderness, in scientific or cultural creativity), there is a “surplus of meaning” over the drive energy. This surplus of meaning escapes psychoanalytic analysis and requires, depending on the case, a specifically aesthetic or cultural or religious or scientific or ethical approach.

The consequence to the understanding of sexuality is that sexual energy does not depend necessarily and indispensably on direct sexual “activity” to feed the spiritual fulfilment of the human being. Many human existences have been dedicated, without genital sexual activity, to “causes” scientific, artistic, political, religious, professional, or simply stamped by the ethical value of altruism, and they were carried with equilibrium, accomplishment and possibly complete fulfilment. It was necessary, at the conclusion – and only at the conclusion – of an analysis of sexuality, to show that sublimation is present in every existence, that it plays an essential function in personality construction, and that it may actually reach heights that bear witness to the richness of meaning human beings are able to impart to their existence.

## **2.12. Conclusion of the anthropological-philosophical analysis**

Human sexuality contains multiple facets, and the preceding analysis risked presenting them in fragmentary manner. Hence, it is appropriate to collate them now into a coherent, articulated whole.

The most evident end purposes of sexuality, as they spontaneously present themselves to thought and are consensually described, are “love” (or the amorous

<sup>51</sup> One of the best recent works on the subject is surely Antoine VERGOTE's *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de la sublimation*, Paris, Cerf, 1997 (cf. pp. 231-237 and the conclusion, pp.265-276).

<sup>52</sup> Medical observations carried out in concentration camps suggest that the sex drive constitutes a luxury activity, as it were. Perhaps we may propose the following interpretation: when a person must fight for its physical survival, all its energies are mobilised, as if the derivation or sublimation of the sex drive took place at organic level, into the struggle to fend off death.

relationship), procreation (“having children”), and pleasure. Yet, one must understand that sexuality touches every dimension of the person (cf. 2.1, “the sexed body”), that it is not confined to active genital sexuality. As it happens, those dimensions are also lived through time (cf. 2.2, “sexuality, desire and time”) – this requires a certain unity of behaviour and imparts coherence to existence, for human beings are incapable of reducing themselves to a purely animal way of life. Contrary to that animal way of life, the “prohibition of incest” (cf. 2.3) has always been considered as a threshold beyond which “nature” in man accedes to “culture.” Human beings imprint on their sexual mores the mark of this accession, *negatively* by the prohibition of incest, and *positively* by standing open to forms of alliance turned to the social exteriority of the human group. Yet even these tenets represent no more than prerequisite conditions for the emergence of sexuality in its truly human sense, that is, the “relationship of affective reciprocity” (cf. 2.4), bearing all the rich nuances of love. Here we reach solid, safe ground, as if finally we had access to the primordial meaning of sexuality. But does this love concern only the two beings that love each other? Both the coming into existence of the child born of the act of love and the recognition of social institution status sealed by marriage (cf. 2.5, “the roles of the third person and of the institution”) prove that love is not a closed, exclusively dual relationship. Social problems, however, entail political decisions; moreover, cultural history and the diachronic understanding of sexuality prove that the relation between “sexuality and politics” (cf. 2.6) is inescapable – indeed, our imaginary cultural molds have led us to think about sexuality in terms of power and domination. But those theses are of little interest to anyone but specialists in human sciences. The concrete reality we experience each day with some enchantment and just as much perplexity is the phenomenon of “eroticism” (cf. 2.7), which combines attraction, imagination and mystery. Is it not more appropriate to prefer to the upheavals of erotic desire the serenity of “tenderness” (cf. 2.8)? Young people might presume that “sex” with tenderness is the only sexual remedy or alibi of their elders! Yet they are wrong, as we may learn from a deeper understanding of tenderness. But who has access to this understanding: philosophers or every human being? Can it be that the analyst ignores the concrete reality of people’s lives to the point of imagining that in sexuality everything must spontaneously “run smoothly”? To this apparent ingenuity one must oppose the harsh reality of “failure” (2.10), at times more widespread than equilibrium. If, however, failure is neither universal nor definitive, then we must look farther for a reason, to the ability all human beings possess to draw on the energy of their deepest drives and “sublimate” them (cf. 2.11). Going beyond Freud, we may ponder that the capacity for sublimation is not reserved only to artists who found expression through the works they created; every human being, as a spiritual being, has within reach this possibility – regardless of active genital sexuality – of sublimating the energies of the libido through an act that expresses and creates his or her own person.

