The Phenomenology of Sexual Desire and the Ethics of Relation

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Abstract: Sexual desire is one of the strongest emotions that we experience, and it perforce touches on issues foundational to our biological natures. We all know what it is to desire a person sexually, but how often has the sensation of that desire itself been analyzed? Moreover, when we are undergoing a sexual desire, how does our subtle behavior towards the desired change prior to any actual sexual or seductive actions? If we desire someone around us do we treat them differently in fully non-sexual and neutral circumstances than we do others that are not so desired? We tend to take it for granted that we should comport ourselves towards non-family/non-friend others in an equal way – or that we should at least try to do so – but is equality of comportment really open to us when sexual desire is involved? Phenomenological methodology can be of assistance here and using it we seek to answer the ethical query of whether it is possible to relate with equal treatment to those who are sexually desired and to those who are not.

Keywords: bracketing; ethics; interpersonal relations; phenomenology; sexual desire
1. Object and scope

When we think of sex and equality in a general way we tend to focus on minority and/or historically oppressed groups such as those in the LGBTQ community. We also tend to think about women and the questions related to gender issues. Both of those large groupings of people and ideas are very important and the topics aligned with them deserve further extended analyses and discussions; neither, however, is central to the present study. What I wish to consider instead is a particular frame of mind that largely gets overlooked or overshadowed by the more immediate problems of minority’s and women’s equality, and in some ways that it does go unnoticed is a pity for this mode of thought connects directly to how we are with each other and that, after all, is really what we are trying to figure out in ethics. How can we be better with each other? The frame of mind I am thinking of is that of sexual desire, and in order not to reduce this complex phenomenon to the black and white of heterosexuality I want to include homosexual desire as well; in other words, I want to include human sexual desire writ large but not writ so large as to include human sexual desires aimed at either nonconsenting humans or nonhumans (whether object or other animal). My question then is this: In a purportedly neutral and non-sexual setting, can we relate to a person for whom we feel a sexual desire without letting that desire affect how we relate to them? A practical and explanatory example derived from this question might be of assistance in directing our thoughts for the remainder: In a setting such as the workplace (generally considered neutral and at least overtly non-sexual), and prior to the establishment of any actual sexual relationship or acts between those involved, can we treat a coworker for whom we feel a sexual desire the same way that we treat our other coworkers for whom we feel no sexual desire? If we can then we are on our way to treating those with whom we interact equally; if we cannot then it seems that an unequal treatment of others is inevitable (regardless of setting), and this goes against a principle of fairness that many of us hold.

A few defining parameters are in order. For one, it should be noted that sexual desire is not the same as physical attraction, but the two are of course related and so we will need to consider how they differ. Additionally, an effort will be made throughout to keep us in the real world of real people engaging with one another; it is an unfortunately common philosophical habit (not always, but often bad) to get engrossed in the technicalities involved when an assumption (acknowledged or not) is made that the subject in question involves purely rational concerns. Human beings have rationality but we can hardly be said to make many of our decisions based on it; to explain this a short detour into psychology will now be necessary.
The default mode of human decision-making is to employ our evolutionarily far older and generally more reliable (from a survival point of view) automatic and preconsciously functioning intuitive and emotional systems. These mechanisms process the streams of input we receive from our senses and then make our decisions for us, presenting them wholesale – as a judgment, determination, choice, or even ‘feel’ – to the monitoring ‘rational’ consciousness that we in philosophy make so much of (and, as remarked, often too much of). What a swath of recent psychological and cognitive studies\(^1\) have revealed is that the human brain functions on two levels when it comes to decision-making and behavior generation. The fundamental level is that of the automatic intuitive judgments and their emotional content just referred to, and the second level is that of the incomparably slower, labor and energy intensive, consciously rational process of weighing pros and cons, costs and benefits. We are greeted by a perception, stimuli, event, et cetera in the world and our brain effortlessly and rapidly responds to it, putting us on a particular mental path in which we judge, act, or decide, all without involving conscious choice. In other words, our judgment, action, or decision is ‘delivered up to us’ and expressed, all from within the preconscious system. Thereafter we may pause and effortfully think about the situation faced, but even when we do so stop and engage our second level of rationality it is important to remember that always included in our deliberations is the input from the first level. The reasons for this are complicated but are related to the vast processing capacity of the subconscious mind (11.2 million units of information at once) versus the conscious mind (around seven units at once),\(^2\) and to the pressing survival needs of responding rapidly to one’s environment that our species has faced during the course of our evolution (remembering that environment includes both the physical and the social; interhuman relations have


