

Introduction

The Problem of Sexuality

Philosophy's Problem with Sexuality

This study seeks to pursue a rigorously philosophical line of questioning, namely, what is (the nature of) sexuality? And it seeks to do so through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory of sexuality. Yet it is admittedly difficult to find two more ambivalent bedfellows than the founder of psychoanalysis and those who have taken on the tradition of Western philosophy that extends back to ancient Greece. On the one hand, Freud's own ambivalent relationship with philosophy is well known and well documented.¹ He famously liked to claim that he tried to stay as far away from it as possible, so as not to taint his psychoanalytic thought with it.² On the other hand, philosophers themselves have spilled quite a lot of ink on Freud's various ideas, while being careful to keep him at an arm's length, making sure not to count him as one of their own.³ However, just because Freud is not a philosopher, by his or the philosopher's standards, does not necessarily mean that he does not have something interesting to say to philosophy. In fact, I would argue that it is, on the contrary, precisely *because* Freud is not a philosopher, that is, precisely *because* of his status on the margins of philosophy, that he is able to offer a unique challenge to philosophy. And his challenge, I argue, is this: keep on philosophizing!

This is because sexuality, which Freud put front and center in his psychoanalytic theory, has traditionally been a problem for philosophy. With few exceptions,⁴ sexuality has proved to be a stumbling block that has continued to trip up philosophers for millennia. For some reason, whenever philosophers are forced to dirty their hands with it, sexuality often becomes

a point at which they seem to suddenly stop philosophizing: losing their deepest insights, failing to consequently apply their own philosophical program, or flat-out contradicting themselves. Perhaps this goes without saying, but losing insights, failing to be consequent, and contradicting oneself have always represented major concerns for philosophers.

Traditionally, in order to deal with the problem of sexuality, philosophers have often tended to repeat a gesture that can be traced all the way back to Plato's final text, the *Laws*. In Book I of the *Laws*, right in the middle of a heated debate about drinking alcohol, temperance, and the "art of pleasure," the apparent protagonist of the dialogue, the Athenian Stranger, suddenly mentions sexuality for the first time: "whether one makes the observation in earnest or in jest, one certainly should not fail to observe that when male unites with female for procreation the pleasure experienced is held to be due to nature [*kata physin*], but contrary to nature [*para physin*] when male unites with male or female with female, and that those first guilty of such enormities [*tolmēma*] were impelled by their slavery to pleasure (Plato 2001, 635C)."

For the Athenian Stranger, there are two forms of sexual pleasures: those that are in accordance with nature and those that are contrary to nature. According to this scheme, heterosexual intercourse for procreation (and only heterosexual intercourse for procreation) is the sort of sexuality that produces pleasure in accordance with nature, *kata physin*. Every other sexual pleasure is contrary to nature, *para physin*. As such, those who engage in heterosexual intercourse for procreation abide by the (natural) law, and those who do not are no more than unlawful slaves to their nonnatural pleasure. In succumbing to such nonnatural pleasures, the latter are committing a *tolmēma*,⁵ an enormity or a crime, against the very law of nature itself.

But then suddenly the dialogue moves on without dwelling on the subject any longer, and the interlocutors continue trading jabs over alcohol abuse in their respective city-states. Plato himself does not have much else to say about sexuality, until it irrupts into the dialogue again much later in Book VIII.⁶ Suddenly the Athenian Stranger can sense that sexuality is beginning to threaten his discourse about how to create and govern a stable social order. According to the Athenian Stranger, all those nonnatural sexual pleasures contrary to nature should be considered excessive and, as a result, a threat to any stable social order. To remedy this problem, the Athenian Stranger argues that institutional laws should be erected in order to reflect, protect, and enforce the natural law of heterosexual intercourse for procreation (Plato 2004, 838A–839B). In other words, these excessive

nonnatural sexualities must be suppressed by institutional laws that will force them to conform with the natural law.

Such an idea seems to present us with an interesting philosophical problem, namely, that when it comes to sexuality the Athenian Stranger must call on artificial means (that is, institutional laws) in order to force the natural into existence. Yet, Plato himself seems to ignore this problem entirely. Once these laws are articulated and put into place sexuality is supposedly dealt with once and for all, and the dialogue again moves on from and never returns to the topic of sexuality.