Still, a philosophical analysis of sexuality may not round off with the complex problems of sublimation, for the latter goes beyond the dimension of sexuality – even though sexuality constantly makes demands upon it. The conclusion concludes, therefore, by returning to the simplest evidence, already shown to be supported by sociological data, an evidence now enriched with a reflexive density it lacked before: the “sex with love” of sociology is justified if it is understood as sexual lived experience within a durable intersubjective relationship and as part of a communion (*com- unio*) of life; “sex to have children” is justified by the taking on of personal and

social responsibility for new human beings, within a durable intersubjective relationship; “sex as pleasure” is justified by responsible pleasure, a source of joy not exempt from ascesis and sublimation, which springs from human sexuality lived in its multiple dimensions.

### 3. Elements for an ethical analysis of sexuality

To present an ethics of sexuality, besides being by nature a delicate task, requires taking into consideration who is being addressed and their values. The lived experience of sexuality always implies in effect, implicitly or explicitly, taking a stand on certain ethical values. Now, ethical values are not imposed from the outside; this entails that an ethics of sexuality is binding only when a person has chosen to accept it. The ethics of sexuality, therefore, is not the same as a juridical code of the rights or duties of human individuals concerning sexuality.

We must distinguish between the ethical point of view of the individual as regards the lived experience of his or her own sexuality (the self-evaluation each one makes); the relational point of view, that is, the intersubjective, private and intimate dimension of acts or attitudes that imply the presence of another person (interaction in the sexual relationship); and lastly the social or public stands taken on matters relating to sexuality. Values are viewed differently from each of these angles of analysis.

Moreover, an ethical theory of sexuality must maintain a sufficiently high level of generality to avoid confusing broad principles that offer firm, clear guidance in life with piecemeal “practical wisdom” serving to resolve problems or difficulties arising from concrete cases.

The enunciation of these principles will follow the order of exposition used in the “anthropological analysis” of sexuality (no.2 *supra*).

**3.1.** Since sexuality touches the entire human person, as shown by the analysis of the “sexed body,” *the ethics of sexuality implies that the “good” of human beings, in what concerns their sexual behaviour, rests on the freely assumed intertwining of the life of the body, affectivity and the mind.* In other words, sexuality cut off from a relation of affection is not, in the medium or long term, constructive of the human personality. The corollary of this principle is fairly important, too: finitude, which marks affective life and implies our inability to maintain affectionate ties with an indefinite multiplicity of people, extends to sexual behaviour, too, so that “Don Juanism” (independently of its psychoanalytic connotations) does not fit in with the ethical good of the person in sexual life.

**3.2.** The construction of personality is produced in time. Concerning sexuality, too, this temporal condition of the human being implies a dynamic process and a gradual evolution. This dynamic process is impossible without some coherence with ourselves in the way we administer desire and sexual force. *Coherence in the conduction of our sexual lives may be interpreted in terms of being faithful to ourselves, and it constitutes an ethical principle bearing on the development of the human personality over time.*



**3.3.** On pain of serious psychological disturbances, the identity of human beings requires that their position within the family be clear and unambiguous to themselves. Incest radically opposes the balanced construction of the human personality, not only for reasons of a psychological nature but also because the principle of alliance, which presides over human sexuality, demands that the family should open outwardly and not stay closed upon itself. *The ethical principle of alliance does not tolerate incest.*

**3.4.** Sexual love, as union with another person, is a communion of life respecting the other's alterity. The ethical construction of personality on the plane of our sex life will be produced through a joint promotion of love and respect for the other person, with neither becoming a mere object of pleasure, that is to say, with neither becoming an instrument in the hands of anyone at all. Serious, profound love tends toward exclusivity and durability, foreseeing, at the start, no termination. *The ethical construction of personality aims, in the sphere of sexual life, at the fulfilment of a serious, lasting love.*

