

# **Making Sex More Talkable**

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## Making Sex More Talkable

*[In the discussion after her talk to the Oxford Psychotherapy Society on March 17, Susie Orbach said, jokingly but I think dubiously, that we don't talk about sex as much as we used to. I guess I know what she means: sex does seem to have slipped down our agenda in some way, so that it comes more under 'any other business' rather than as an interest in its own right.*

*Which is surely wrong. For some months I've been trying to get my present thoughts on sex onto paper. I was amused by Susie Orbach's remark. But I am left uneasy with my amusement. We should be talking about sex. I would like therefore to share now what I have been writing rather than develop it further as I had intended.*

*I begin with a summary, then continue with some themes and variations. There is nothing definitive about these notes. My purpose is to encourage more talk, not to define.]*

First, what's wrong. I think we have to accept that sex (I am using the words sex and sexuality interchangeably) is both excessive and insufficient. There is just too much of it, much too much. And it is insufficient in that it cannot itself explain what it gets us into.

Second, what we can do about it. We can accept that what sex gets us into is the make up of the world. The idea of a metaphysical 'make up of the world' is crucial for what I have to say. We are involved in making up the world as we go along. Sexuality is one important aspect of that involvement. Its excess and its insufficiency have to find their place in that making up.

### **Lust**

From outside, lust is disgusting, violent, ridiculous. Seeing a fellow human being on heat when one is not so oneself is not nice. But seen from inside, lust comforts. It is comforting as well as compulsive. Compulsion and comfort lock together in a closed circuit.

Can the two sides of lust be brought to acknowledge each other? Yes, if we realise that sexuality serves the species before the individual. Lust connects personality with the impersonality of species. In doing so it cries out for social recognition. Lust seeks social celebration because sex needs to be communal if persons and species are to know each other.

This is why sex likes ritual. Couples who try to negotiate lust know how important private rituals can be. Conjugal rites persuade where

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conjugal rights prevent. But to be effective ritual has to be public as well as private. In seeking social acceptance lust aspires to rituals with a public face. And for that we need a spirit of orgy and mockery.

Orgy generates ritual. It calls on ritual to give it form. Orgy is communal. In being so it reminds us that we are members of a species as well as persons. In orgy we admit compulsions and comforts of which individuals can never make sense. We have to become 'dividual' (the term is from the anthropology of cannibalism) in order to be reminded that we are members of a sexual community. Orgy makes that possible.

In calling on ritual to give it form orgy evokes mockery. Mockery recognises the embarrassment of the individual in the presence of the dividual, of the communal. This embarrassment is essential for sexual comprehension. Being a person on heat in the service of species is truly and properly embarrassing.

We need mockery to engage with this embarrassment. Mockery brings species and person into play against each other. It does so in being cruel, and in feeling its own cruelty. Mockery is not afraid of addiction. It exposes pretence, but knows that we cannot do without it. It knows the connections between baby talk and pornography. Mockery catches denial in the act, and then turns it to look at itself. It appreciates that decency is necessary for an embarrassment that is true and proper. Mockery allows us our fears in the same breath as it urges us to go on.

### Display

One aspect of orgy is display, but sexuality involves display in other places too, as the television Clothes Show reminds us on Sunday evenings. If modesty is to make allowances for lust, we must think more about our need for sexual display.

How do I look? Show me. Show it. Put it on. Take it off. Theatre has taught me that in being both demonstrative and provocative display has much to say about sexuality. Theatrical display (deixis and ostension are the technical terms) converts deed into representation. This conversion of deed into representation is crucial for the socialisation of lust. It allows for provocation and for the punishment of provocation. It moves orgy into performance.

The compulsions of sexuality are representative as well as instinctive. But the human body has within itself the power to exceed

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and overturn its own representations. Performance reflects that power. Much of our enjoyment of sex, and much of our fear of sex, is enjoyment or fear of performance. In public a society wedding can be just lovely, or really rather obnoxious. The Spanner case videos landed the performers in prison, while the transvestite judge was allowed to disrobe with dignity. In private, a sexual partnership is constantly negotiating performances which are more or less enjoyable, more or less ridiculous, more or less fearful. For those of us who have taken Mary Douglas' thesis of the Two Bodies (the personal and the social) to heart, it is obvious that sex uses display so as to experiment between private and public performance.

### Deception

For some of us deception is more flagrantly involved with sexuality than it is for others. But I would argue that sexuality is always to some extent deceptive. Display and deception go hand in hand, with concealment always a third, a reminder (gentle, painful) that what is possible always risks going beyond what we have come to expect (or is it a question of what we would like to expect?)