At least chronologically speaking, this would appear to be Plato's final word on sexuality. At first glance it would seem to be in tension with some of his earlier works concerning love and sexuality. Unlike, say, the *Symposium*, in which sexuality and Eros arguably play an integral role in almost every aspect of human life, in his final dialogue it is only briefly addressed when it almost inconveniently surges into the text, only to be suppressed back into the margins. It is certainly worth noting that this suppressive gesture operates on both the theoretical and the textual registers. Theoretically speaking, Plato divides sexuality into natural sexuality (which conforms to the law of nature) and nonnatural sexuality (which must be suppressed and forced to conform to the natural law). Textually speaking, this normalizing and naturalistic schema allows the interlocutors of the dialogue to avoid talking about sexuality any further, relegating it to the margins of the text.

And it is this very gesture that becomes the dominant one in the history of philosophy. Throughout the history of philosophy, we see philosophers repeatedly attempt to pronounce the final word on sexuality by dividing it into the categories of natural and nonnatural, relegating it into the margins of philosophical thought and reflection.

Even in Plato's earlier works such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, in which sexuality plays a much more prominent and positive role, it is still arguably something to be transcended and left behind on the way to a higher appreciation of true love and beauty. Or take Aristotle. As Emanuela Bianchi argues in *The Feminine Symptom*, Aristotle seeks to couch an entire "patriarchal metaphysics" in the division between the biological difference between men and women and the supposed natural attraction between them. This conception of sexuality and sexual difference certainly plays itself out in his understanding of nature, which spans several of Aristotle's texts (Bianchi 2014, 2). For example, in section II of Book I of the *Politics*, when musing about the structure and role of the family in political life, Aristotle declares that procreation is a natural desire that human beings share in common

with plants and animals (Aristotle 2013, Book I). Furthermore, in probably his longest and most sustained musings on sexuality, in the *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle's analysis of sexual difference and reproduction leads him to the conclusion that sexuality itself is governed by a natural teleology toward heterosexual reproduction (Bianchi 2014, 1–2). Of course, anything that deviates from this teleology and begins to complicate his conception of nature and sexuality is almost conveniently glossed over in Aristotle's analyses (Bianchi 2014, 74). Or take Epicurus, who conceived of the sexual intercourse between a man and a woman as natural and sought to banish sexuality to the margins of human existence because it is excessive and should be avoided (Brennan 1996, 348). The Stoics, too, seemed to share similar views on sexuality. Cicero, for example, who otherwise often vociferously disagreed with the Epicureans, agreed with Epicurus's marginalization of sexuality, condemning the passions aroused by it. He appears to have had even more severe remarks about homosexuality (Cicero 2002, 64–67); and, at any rate, he considers a man's love for a woman to be much more "permissible" by nature (Cicero 2002, 65). Or take Augustine. In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes sexuality in terms of a dangerous impulse that must be squelched at all costs. Although the theme of sexuality continuously irrupts into Augustine's confessions, he tirelessly struggles to suppress it by repeating this familiar gesture. For example, in Book II of the *Confessions*, he tries to fend off the dangerous sexual impulses of his childhood (Augustine 1982). Furthermore, in *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Augustine goes so far as to claim that marriage and procreative sex are the natural domain of sexuality, while every other carnal pleasure is considered to be evil, sinful, and unnatural. Later Scholastics also display a similar struggle against sexuality in their writings. For example, in his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas sought to discover what is natural about sexuality by understanding what human sexuality shares with that of the animals. He, then, strategically attempts to remove sexuality from sight by confining it to the conjugal bed and, at the same time, going so far as to condemn every other sexual pleasure as a sin against nature (Aquinas 2000, IIa–IIae). Or take Rousseau, who famously carries on Augustine's confessional tradition and, in his own *Confessions*, continuously struggles against any and every nonnatural sexual impulse that threatens to corrupt his natural purity. Or take Descartes. In the *Passions of the Soul*, his last philosophical treatise, which is dedicated to a sweeping account of the human passions, Descartes only briefly mentions sexuality a single time. In Article 90, he claims that nature itself has established sexual difference as a means of attracting two people of the opposite sex together

for sexual union (Descartes 1989, Art. 90). Or take Kant. Throughout his career, Kant continuously found himself mobilizing his philosophical arsenal against sexuality. Whenever sexuality comes up in Kant's discourse, he attempts to suppress it by organizing it into the moralizing categories of natural procreative sex and unnatural and dangerous perversions (Soble 2003). Or take Hegel, who in his treatment of marriage in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, interestingly notes that human sexuality (with all of its complex rituals of courting and marriage) seems to exceed and defy the natural impulse to simply procreate (Hegel 2012, 201–6). However, immediately after pointing this out, Hegel attempts to wrangle sexuality back into the conjugal bed, relegating it to its supposedly natural purpose of procreation (Hegel 2012, 206–8). Slavoj Žižek suggests that Hegel has to go so far as to come into direct contradiction with his own philosophical insights about nature and sexuality in order to accomplish this suppression of sexuality (Žižek 2012). Or take a more contemporary example like Thomas Nagel, who seeks to couch the division between natural sexuality and nonnatural perversions in psychological—rather than physiological or biological, but nevertheless naturalistic—terms (Nagel 1969).