\(^2\) These figures are taken from Dijksterhuis, *ibid*. The lower figure stems from the capacity of the working memory.
played a large part in our evolutionary history and continue to do so today). We often mistakenly think that we are deciding something rationally because, and again according to the same expansive research, we have a habit of explaining our decisions to ourselves using our rational capacities (‘Oh, I did X for Y reason’). The scholastic tendencies of lauding rationality and ignoring the minimum role that it plays in human reality have given rise to what Graham Harman has called ‘pulp philosophy’, which is characterized by ‘the rational materialist hero (generally a first-person narrator) [who] slays hordes of irrational alchemists, astrologers, witch doctors, vitalists, and Christians.’ In the below we will try to step lightly around this pulp swamp by attempting a phenomenological analysis of sexual desire; phenomenology being a tool for describing conscious experience as it is experienced. I should forewarn the reader that this means our discussion might at times feel uncomfortable, but for that it will remain frank, open, and honest.

Given the extent to which our behavior actually is generated in a largely prethought manner, how might we use rationality to try and change it? Thankfully the aforementioned psychological and cognitive research into our intuitive and emotional decision-making processes has revealed that our automatically generated decisions and judgments can be adjusted via sustained conscious attempts to do so. This means that we can give ourselves new intuitions. We can also override our intuitive decisions and connected behaviors, but such naturally requires self-monitoring. If we therefore wish to relate better to each other our path seems clear: stop ourselves from doing what might be natural (automatic) but may not be best and work on developing alternative natural reactions (new automatic results); put simply, adjust what results from our preconscious processing so that something else comes out of it. This path involves doing (in the form of self-monitoring) and thinking (in the form of using the rational mind to reprogram the nonrational mind). Regarding the details of the doing aspect, we will largely leave such to the many fine books and techniques on mindfulness,4 and instead focus here on the thinking.

2. Sexual desire and physical attraction

Sexual desire and physical attraction, although clearly distinct phenomena, can

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be easy to confuse (possibly more so for men) and are often used interchangeably in common parlance. Although both are motivating factors and can each lead to sexual arousal, they differ importantly in degree. The experiential potency of sexual desire is a far stronger motivator and is much more likely to lead to action than physical attraction is, although physical attraction itself might be a stepping stone to sexual desire – or to nothing at all. To put the difference I have in mind here rather pithily, we could say that while physical attraction may trigger an approach, sexual desire may trigger a pursuit.

Once aroused the body’s physiological responses are well-known: for women the nipples, vulva, clitoris, and vaginal walls become enlarged and the vagina also becomes lubricated; whereas for men blood begins to flow to the penis, the heart rate increases and blood pressure changes, the testes swell and ascend, and the scrotum thickens. In both sexes the pupils also dilate. Our interest here is however focused not on the body in the conventional sense but rather on the thought and experiential feel involved (though we admit that these are also elements of the body proper); as such, it is the psychological responses that are of more importance to the topic at hand. There, interestingly enough, for both men and women testosterone is involved in sexual arousal; and especially for men the brain’s amygdala and hypothalamic regions are activated. This is noteworthy because both of these regions are associated with memory and emotion, the former also with decision-making, and the latter (as part of the limbic system) with motivation and behavior.⁵ Social elements, such as gender role expectations and sexual attitudes, are also naturally involved, but we must recognize that the process of feeling either sexual desire or physical attraction is a deeply subjective one. Accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that participants in research studies will often report arousal even in the absence of physical indications of such.⁶ This purely internal aspect of subjective feel is crucial to our undertaking in trying to work out whether it is possible to relate to a person for whom we feel sexual desire without letting that desire affect how we relate to them. On this Edmund Husserl can show us how to begin; but first a sidebar.