**3.5.** A lasting sexual relationship carries, whether one wishes it or not, a *socio-institutional dimension* (borne out by the fact that "de facto unions" seek social recognition). On the other hand, the *natural* procreation of human beings presupposes – save for cases where procreation is medically assisted – sexual congress. *The ethical principle of sex life as regards procreation demands respect for the child's right to care by its father and mother in a stable family environment.*

**3.6.** Ethics and politics connect on the plane of sexual activity. Sexual behaviour always implies cultural assumptions; *the ethical construction of personality incorporates respect for equity into the sexual relationship.* Reciprocally, the forms of *machismo* or inequality that fail to observe this equity are not reconcilable with the ethics of sexuality. On the other hand, *it is a duty of policy-making entities to take the necessary measures to create conditions for the ethical construction of personality on the plane of our sex life.*

**3.7.** Pleasure, joy and happiness are not identical concepts, for they do not denote the same reality. *In the realm of our sex life, the ethical construction of personality tends toward an ever closer connection between pleasure and joy,* bearing in mind that joy always implies the possibility or reality of shared experience with another human being respected as such (cf. *supra*, no.4). The more it is shared on a basis that is not exclusively corporeal, the more will this joy fulfil the human being. *The more profound and stable the joy, the greater will be the likelihood of its generating genuine happiness.*

**3.8.** Are ethics and eroticism reconcilable? Looking under all its various deviations, *we must bring into the light of day the constructive value of eroticism. The dynamic force that inhabits eroticism is a mixture of attraction, imagination and mystery.* The alteration of any of these factors is able to deprive eroticism of its constructive dimension in the "healthy" experience of sexuality. A sexual relationship devoid of attraction becomes mechanical; devoid of imagination, it becomes objectifying, easily transforming the other into an object; without an "aura" of mystery, it easily becomes devoid of respect and enchantment. Moreover, being linked with desire, eroticism is a likely location for great deviations or perversions; in this regard, there is some cause for concern in the encroachment of pornography on the *Internet*. What will be the contents of the imagination, the imaginative power and the ability to relate of a human being who is, in matters of sexuality, obsessed by pornography on

screen? Among other aspects, pornography carries a germ that kills the expression of tenderness.

**3.9.** Is there an ethics of tenderness? In metaphorical terms, one might say that tenderness is the poetry of love. The creativity inherent to tenderness is a way that harmonises and reconciles the human expression of love with the realm of life and the world of the cosmos. That is why tenderness is able to gather into one, according to Erich Fuchs commenting a poet, the triple song rising from the world, the word and the flesh. *An ethics of tenderness contributes to the individualisation and personalisation of the sexual encounter, constituting thus a specifically human value.* Let it be said, furthermore, that tenderness is open to a variety and multiplicity of expressions, so that its range of manifestation is not limited to the sphere of sexuality: there are forms of tenderness specific to each kind of affective relationship (parental or filial love, friendship, etc.).

**3.10.** Not being exempt from failures, the human journey in sexuality proceeds in different manner and at different pace for each individual. *An ethics of sexuality implies that, in case it happens, failure be admitted and integrated not as something that annihilates the person but as the starting point for ever-possible advances in the construction of personality.*

**3.11.** In the construction of personality there is no advance without some frustration. Education entails confrontation with frustration, with benefit to a greater unification of the person. Likewise, there is no advance without asceticism. This truth, valid for any personal dynamic process or search of self-fulfilment at physical, professional or spiritual level, also rules the education of personality in matters of sexuality. *The inevitable frustration becomes ethical when it is seen not as having value in itself but as a stepping-stone to a good deemed to be higher in the broader picture of the construction of personality.*

**3.12.** The ethics of sexuality is not addressed only to people who live a relationship of sex and affection. For multiple reasons of a voluntary or involuntary nature, there are people who live in a situation of sexual abstinence or continence. Such is the case of people, young or not, who have not had the luck – or who have not yet had the possibility – of finding the person with whom they might or would have wished to share their life. Such is case of handicapped human beings. Another situation, even more frequent, is that of widowed or divorced people. Similarly, there are human beings who freely chose celibacy in the name of a religious ideal or ordainment, or out of dedication to some scientific or altruistic cause that monopolised all their forces. It is not excluded, either, that a situation of solitude due to involuntary reasons may later be assumed voluntarily and serenely. Now, the ethics of sexuality – as mentioned in point 2.11 above – concerns human beings in such situations just as much. Every person expresses itself through its sexed body, every person is sensitive to eroticism, every person is called upon to receive and give signs of tenderness appropriate to its particular situation, every person constructs its own search for happiness through passing time – through high and low moments, through success and possible failures –, every person deserves respect and is called upon to respect the freedom of others. Thus, *an ethics of the construction of personality through the lived experience of sexuality also lays stress on this: that, despite the specific difficulties of such a path, there are multiple ways to live a harmonious, serene sexuality outside the sphere of sexual relationships.*