As we can see, sexuality has always been on the minds of philosophers, and there is nary a philosopher who has not sought to pronounce the final word on it. Time and again sexuality *is mentioned*, it does come up, and more often than not it is treated only as a problem that must be quickly sorted into the categories of the natural and the nonnatural, then dismissed, suppressed, and done away with. Thus, we might ask ourselves: Why this dismissive and suppressive treatment of sexuality? Why the categories of natural and unnatural sexuality? And what, for that matter, is so threatening about sexuality to philosophy such that it must be suppressed and marginalized in this way?

Taking the Problem of Sexuality Seriously

Of course, these are precisely the sorts of questions that Freud forces us ask. This is because, according to Freud, sexuality is something whose very nature, and by its very nature, confronts us as a problem. However, contrary to much of the tradition of Western philosophy, for Freud sexuality is a problem that must be confronted head on. In other words, rather than being a problem that must be dealt and done away with, sexuality is a problem that must be taken seriously *as a problem*. In fact, in an often overlooked and

absolutely crucial footnote contained in Freud's groundbreaking *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud declares that for psychoanalysis every manifestation of what we call "sexuality"—even the most obvious and straightforward examples of it, that is, even what we would all unquestioningly consider to be sexual (e.g., intercourse between a man and a woman)—is itself *a problem, ein Problem*, that "needs elucidating" because it is not a "self-evident fact": "from the point of view of psychoanalysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem [*ein Problem*] that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact" (SE 7: 146n/GW 5: 44n). As a problem, then, which comes to us from the ancient Greek verb *pro-ballein*, literally meaning "to throw before," sexuality is something thrown before us, something that confronts us, something that challenges us. It does so not as something pre-given, predefined, or predetermined, but rather as something demanding an investigation—one that does not anticipate in advance where it should lead.

It is precisely as a problem, then, that we will treat sexuality in what follows by turning to Freud's theory of sexuality as it is spelled out primarily in his *Three Essays*. Such a reading demands that we read Freud not with the hope that he will provide us with a more palatable solution to the problem of sexuality. Instead, we will read Freud as problematizing sexuality, in other words, as reactivating or rehabilitating the problem of sexuality. That is, we will read Freud as raising sexuality back to the dignity of a problem, as treating sexuality as the problem it already was and always is.

Despite his urgent plea to treat sexuality as a problem, Freud himself has often been faulted for surreptitiously *normalizing* and *naturalizing* sexuality, thereby himself obfuscating the problem. Although he promises to do otherwise, so the story goes, Freud himself nonetheless pronounces his own final word on sexuality, which looks disappointingly like that of the philosopher. According to such accusers, the symptoms of Freud's naturalistic and normalizing tendencies are exhibited in many aspects of his work. Look no further than, for example, the following evidence: his treatment of sexuality as an instinct; his emphasis on the stages of libidinal development; his focus on genitality; his preoccupation with sexual difference; and his essentializing conception of femininity and masculinity. What all these indictments share in common is the effort to fault Freud for falling prey to the following mistakes in his work: (1) he hastily turns sexuality into something innate, functional, and teleological; and/or (2) he speciously grounds a binary between the normal and the abnormal in eternal, ahistorical, and often phylogenetic structures. In both cases, the problem is that

no matter how hard he tries, Freud nevertheless treats what is supposed to be contingent, fluid, acquired, and sociohistorically constructed as necessary, fixed, innate, and predetermined by nature.

However, what such detractors fail to take seriously is precisely the ways in which Freud's treatment of sexuality *as a problem* informs his analysis of it. In what follows, I will argue that by treating sexuality as a problem Freud comes to challenge the very *naturalistic* gesture for which he is often faulted. And far from pronouncing the final word on sexuality, Freud instead succeeds at opening up a series of questions that challenge us to rethink the nature of sexuality. As such, the question for us in what follows is not whether Freud himself is a naturalist, but rather, what does the nature of sexuality look like when we take Freud's problem of sexuality seriously?

Beginning to Read Freud's Theory of Sexuality Philosophically

But how should such an investigation begin? Our investigation will begin as Freud himself began; and it is my contention that (despite his ambivalence toward philosophy) Freud begins his investigation rather *philosophically*. For if sexuality is a problem and not a "self-evident fact"—that is, not something that is pregiven, predefined, or predetermined in advance—then we are necessarily forced to ask ourselves the question: what *is* sexuality?⁷ After all, what is it about all the (for lack of a better word) "stuff" that we call "sexual," which makes it sexual in the first place?