How can we talk truthfully about deception? Truth and deceit don't go together. Or do they, if we introduce a third term, suspicion?

Deception introduces us to voices crying in isolation. "How could you do this to me?" "Surely you must have suspected?" Experiences like this are cruel. It is almost impossible to talk about them decently. Yet if we are to talk truthfully about sex we have to try.

How are suspicion, trust and deception related? Is suspicion something the world would be better without, or is it something necessary, something helpful, a faculty in need of regular exercise? Does sexuality carry with it a contradictory obligation both to trust and to suspect? The English language is full of clues. Why does 'disabuse' mean what it does? When we know ourselves to have been deceived we say "you have abused my trust". But in those terrible days and weeks that follow there is also a sense (almost but not quite welcome) that we have been disabused of - well, of what?

And what about guesswork? "Surely you must have guessed?" Balanced unsteadily on the turn between perception and apperception, hesitant between believing and knowing, guesswork is there to be exercised, if we will. Is sex inviting (provoking) us to do so? More: is

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sex demanding of us that we do so? Is that what sexual jealousy (like provocation) is for: to keep us guessing about what sex can get us into?

Sexual deception can be evidence of pathological splitting of mind and heart. How we respond to such splitting depends on what we do with our feelings of jealousy and betrayal. We can keep them apart, or we can get them talking to each other. If they talk they may find they share an interest in the mockery of lust and what it has to contribute to the make up of the world.

Deception, suspicion, guesswork, mockery: something almost metaphysical may be at stake here. Sexuality could be an example of a more comprehensive human entanglement in the make up of appearances. "I'd rather not know". "Some things are better left unsaid". 'Keeping up appearances' can have a cheating ring to it. But I would argue that keeping up appearances is something we have to do if we are to play our part, do our bit, in the make up of the world.

Think of our faces. Face is how we appear. It is also an act. We face up to things. While we are awake our faces are always acting. Faces are a familiar, constant, everyday reminder that appearance is not just there. It is an act. What we can make of our sexual differences depends on how we view that act. We can see it as necessary, and therefore to be cultivated. Or we can see it as regrettable, and therefore to be avoided if at all possible.

Deception reminds us that display and concealment go together. What is shown is always within a context of what is not shown. What is made known is always in the light of what remains unknown. Some things are indeed better left unsaid. There is always more to be guessed at, even after we have come clean.

### Generation

The connection between sex and generation seems so obvious that it is not easy to question it. Yet with doomsday projections of population growth, the politicising of argument about contraception and abortion, the advent of genetic engineering, the need to do so is urgent. What happens when we want children?

When we fuck to conceive sex seems to be at its most purposive, its most functional. This surely is what sex is for. We know what we want, and we are doing what is necessary to get it.

A child is conceived, a child is born. Is this what we wanted? Yes,

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and no. The child we wanted is here. But this particular child? Did we have it in mind when we fucked? There is a hiatus between our intention and the particularity of the result.

This is a familiar idea. It is so much part of having children that we often don't give it a thought. But we should. Watching children grow up and become adult, and then themselves parents, has made that hiatus an ever more insistent question mark over my understanding of sexuality. Looking towards my own birth it confirms the question which broke on me in my late twenties: since my parents certainly did not have me in mind when they conceived me, how am I related to their sexuality?

The only answer that has satisfied me has been to raise questions about time. I am not simply related to my parents' sexuality in time. What relates me effectively to my generation is the making of time. Sexuality on its own is insufficient to explain what it gets us into. Our understanding of what sex gets us into has to be grounded in a metaphysics of time.

I illustrate this with reference to continuity and repetition. Children ensure continuity: of family, property, people, history. We want children because we want 'it' to go on. But we also want children so as to repeat on our own lives. We aren't the 'it' that goes on. But we have it in us to make some kind of copy of ourselves, so that an image, a memory, of us can be passed on.

Wanting children for the sake of continuity and wanting children for the sake of repetition are two different kinds of wanting. There is compulsion to repeat and compulsion to go on. Generation has to allow for both. Living in a culture that takes time for granted, that has forgotten to question how we are implicated in the make up of time, it is almost impossible to do so. We assume that the two kinds of wanting are the same. We are wrong to do so. We obscure a crucial difference in the timing of sexuality.