Some readers may at this point be wondering whether, and if so where, love fits into the discussion. The topic of love itself is far beyond the scope of the present study but it can be confused with either sexual desire or physical attraction and so a few words might be in order. In an interesting essay on the constructivist explanation that it is

⁶ ‘Sexual arousal’, ibid.
taboo which creates desire, M.C. Dillon considers the idea that if narrative is placed in the category of poiesis (Ancient Greek: ‘to make’) ‘then love is a social construct produced by language itself’. He cites portions of poems by Sappho and Ovid as illustrations, the first being:

my feelings for you, my beautiful ones,

will not change.

and the second:

Helen...
Weeps at the old bitch staring from her mirror.
And who would rape her once or twice now?
Time and Old Age eat all the world away—
Black-toothed and slow, they seem to feast forever
As all things disappear in time, in death.

In the examples given, I think, we can detect a conceptual blurring of the line between love proper and desire proper; the first fragment does not offer much context but in its appeal to ‘feelings for’ and lack of any overt behavior or action it seems far more about love than about desire. The second is more straightforward in both its allusion to (violent) acts and, by the nature of those acts, appeal to a clear-cut desire – and not at all to love, for one does not rape a beloved (although rape can occur within the confines of a previously loving relationship the transgression itself is not one of love). Our concern here is with sexual desire, and that in its pre-act experiential form, and thus love does not enter our analytic picture. As Dillon shows, however, it is all too easy for one to enter the mental space of the other, and so it is with caution and care that we will proceed, wary to keep our focus purely on the issue at hand. We turn now to a consideration of the experience in question.

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8 Taken from The Poems of Sappho, trans. by Suzy Q. Groden (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), p. 20; cited in Dillon, ibid., p. 19.
3. What it feels like to sexually desire

As the founder of phenomenology Husserl created a technique for his new method of studying consciousness that he called bracketing, or epoché. This involves defining and describing an experience without regard to its place in the natural world, social, or cultural context. It is instead to focus only on ‘what makes consciousness a consciousness of this or that object’,10 it is to inwardly turn one’s attention from the thing generating the experience to the experiencing of the thing. That is, to effect a move into one’s consciousness of the object in question; what it feels like and what it is like – from the inside – to have that experience. This is a shift in attitude similar to putting a word in quotation marks, where the context in which that word appears fades into the background while the word itself, standing now alone, dominates the foreground. It is to go from seeing that thing to how I see that thing, to what it is like for me to see that thing.11 What then is it like to experience sexual desire? Methodologically I can only relate what it is like for myself to have this experience, but the description that I give may prove broadly applicable to others, and in that it may assist our analysis in the next section wherein we try to answer our ethical question on interpersonal relations. A description will therefore follow.

First of all I must confess to being a man and therefore the account that I give will necessarily be undertaken from a male perspective. I am also a man in my middle years given the average lifespan for men with my background and with the availability to healthcare that I have. This is important because once one reaches one’s middle years one notices that everything aside from fatigue is felt less intensely; such should preferably be kept in mind when reading the below.

The first thing I notice when gripped by a sexual desire is a certain elation, a good and positive emotion that is no doubt related to the release of hormones. I can feel some blood begin to enter my penis and the accompanying tightening of the bottom of my scrotum, as well as a tension across the chest, focused in the general area of the lungs and experienced as a kind of pressure or wide tingling. I note too that my heart rate has increased and that behaviorally I am inclined to sustain eye contact with the person of my desire, alert to possible signals of reciprocity. I am also moved to be more open, kinder and more gentle or polite in speech than I typically am or make efforts to be, and far more likely to smile than is usually the case. All of these last characteristics

11 Husserl, ibid.; Woodruff Smith, ibid.
are in their execution aimed at generating a positive response from my desired, but we must admit that they are neither necessarily consciously so directed (recalling the two level structure of the brain) nor even intended to lead anywhere, for sexual desire is a motivator and not a command.

What is of interest here is that while the physiological changes are beyond my reach I still retain control over my behavioral output to at least a certain degree; what I think can be said is that the aspects of eye contact, speech, and expression are all the results of the intuitive and emotional processes that were described in the first section above. Were I equipped with different intuitions – perhaps from being raised in a culture where aggressive speech rather than gentle speech is greeted favorably in a sexual context – then it seems safe to assume that my behavioral output would be adjusted according to them rather than how I have just described. I draw this conclusion from the fact that the listed characteristics are noticed by me in phenomenological description after the fact of their expression; I do not purposely choose to try and maintain eye contact longer, speak more kindly, or smile; rather they are personally observed results which I then explain to myself (if I explain them at all) after they have already taken place. I also may or may not be willing to explain them as being indicators of sexual desire, I might instead attribute them to the other person being so pleasant or enjoyable or the like; a good deal will depend on my self-honesty and accuracy of self-analysis.

