



BOOK REVIEWS

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Let's Talk about Sex

Sexuality: existential perspectives, edited by Martin Milton, Ross-on-Wye, PCCS Books, 2014, 354 pp., ISBN 978-1906254704

Reviewed by Cristalle Hayes, existential psychotherapist

Finally! Existential writers and specialists in the field of sexuality and psychotherapy have come together to tackle the topic of sexuality, and it seems that they have much to say! For the late Hans Cohn, included in this collection, 'Sexuality has been strangely neglected by writers on existential psychotherapy. The theme has remained unfocused in existential thinking' (p. 62). This book is a response to this neglect. The lack of writing on sexuality from an existential perspective was too great and this book is very much needed – a point acknowledged throughout the book. What really comes through in its pages are the passion, relief and excitement the writers share on the topic.

Sexuality: Existential Perspectives is a provocative and earnest collection of papers that approaches the topic of sexuality from a variety of angles. Divided into seven parts, the book covers topics such as homosexuality, gay affirmative therapy, sexuality in the therapeutic relationship and existential perspectives on group, couples and family therapy. The book sets out to expand the discourse on sexuality; it does so with courage and integrity, and without backing off from uncomfortable topics. The inclusion of examples from client work and personal experience is appreciated, and certainly brings a liveliness and ground to the discourse, taking the reader away from the theoretical and the abstract – though at times the writing can veer towards the abstract, theoretical and philosophical. Although this is important and informative, it does at times become dry and less appealing.

Sexuality is a fascinating phenomenon, and existential thought can really add to the discourse around it. The book is acknowledging that it is a phenomenon familiar to us all, and one which pervades all aspects of life as well as being an elusive and confusing aspect of our existence. But what are we really talking about when we talk about sexuality? And what do we really mean by 'existential'? At times I wondered whether the writers did a better job at explaining what they mean by existential and phenomenological than they did at explaining what is meant by *sexuality*, though all seem to agree on the elusiveness of the term. There is an explanation with nearly every chapter; this is useful and interesting albeit repetitive.

This book covers controversial and often misunderstood topics such as homosexuality, transgender, childhood sexuality and open non-monogamy. These topics feel important to me, and the chapters enabled me to challenge my own assumptions on these topics. I often found they provoked difficult feelings which signalled to my own assumptions. I found these chapters to be the most engaging and thought provoking, bringing up feelings of shame, hope and ignorance. Yet I always felt that the writers had taken my hand and were walking me through this uncomfortable terrain. I often wanted to speak back at them, and felt that the discourse didn't just end there. This is what makes the book fascinating and controversial.

This book has many contributors; the writers that I found most engaging were Elena Manafi and Ernesto Spinelli. Elena Manafi gives an inspiring introduction, which really drew me into the book. Sexuality is important and we need to explore this idea. Why is it important? Because it is everywhere! She makes it feel so relevant to human existence. Manafi writes:

This is it! You are holding it. A pioneering piece of work, an enormous, daring act by all authors, who combine their philosophical and theoretical expertise, their personal and clinical experiences, their passion and despair, to give 'flesh and bone' to a long-held silence. (p. x)

Spinelli thankfully takes great lengths to define human sexuality, using the definition of Tamara Sears, and explaining it further using a quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*. I love how Spinelli conveys complex ideas in such a clear and simple way. This is what he is attempting to do:

... a critique, derived from existential phenomenology, that has focused critically on the issues of choice, essentialism, otherness and gender. In doing so, I have attempted to demonstrate that existential thought provides viable alternatives to challenge rigidified ways of thinking about being sexual. (p. 57)

This resonated with me, as there seem to be inflexible ways of thinking about being sexual – something I notice both in my personal history as well as with clients. Rigid assumptions do need to be acknowledged and challenged, and existential philosophy can do that very well, particularly when in the hands of someone like Spinelli.

His essay on childhood sexuality is the most exciting chapter in the collection, exploring the topic with courage, humility and compassion. There can be hysteria around childhood sexuality and sexual abuse; the way in which Spinelli writes about this difficult issue cleverly negotiates the thorns. I feel he brings much clarity to this topic.

I found Part 2 of the book, which draws on Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, more dry and difficult to read, and those not familiar with philosophy may find these challenging. I have studied existential philosophy for two years, yet had to reread these chapters several times. It made me feel more ignorant rather than foster more understanding of sexuality. I wanted to hear more about sex!

In general, this book left me feeling that there is still much more to say on existential perspectives on sexuality. Now that we have established the need to talk about sexuality, attempted to define it and explore difficult areas, I feel we can go deeper, engage further and challenge more – something the editor himself acknowledges.