I think this difference is important for understanding what is at stake in the politics of family life. Between the generations we are trying to reconcile continuity with repetition. It is wrong to assume that this can be done naturally. It has to involve interruption that is unnatural. This interruption catches us willy nilly into the make up of time. Having children cannot be divorced from how we constitute time. The politics of contemporary sex, both in the streets and our homes, would make more sense if we could recognise that. Sexuality is like music. It has a

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beat. The beat is in time, and it makes time. The organisation and continuity of society depend on that beat. Argument as to how the getting of children and the make up of time are related is the voice of that beat.

### **Time: Accident or Gift?**

Emphasising the insufficiency of sex to explain what it gets us into can lead to a better appreciation of accident. Children may be planned, but the particular child is accidental. Contraceptive accidents upset the best laid plans. Sex introduces us to what has been called "the ontological status of accident": the place of accident in the determination of being.

The word spasm helps fill this out. Spasm links us to the convulsions of lust, to the pangs of jealousy, to the knee jerk reactions of those set in authority. Human beings have to manage many orders of temporality: chemical, biological, historical. It is not easy. When we confuse them, we can go into spasm. Or we can catch ourselves, reflect, and experiment with a different beat.

More generally, accident invites us to consider the make up of time. How do cause and intention come together in the getting of children? Trying to get pregnant and being unable to do so teaches us how far that question can lead. The idea of gift comes to seem more relevant than either cause or intention. The death of a child can make the point as effectively as birth: what is given can also be taken away.

Sexuality involves us in experiences of gift and loss which are cruel. They can break our heart. I don't think we can fully own these experiences unless we accept that sexuality is in some way responsible for the make up of time. For example, the debate round contraception and abortion: what is this about? It defines itself as between Choice and Life. At a public level the argument can exhaust itself in sterility. At a private level there is significant negotiation. I think what women and men are trying to do between them is to take more responsibility for the timing of life. There is a choice as to whether we experience time as gift or accident. It is a choice that affects the world as well as humanity. Sexuality is how life takes an interest in that choice. We want to make that interest our own.

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### Affinity and Romance

When eyes catch and hold each other across a crowded room, what happens? "Thou and thou alone": the unique particularity of love - how is it that one transitory moment of magic can so determine our fate and the fate of generations to come after us?

Chemistry and kinship: the magic of an attraction that is both sexual and of the heart, the tenderness of betrothal up against rules that determine whom we may marry and whom not, equations that govern the mixing of elements. Our use of language suggests that we feel they have something in common. If that is so, how do we engage with such an affinity?

I suggest we do so through the force of likeness. (The word 'force' suggested itself from two sources. One was Ricoeur's 'discourse of force' as compared to 'discourse of meaning' in his book on *Freud and Philosophy*. The other was the title of Christopher Ricks' book *The Force of Poetry*.)

Over the last hundred years we have come far in realising how sexuality invites us ('compels us' might be nearer to the mark) to open the study of family and kinship into the study of myth and symbol. But sustaining our interest in myth and symbol I detect a more pervasive belief (loosely associated with the name of Freud) that we have discovered, or rediscovered, that sexuality is the key to a force that all things have in common, the force of likeness. To engage with sexuality is to engage with the force of likeness.

Likeness makes connections. But it does so with force. To appreciate the force of likeness we have to start from a strong sense of sameness and of difference, and of the gulf between them. Sameness allows of no difference. What is different can never be the same. I am not using the word 'likeness' as equivalent to 'the same'. Likeness combines similarity with difference without collapsing, or indeed bridging, the gulf between them. It creates, and it violates. There is longing, and there is disgust. Fully to appreciate the force of likeness we have to come face to face with the unforgivably and unforgivingly 'other', and with the violence we do when we make it 'like' something it is not.

This is where sexuality and psychosis touch. It is a moment that we avoid in vain. The conjunction of creation and violation compels us. It stupefies, it excites, it fascinates. Madness threatens. Sexual experience cannot get away from the risk of that moment.



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Likeness is the working out of risk. It jumps. It risks jumping. It risks jumping from this to that. In taking the risk, it has nothing but itself to rely on. The jump is unsecured. And yet it holds. It binds. It binds like some interstitial glue or cement, holding everything together in relation to everything else.

We take likeness so for granted that we forget to question how it works.

What causes that jump to hold? That's the question which gives the word affinity its range and depth of meaning, and makes the play between sexual longing and sexual disgust so compelling and so cruel.