I stated earlier that I maintain at least some control over those actions despite their automaticity for once consciously noticed I can make whatever adjustments that I then, at that point, decide to be fit. This is perhaps what is a difficult point to grasp about the picture that the psychological and cognitive research has revealed: although behavior is typically generated far below our conscious awareness of it, once expressed that same behavior may enter into our attention, and starting from that juncture onwards to the next automatically produced act, judgment, or decision, the rational mind is able to exert its influence. Much in this hinges on the circumstances involved and the degree to which we habitually surveil ourselves. The other common factors, such as higher blood pressure, testes swelling, and pupils dilating, I do not, and really cannot, experience consciously. Such very well might all be there but from my introspective point of view they are not data that are considered and therefore have no place in our description of what it feels like to sexually desire.

What is remarkable to realize from this brief exercise is the degree to which Husserlean bracketing is in fact a technique of mindfulness itself, of the cultivated awareness of what is occurring within us as we go about our daily lives in the world. When we bracket an experience we isolate and de-contextualize it, we step back from
our situation and view the having of the experience in its fullness by paying attention exclusively to it. Mindfulness alerts us in very similar ways to how we are feeling now, thinking now, moving now, reacting now. Mindfulness moreover applies the lessons there taught in a re-contextualization that ideally adds wisdom and balance to the acts or responses that we then initiate. The results of a phenomenological bracketing can also naturally be applied in guiding behavior, and recognizing this appears to serve as a signpost giving us direction for our further analysis. How then might we think through what it feels like to sexually desire in order to resolve our ethical query?

4. Thinking through what it feels like

This is the point of contention, this is the area where the struggle is most acutely felt, and it is only here that our question can be answered in one way or another. To repeat, our analysis is focused on a single issue: In a purportedly neutral and non-sexual setting, can we relate to a person for whom we feel a sexual desire without letting that desire affect how we relate to them? At first blush, based on the phenomenological description given above, it would appear that we cannot; that whatever we may note about the manner in which we are acting by the time we are even able to take notice of it the action has already begun expressing itself; our conscious minds arrive at the scene too late. That much is certainly true – if we are to accept the empirical results of the psychological and cognitive studies – but it is also very unsatisfactory. Are we to think of ourselves as mere automatons, slaves to the dictates of the intuitive and emotional forces that drive our brains and result in unplanned and preconscious actions and decisions? To admit that would not only be anathema to most individuals who consider themselves to be rational people, it would also run counter to the entire philosophical ethical project. Yet given how our brains function are we even still talking about rational individuals?

Fortunately we are, and the reader will remember that our conscious rationality can both override the automatically produced acts and choices delivered by our preconscious functioning, and it can also serve as an impetus for the formation of new intuitions which result in different automatically produced acts and choices. Nevertheless, what we are discussing is much more difficult than it might seem. Sexuality is at the very core of our creaturehood, and what is being considered here is divorcing a fundamental biological drive from the manner in which one relates with another when it is precisely in that very relating where the drive makes itself most felt. It is not simply the vision of another – which may start and end with physical attraction – that leads to the aforementioned bodily and behavioral changes; it is rather the desire
to have sex with that person and that aspiration, as we know, is typically felt as a very strong one. Of course it is possible not to pursue having sexual intercourse with someone or not to act like a drunken youth unable to keep her or his hands to her/himself, but is it possible for that drive and the psychological effects of it (including the chemicals released in the brain) to be shut out such that the interpersonal dimension is equal to that wherein no sexual desire is felt? Can I treat you, despite feeling actively and powerfully that I want our minds, organs, and orifices to conjoin in a passionate and orgasmic embrace, the very same way that I would treat another for whom zero sexual desire is aroused?