Of course, such a question will, without a doubt, remind us of the (in)famous Socratic *ti esti* question, the "what is . . . ?" question. And at this point it is worth remembering that in Plato's earlier, so-called definitional dialogues,⁸ the ones in which Socrates poses the "what is . . . ?" question to his interlocutors, he does so in order to demonstrate that their subject matter (whether it be piety, courage, temperance, justice, friendship, etc.) is something along the lines of what we are here calling a "*problem*," in the Freudian sense. In fact, Plato can be seen as portraying a Socrates who is at pains in these dialogues to get his interlocutors just to the point of seeing that their subject matter is not a self-evident fact and, therefore, needs elucidating. In this way, Socrates challenges his interlocutors to treat their subject matter not as it immediately appears to them, or perhaps better said: not *only* as it appears to them, and not *only* in terms of their preconceived notions of it. Instead, he challenges those initial appearances and preconceived notions in order to show that

the matter at hand is something worthy of deeper investigation. However, the specifically philosophical difficulty of this approach is that by virtue of throwing these initial appearances and preconceived notions into question, the investigation can no longer be mapped out in advance by prevailing opinions, definitions, norms, or practices. As such, Socrates and his interlocutors must forge their way through the subject matter without any assurances of where it will lead.

Likewise, Freud challenges us to do the very same thing when he problematizes sexuality in the *Three Essays*. By reading Freud's theory of sexuality in the *Three Essays* as the reactivation or the reproblematicization of a problem, this forces us to read his work just as he approaches the problem of sexuality itself—namely, without trying to force or determine in advance where our investigation shall lead and without imposing our preconceived notions of Freud's work on it (or at least being open to the possibility that our preconceived notions about it could be wrong). Instead, we must follow it in all of its various vicissitudes wherever it should lead with the idea that there is still something surprising and novel to be found in it. What this has in store for us, as philosophers, is the ability to keep on philosophizing, allowing us to do so precisely at a point where philosophers have traditionally tended to become rather unphilosophical.

Freud's Confrontation with Popular Opinion

Now the analogy between Socrates and Freud's respective methods of investigation begins to diverge at crucial moments.⁹ However, they do share another similarity in how they begin: much like the Socrates of Plato's definitional dialogues, Freud will begin his investigation into the question about the nature of sexuality by first turning to the self-professed experts in sexual matters. This includes anyone who believes that they have a definitive definition of what sexuality is, which Freud groups under the heading "popular opinion," *die populäre Meinung*. It is important for us to understand that when referring to "popular opinion" Freud does not only have in mind his scientific and medical contemporaries, but also each and every one of us. Throughout his work Freud repeatedly emphasizes the fact that we all take ourselves to be experts when it comes to matters concerning sexuality. Of course, this is no accident because we have all wrestled with—and continue to wrestle with—the problem of sexuality ourselves. This is a struggle that we can trace all the way back to our childhoods,

during which time we were consumed with burning questions about the nature of sexuality.

Now, our present investigation will not be concerned so much with the origins of these questions, nor with the reasons as to why they are so pressing for us (which itself would demand and deserve a rich investigation of its own¹⁰). Instead, we will focus our attention, as Freud does in the *Three Essays*, on the ways in which popular opinion attempts to deal with these demanding questions. Curiously enough, the way that popular opinion attempts to deal with this problem looks a lot like the way that the tradition of philosophy has attempted to deal with this problem. It is no coincidence, then, that at the outset of the *Three Essays*, Freud claims that the “poetic fable” in Plato’s *Symposium* (that is, Aristophanes’s famous speech) is a beautiful reflection of popular opinion.¹¹ In what follows, we will see that, like the philosopher, popular opinion attempts to avoid the problem of sexuality altogether by establishing a normalizing and naturalistic definition of sexuality. Repeating a familiar gesture, popular opinion seeks to divide sexuality into a *natural instinct for heterosexual intercourse and reproduction* and the *unnatural perversions of that instinct*. By attempting to organize sexuality into these categories, popular opinion repeats a millennia-long tradition dating at least as far back as Plato’s *Laws*, hoping this time to have finally pronounced the last word on sexuality and buried the problem once and for all.