To get at that cause we have to open our minds to frightening links between gender, and the violations associated with that word, and the old metaphysical problem of the One and the Many. This is where our interest in threes and triangles belongs. The nuclear family of mother, infant, father; the rivalry between heterosexual and homosexual desire; adultery; lust in which body discovers 'it' as more personal than I and Thou: sex returns us to threeness again and again, soliciting an interest in questions which sex in itself cannot comprehend.

How can the world be both One and Many? Because of likeness, of which gender is a generative example, an example that cannot be avoided. Likeness is the third term which accommodates multiplicity and singularity. It gives order to variety, and makes the particular case into an example of others (think of the play between the noun 'species' and the adjective 'specific'). Gender reminds us that in doing so it can violate as well as create.

Sexual attraction means too much to be understood in its own terms. It demands an opening into the metaphysics of likeness in which substitution ("A is like B, so it can take the place of B") is experienced as sacrificial. Faithfulness, flirtation, adultery, matter in the way they do because likeness is sacrificial. The matching of like with like is not something that we can take or leave. It has force. In its creation of order and variety it is binding. The force which attracts like to like may be too much for us, but it won't let us alone.

### Comfort

One of the difficulties in talking about sex is with words that carry too much meaning. For instance, comfort. There is the comfort of familiarity. "Come on, give us a cuddle". The comfort of being at home,

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of keeping each other warm in bed. The comfort of reciprocated desire. The comfort of masturbation. Even comfort that is out of this world, when the unforgivably and unforgivingly other appears in the face of the beloved. If the same word really says what we want across such a wide range of experience, then we have to learn that language spreads, perhaps even smears, as well as pointing. In talking about sex it helps to think of the smearing of paint onto a canvas to convey texture as well as light.

### **Appetite and Taste**

There is much talk of the need to discipline sexual appetite. I think we do better to think of sex as itself a discipline. If we do so we can discover taste as a means to direct and control appetite. Taste is a discipline that can be exercised, practised, learned. The more we can appreciate the effectiveness of taste in sexuality the wider the range of sexual discipline. For instance, taste is how we both enjoy and judge the aesthetics of sex. As enjoyment and as judgment taste makes our customs creative. On the frontiers between pornography and art, addiction and beauty, taste ensures that our sexual customs take time to reflect on disgust.

Taste is the most effective censor we have, working as it does from outside in and from inside out. Taste decides whether licking results in a biting and chewing and taking inside us, or in a spitting out. Taste understands addiction. Taste appreciates abstinence. Taste knows that judgment is only effective when refusal and permission leave room for each other.

Taste is both transitive and intransitive. We taste our food to find out what it is like. And food tastes. In all the complex physiological linkings between hunger and thirst and sexual appetite, taste helps in translating one into the other, in ensuring that the various parts and functions of the body are aware of each other. In being close to smell, taste keeps us primitive as well as rarefied in perception and judgment. The smell of sex reminds us what a difficult job taste has when it comes to the first and last things of life. It reminds us what it is like to be on heat, as well as of the charnel house and cesspit. It repels, it disgusts, but it does not deny.

Taste is not just a private matter, as many people seem to assume. Taste is as private and public as money. Taste is a matter of constant

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negotiation between subject and object. It knows about minorities and majorities, and the tyranny they can exercise. Taste reaches out and offers up. It is essentially experimental. Experiment is indeed its discipline. Taste can't stay as it is. Both public and private tastes change, because taste isn't something to take or leave, like or dislike. It is also, as any good cook knows, a challenge to do better.

### Mood

Mood helps illustrate points already made. Mood is our way into the chemistry of our bodies. Some people would say mood is chemistry. Mood tests and measures affinity. Like taste, mood is both transitive and intransitive. We use mood transitively to test, judge, get a sense of where we are, of what we have got ourselves into. But mood is also lodged intransitively in persons and places and events. As the Young Ones used to say on television: "It's heavy, man".

Trying to talk about sex often meets with a mood of despair. "It's just not worth trying any more". "You just can't hear what I'm saying, can you?". "Oh, we're hopelessly stuck". "There's nothing between us any more, is there?" In working with such despair I think it helps if we approach it as a problem of mood as well as, or perhaps rather than, sex.

Mood is about the conversion of deed into representation. Can we convert the sheer fact of chemical state into representative behaviour, behaviour that presents us to each other and in doing so represents that 'something more' which makes life interesting? Mood is about atmosphere, and how it affects appearance. Between "there's nothing to talk about. It's all in your head", and "Now I see: why couldn't you have said that before?", negotiation of mood reminds us daily how easy it is for us to deny our part in the make up of atmosphere. We call moods deceptive. Yet they can give the lie to appearance. And their timing is all. They come and go, constantly inconstant, generating accident, the despair of words, the gift of music.