#### **4. Elements for an education into sexuality**

An education into sexuality is as necessary as it is difficult. At the start, we must distinguish self-education from the task of educating others, usually younger than ourselves. The tutors are expected to have been duly educated as well, and able to find the right tone for speaking of sexuality. Considering that sexuality is dynamic and coextensive with the full span of human existence, our self-education into sexuality may never be deemed complete; indeed, our passage through the different ages of life shows us that this self-education presents different contours and new demands as it progresses. Broadly speaking, what we mean by “education into sexuality” is the task of educating others; a task reserved in the first place to the family and the school, then to social, religious or political institutions turned to matters of physical and mental health, to intersubjective relationships and to family planning.

An education into sexuality might be thought complete only when it was at the start erroneously reduced to imparting objective knowledge relating to human reproduction. The first conviction in the tutor’s mind, therefore, must be that the education into sexuality is an ongoing process that no amount of school lessons can encompass. Just as not all aspects of women’s or men’s lives can be taught at school, an education into sexuality will not be definitively assured there either, regardless of the quality of the teaching.

On the other hand, the education into sexuality will find even less than other educational tasks its perfect or exemplary educator, and this often makes it harder to adopt a clear, serene and firm language. Thus, imperfect tutors must take on the charge of this education into sexuality – a field that also makes it hard to separate the theory being taught from the tutor’s own experiences. Moreover, being usually older than the pupils, the tutors are likely to have had a longer experience of sexuality, which might bring into play, besides gratifying, happy experiences, the presence of thwarted hopes, of pains or wounds not yet healed, of possible failures or even unconfessed perversions.

Probably moved by the intention to maintain ideological neutrality, the social and political entities charged with setting the syllabus of the “education into sexuality” resist with difficulty the temptation of facileness – which consists here in restricting the syllabus as much as possible to teaching the anatomy and physiology of reproduction and describing contraceptive methods, adding a minimum of psychological considerations supposedly free of any ideological elements that might limit or channel the freedom of the pupil. Laying down this syllabus in legislation is no guarantee of its quality, or of respect for the pupils as persons. In effect, it is a serious mistake to suppose that respect for the freedom of the pupils demands that their education into sexuality be restricted to the objective and biological aspects of sexual relations.

As we did in the ethical analysis of sexuality (point 3 above), the final considerations will follow the order used in the anthropological analysis (point 2 above) and in the ethical analysis (point 3 above), so as to establish *general guidelines* for the syllabus of education into sexuality. The chief goals of these *guidelines* are *to promote dignity in our sex life, countering its banalisation; to appeal for accountability in sexual behaviour, countering irresponsibility in that area; to insist on the obligation to respect the other person, countering all attempts at utilisation or instrumentalisation*. Considerations on *family planning* and *contraception* will be incorporated into this wider context.

**4.1.** The first guideline for education into sexuality *asks for the non-separation of the three dimensions of sexuality, namely the anatomical-physiological, the affective-relational, and the social dimensions.* The philosophical theme of the “sexed body”<sup>53</sup> means that sexuality is not added on to a person already constituted as person independently of its sexed condition; sexuality is there throughout the person’s existence, psychologically and socially. For that very reason, education into sexuality may not abstract the multiple dimensions connected with the sexed human existence, for the body’s physiology, despite its great basic importance, is but one of the planes on which the person’s existence unfolds.