However, immediately at the outset of the *Three Essays*, Freud seeks to contest this eulogy, this (normalizing and naturalistic) final word on sexuality. In so doing, Freud does not intend merely to “critique” popular opinion, that is, in other words, to show that popular opinion is simply wrong to define sexuality in this way and that he, Freud, has a much better definition of it. No, the point for Freud is to resuscitate the problem of sexuality and confront popular opinion with it. In so doing, Freud hopes to provoke the expert in all of us to challenge ourselves to go beyond our preconceived notions of what we think sexuality is. By challenging our common opinions about sexuality, Freud is able to show that popular opinion, despite itself and on its own terms, actually knows (without knowing that it knows) something more about the nature of sexuality than its normalizing and naturalistic definition immediately implies or explicitly seeks to accomplish. In other words, Freud’s insights about the nature of sexuality are already (unknowingly) contained within popular opinion; Freud is just going to point out these insights and develop them—the consequences of which we will attempt to systematize in what follows.

Chapter Outline

In part 1, we will trace some of the consequences that this problem of sexuality has created in the reception of Freud's work.

In chapter 1, we will turn to and reevaluate Freud's confrontation with popular opinion in the *Three Essays*. This confrontation is an important and often overlooked aspect in the development of Freud's theory of sexuality. Specifically, for our purposes, it will help us begin to articulate the problem at work in popular opinion's normalizing and naturalistic definition of sexuality. Through Freud's engagement with popular opinion, we will be in a much better position to specify what exactly is meant when we say that sexuality is a problem.

In chapter 2, we will see how this problem of sexuality has continued to play itself out in the reception and, more specifically, the translation of Freud's work. Special attention will be paid to the debates surrounding James Strachey's infamous translation of the term "*Trieb*" as "instinct." By turning to the eminent philosopher, psychoanalyst, and translator, Jean Laplanche, we will begin problematizing the traditional choice between either "drive" or "instinct" as the translation of Freud's "*Trieb*." We will show that the problems that arise in the translation of Freud's *Trieb* shed light on a much more difficult problem at the heart of his theory of sexuality.

In chapter 3, we will continue to complicate the classic *Trieb* and instinct distinction by asking whether the complications that arise from this distinction are a problem for Freud (that is, whether Freud himself just had difficulty maintaining a clear distinction between the two terms in his work) or if there is something deeper at work. That is, we will wonder whether this is a problem in the thing itself, that is, sexuality. Relying on the work of Louis Althusser, we will attempt to chart a course through Freud's work that will illuminate a new way of understanding Freud's *Trieb* as border- or limit-concept and, as such, the "impossible" relation it forms with the natural instinct.

In part 2, we will begin a three-part investigation into Freud's theory of infantile sexuality. In chapter 4, we will begin with Laplanche's magnificent study of Freud's *Three Essays* in his 1970 text, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, in order to begin giving a robust account of the complex relation between infantile sexuality and the instinct. Along with Laplanche and Freud, we will begin to trace sexuality back to its origins in order to give a genetic account of it. By investigating the characteristics of what Freud famously and provocatively called "infantile sexuality," we will find

that the origins of sexuality are structured in a complex relation with the other qua caregiver.

In chapter 5, our question into the role of the other in infantile sexuality will lead us to the work of Jacques Derrida. We will stage a debate between Derrida and a contemporary revisionist reading of psychoanalytic autoerotism, which seeks to purge the other altogether from infantile sexuality in the name of rescuing Freud's theory of sexuality from heteronormativity. Through a detailed discussion of auto-affection we will demonstrate the necessity and inescapability of the other in infantile sexuality, even in autoerotism. This will provide us with an opportunity to revisit the problem of sexuality in light of more contemporary concerns about Freud's work and provide a heterodox and spirited defense of the much-maligned Oedipus complex. We will argue that even the supposedly most normative aspects of Freud's work can furnish us with the tools necessary for challenging the very normativity with which he is often charged once we take the problem of sexuality seriously.

In chapter 6, we will return to Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* in order to continue fleshing out our understanding of infantile sexuality. What we will see is that there is a problem at the origin of infantile sexuality. Through Laplanche's innovative reading of Freud's *Three Essays*, we will be led to the claim that infantile sexuality as such is a perversion because it comes about as a deviation from the instinct. Working with and against Laplanche's idea of infantile sexuality as the perversion of a weak and premature natural instinct, we will come to challenge some of Laplanche's own tendencies to reduce the instinct-*Trieb* relation to a mere opposition. In so doing, we hope to shed even more light on the origins and nature of sexuality in the unfolding of the self-differentiating *Trieb*-instinct relation.

In the conclusion, we will seek to show how Freud's understanding of sexuality as a perversion of the natural instinct challenges many contemporary attempts to treat sexuality as an exception in various ways. In so doing, we will seek to show how Freud's problem of sexuality, in turn, challenges us to abandon the gesture of problematization itself. In this way, we hope that Freud's theory of sexuality will continue to provoke questions, discussions, and debates about the nature of sexuality.