I think that true equality probably isn’t possible but an approximation to it is; yet even to achieve that approximation a very high degree of self-monitoring is required. The physiological changes that occur are natural functions of our species-based genetic programming and as long as we have the reproductive organs and systems that we have such will not go away. Intuitive responses like eye contact, speech, and facial features are however physical manifestations that can be adjusted, albeit often belatedly due to the manner of their preconscious generation. What I mean by that is that there is a sense in which recognition enables release. If I am aware of blood flowing into my penis, my scrotum and chest tightening, etcetera, then I am aware of sexual desire manifesting itself in me and being so aware by necessity means that conscious recognition has taken place, hence my rational faculties are able to function making use of that data. Here I face a choice: continue on enjoying the feeling of sexual desire and – possibly – budding flirtation embedded within the interaction taking place, or rather shutting it down by opting not to hold eye contact so long, to speak differently than I had only a moment before (a change of tone, perhaps), to refrain from what may be a ready smile. This is not so much a matter of the will as it is of awareness, and of the knowledge of likely self-induced patterns of behavior that may result from allowing oneself to fall into whatever habitual manifestations might be involved (e.g. eye contact, speech, expression).

These points also, of course, speak to self-knowledge, and it is here where Husserlean bracketing and (other) mindfulness techniques can be so helpful. Based on what we learn of ourselves through keeping an introspectively watchful eye always open we equip ourselves with ever more options. If we wish to approach equal treatment for all those with whom we interact then we must learn to draw lines for ourselves which we know how not to cross, what to do and not do such that those lines are not crossed. At this point we are now talking about the will, about self-discipline, and we are once more talking about using the rational mind to monitor and, if need be,
override intuitive judgments. If an approach such as that just described is repeated often enough and with sufficient conscious deliberation then over time those same intuitive judgments will adjust themselves to the changes being rationally demanded and the act of maintaining fair interpersonal treatment regardless of sexual desire will become an easier one to achieve; or so the research seems to indicate anyway.

The effort, however, is not one that is made only internally. There are countless complicating factors of a social nature involved in any interpersonal reaction, and there may even be the motivation – acknowledged or not – to seek an advantage (of whatever kind) through engaging in or cultivating sexual desire with another. This very fact of the widespread variety found everywhere in human communities and interactions may be one reason why deontological ethical systems have become easy targets for utilitarian and consequentialist arguments; topics such as that are however well outside the scope of our current discussion. Perhaps the most we can say is that in this matter, at least, personal ethics (deontologically based or not) seem particularly important, although the construction of an environment that favors equality should be pursued if the equal treatment of others is in fact a value that we favor.

One final note on the societal elements involved in the attempt to overcome potentially differing interpersonal relations between oneself, those sexually desired, and those not. A point that should not be excluded here is the effect that social feedback plays on the preservation and alternation of intuitive reactions. Just as we are able to rationally override our intuitive judgments, actions, et cetera, so too can our intuitions be kept or changed based on how others are with us and how others react to what it is that we say and do around them. In trying to change our preconsciously delivered automatic behaviors we might either be receiving assistance or resistance from those in our social circles; the old adage of surrounding oneself with the type of people that one would like to become seems apposite here. In any case, once more a knowledge of the processes and procedures involved will be of assistance to those who wish to approach comporting their interpersonal relations in as impartial a manner as is practicable.

5. Conclusion

Our concern in this short paper has been with an ethical question regarding interpersonal interactions, namely: In a purportedly neutral and non-sexual setting, can we relate to a person for whom we feel a sexual desire without letting that desire affect how we relate to them? In the pursuit of finding a response to this query we have seen, through the results of recent research in the fields of psychology and the cognitive

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12 On this see especially of the research listed above Haidt 2001 and 2012, op. cit.
sciences, the high degree to which we are subject to the preconscious handling of
perceptions and stimuli that our brains engage in, and how we are decisively not
creatures of rational decisions. We are, instead, intuitively and emotionally oriented
towards our world and our behavior, judgments, and choices reflect that orientation.
That is not the whole of it, however, for we do also have rational capabilities and we can
use our rationality to both overturn and reprogram what our preconscious analyses
deliver up to us. Often such will occur after the fact of acting, but if we are careful and
aware it is not too late for we can intervene in the sequence that is underway and by
doing so help to establish a variant initial sequence; that is, we gradually build in
ourselves new intuitive reactions. Husserl’s phenomenological methodology proves to
be very useful in this effort as it allows for deep self-knowledge and can even be
considered as a form of mindfulness, the self-monitoring aspect of which is also a tool
of great potential in any ethical concern. If we are to be better with each other – as is
usually considered to be the main concern of ethics – then we may wish to seek more
from phenomenology than we have done in the past. Its techniques could very well lay
out a path for our future.

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