**4.2.** It is not only the education into sexuality that takes its time, but also the evolution of psychological equilibrium in the experience of sexuality. It is fitting to insist on the evolution of sexuality with age. In this sexual and affective evolution, every human being goes through multiple stages, which psychology describes. One consequence is particularly important: any imbalance or apparently insurmountable difficulty at a given moment does not mean that imbalance is definitive. Contrariwise, the equilibrium attained at a given age is not guaranteed to be permanent in the future. *The equilibrium among the several dimensions of sexuality and affectivity is always fragile, but dynamic, and it is never acquired once and for all; it demands from both man and woman an open frame of mind, always attentive and active.* Moreover, the education into sexuality illustrates the need to incorporate time into the way we administer desire and affectivity. Bonds of affection are not created in a snap, they require some time to become closer and deeper, and skipping this stage, the sexual encounter loses its human richness.

**4.3.** Education into sexuality guides human beings on their way to achieving a human identity, male or female. One of the greatest dangers that beset this accomplishment is psychological and affective fusion, which makes the human being, young or adult, dependent on some possessive person (e.g. mother or father, daughter or son) or then impedes confrontation with the alterity of others. Ethically and psychologically deadly, fusion is a risk that must be avoided. *The forms of fusion are multiple, particularly in incest. Part of the educational guidance of sexuality consists in stressing the incompatibility between the acquisition of an adult personality and fusional forms of relationship.* Relationship must replace fusion.

**4.4.** To live a lasting human love implies great respect for the other’s alterity. It is essential, no doubt, to introduce the differences between the female and male modes of experiencing life, this being the purpose of differential anthropology. Hence, *the chief elements of differential anthropology must be included in the educational guidance of sexuality.* Yet, given that the other is not a woman-in-general or a man-in-general but actually *that* woman or *that* man, the acceptance of her or his person as other is beyond the requirements of differential anthropology. In effect, there is a difference between a *theoretical* acceptance that the other human being with whom we initiate or prolong a relation of affection is different, and accepting *in practice* that, by virtue of this difference, he or she may not be molded by “me,” according to how “I” project and imagine this difference. Recognising the other’s full and free alterity implies an inversion in the terms of the relation spontaneously constructed between his or her person and the image that “I” made of this person: it is not the other’s reality that must conform to the image, it is the image that must

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<sup>53</sup> The expression “sexed body” is to be understood in the sense indicated in note 9 *supra*, i.e. as “sexed human life” or as “human person in its sexed dimension.”

conform to reality. As it happens, adolescent love, due to the psychological narcissism that affects it, rises slowly and with difficulty to this acceptance; for that very reason, precocious courtship usually leads fairly quickly to a dead-end. *A fundamental point in guidance consists in trying to bring home the understanding and acceptance of the irreducible alterity of the other as a unique person.*

**4.5.** Ethics has shown that the ideal towards which we ought to tend, from the point of view of human procreation, is the bringing forth of children in the setting of a stable family nucleus founded on love. On the other hand, making room for the children modifies the relational equilibrium of the family cell. Given the concrete dynamics of the relationship of sex and affection, *it is therefore desirable that motherhood and fatherhood be responsible. The education into sexuality derives therefrom a new guideline: responsible parenthood demands a joint previous reflection on family planning and on the best measures to be taken for the purpose.*

**4.6.** The connections between sexuality and politics may be approached from multiple angles. The educational blueprint resulting from these connections addresses in the first place the equality of rights and duties, the fight against forms of exploiting women and children. It is often said that the twenty-first century will be the century of women, in the course of which women will gradually acquire effective equality with men. The guidelines for education into sexuality *will reserve a place for the denunciation of forms of physical and psychological violence against women and children*, for the denunciation of prostitution and paedophilia, and also a place for means to fight the evils incurred by society on those accounts. *Stated in a more positive manner, the promotion of women cannot but promote men*, for their affective and sexual encounter is accomplished on a basis of equality, not on the basis of some form of subordination. *Moreover, responsible procreation must be regarded by society as a valuable service rendered to it, so that policies according privileges to the family cease to be considered as concessions to families by the State, being instead, at least in Western countries, a right, in which the State itself has a vested interest.*

**4.7.** Ethical analysis has shown the need to distinguish physical pleasure, joy and happiness, and to illustrate their reciprocal articulation. In matters of sexuality, the usual result of the near-exclusive insistence on pleasure and on the apparent “normality” of sexual encounters unconnected with a stable project is the actual reduction of the education into sexuality to a physiological description of sexual congress and of the use of condoms. From that point of view, when the legislation that regulates sexual education confines itself to the physical aspects of sexuality, paying no attention to the balanced development of all its dimensions – and when it resorts almost exclusively to condom campaigns to solve sexual problems – it manifests a seriously reductive understanding of sexuality. Under the pretext of a praiseworthy struggle against the risk of AIDS, the education into sexuality as provided for in some legislative acts ends up producing negative effects, contrary to their proclaimed educational goals. *The guideline we may extract from this problematic issue is methodological rule: always try to resolve particular problems starting from a global perspective that integrates all human dimensions of sexuality.* For all its power, sexual pleasure alone cannot aspire to taking the place of this global perspective.

**4.8.** Attraction, imagination and mystery intersect in eroticism. Through its connection with the force of desire, eroticism outlines a domain in which the wonders

revealed by sexuality may also degenerate into perversions. Lying between two extremes, one being the banalisation of eroticism by pornography, the other being attitudes of escape caused by deep fears or unconscious complexes, eroticism appears to offer the opportunity of serving as a link connecting the presence of bodies with the emergence of affection or love. In keeping with the preceding methodological rule, we see here an *educational guideline asking that eroticism be not isolated from the whole of the human dimensions of sexuality.*

**4.9.** The importance of tenderness is understood gradually as the human being, man or woman, advances in years. We are unlikely to err when we affirm that a sexual relationship that does not generate ever-deeper forms of tenderness over the years is bound to founder. *Here, the educational guideline emerges forcefully: tenderness is part and parcel of all forms of love and must not be overlooked in an analysis of sexuality.* On the other hand, tenderness finds or invents expressions which, though rooted in the sexed body (or in the sexed dimension of the person), need not rest on actual sexual relations to weave profound ties of affection.

**4.10.** The path of each human being is unique and, in most cases, paved with learning through trial and error. To represent the sexual fulfilment of a human life as an easy, spontaneous progress, besides being erroneous, shows great naïveté. The expression Aristotle reserved for ethical living is equally fitting here: it is a “rough task.” Even when we must assume the consequences of failures suffered in the course of discovering or living out sexuality, such failures never shut the door definitively to genuine human fulfilment. *The educational proposal in this regard consists in having the courage to acknowledge failures, to assume them and still believe that the path of life is always open to those who endeavour to discover it or invent it.* To be sure, it will not be necessarily on the same plane of sexual or affective life that new doors will open. In other words, the path to fulfilment in human life offers possibilities not necessarily connected with an active sex life.

**4.11.** The easiest solutions to problems relating to our sex life are not necessarily the best or the most appropriate. Advancement demands, in almost every sphere of human existence, a measure of effort and renunciation; the education into sexuality is no exception. *The acceptance of frustrations, in any of the several planes making up human sexuality, must be mentioned in the guidelines that preside over the education into sexuality.* The chief task of education, in dealing with the imposition or self-imposition of frustrations, resides in the orientation of attention. When attention is fixed on the goal or good attainable through frustration, the latter is more easily bearable, and its acceptance is seen to mediate the accomplishment of an existential project that is, strictly speaking, “worth the trouble.” *To propose, in the domain of sexuality, a life orientation that is “worth the trouble”– here is perhaps the first and last guideline of our educational task,* both when we teach others and in those cases in which teacher and pupil are... one and the same person.

**4.12.** This “worth the trouble” guideline applies to everyone – to people who live a relationship of sex and affection, as well as to people who for some reason (cf. point 3.12 above) are led to expressions not directly sexual in their relations of affection.

## Conclusion

The present reflection attempted to clarify philosophically the dimensions or aspects pertaining to human sexuality, to propose broad ethical principles and to establish guidelines for an education into sexuality. Ultimately, sexuality is intimately tied to the lived experience of the person. Taking up again words already commented in the introduction, we may say in conclusion that human sexuality appears as a mixture and mystery of meaning and force, inviting discovery through multiple approaches – like a wonderland in which the other human being appears in all its dignity and fragility, requesting respect; or perhaps like a wilderness for errant searching, where nevertheless an open door always awaits leading to the recovery of personal dignity.

The Relator,

**Prof. Michel Renaud**