Making sex more talkable depends a lot on making moods more talkable.

### Property

The connections between sexuality and property are manifold. Divorce is perhaps the time when they make themselves felt most publicly. If we start with the viciousness, greed, meanness, blindness

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and nit picking of divorce arguments about property, we can ask where these are in happier times. Are they just absent, or are they present in other disguises?

Anthropologists have made us aware of intricate, omnipresent links between sexual exchange and the creation, exchange and retention of all manner of goods. Contemporary argument about contraception, abortion, rape, pornography and the marketing of sex, focuses attention on bodies as property. Between women and men, children and parents, it is becoming easier to admit that the body as property is something we fight over. What is the fight about?

There are of course many answers. I want to contribute one which is not widely talked of, the metaphysical distinction between Being and Having. I first came across this in Gabriel Marcel's metaphysical journal of the 1920's and 1930's, which I read during my first exposure to psychoanalysis. Marcel argues that to inhabit the distinction between Being and Having, between what is me and what is mine, we need to acknowledge apprehensions which are religious and metaphysical. Having depends on Being, and we are apprehensive of that dependence. It involves us in seizures and responses that take us right out of ourselves, making us afraid.

Marcel's argument excited me intellectually. But also sexually. I was caught up in the problem of sexual possession: how to possess sexually, which did not seem possible unless I was myself possessed. Marcel's book made a connection for me between metaphysical and sexual seizure and response which I have never been able to ignore, and which seems to be filling with new meaning as I grow older.

Anthropological perspectives on property and sexuality include the metaphysical. Where personal, social and cosmological obligations run together metaphysics is common sense. Inhabiting the distinction between me and mine, which is what sexuality and property both do, requires that we make ourselves responsible for that distinction. Which is not just a personal matter. It is orgiastic. There are questions that can be neither asked nor answered from inside our own body. They require participation in world making, in activities (ritual, economic, sexual) that locate the distinction between you and yours, me and mine, us and ours, in the violence of creation.

Property, like body, invests us in the violence of creation. That's what we are fighting over. The body as property, property as an extension of

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the body, represent our indebtedness to creation and the violence between maker and made. We are aware that more is at stake in arguments about sexuality and property than we can pin down. To pick up the stake we must widen the argument to include our indebtedness to creation and its violence.

### War

Which is why we must not be afraid to talk of war. There is a totalitarian all or nothingness to sex which we can only talk about in the language of conquest and defeat. "I must have you". "I do not want your desire. It is invasive". "I must know where I stand". "You have no right to ask that of me". "You have got to withdraw before we can talk further". Sexuality involves warfare. Our talk about sex is not only more honest if we admit it. It is also more effective. Because warfare is responsive to human cruelty in ways that peace is not. Sex can be unkind in ways that only war can justify.

War is the breakdown of law and order. It is also the attempt to establish law and order through an act of conquest. In our approach to sexuality we must have both modalities in mind. Sexuality appeals to a lawfulness which can allow for conquest and surrender as well as for the administration of justice. That is the kind of law sex acknowledges. The act of conquest and surrender is one way into the difference between making and obeying laws. The sexual act asks that that difference be recognised and allowed for.

We have to include other attributes of war. In war killing is glorified, and the glorification is reciprocal. The killer is willing to be killed. Does glorification of this kind have any part in sexuality? I think it helps to bear that question in mind as we approach the murderous fantasies and wishes of marriage and family life. For instance, in relation to feeding. Sex is experienced as both an eating and a being eaten, a being filled and a being emptied, a taking and a giving. Behind such reciprocity stands the killer willing to be killed. Having food depends on being food. War owns that dependence.

In war bodies are prepared to do things to bodies, flesh to flesh, which peace finds inconceivable. Sexuality recognises this. It recognises the difference between war and peace, and our part in both. It recognises the difference, but it is not bound by it. It seeks out orgy so as to be able to move between the two. Such movement is dangerous indeed.

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There are times when no quarter is given, when in asking for mercy we can appeal only to a victor, to that which has overcome, not to the impartiality of a judge. Is it too dangerous for us, a movement that we should try to eliminate from our lives? Or is it an opportunity to move the reciprocal glorification of killing and being killed into a context which allows sacrifice meaning?

I am uneasy with Christian talk of love. But I am sure it is talk with which we must engage, critically, wholeheartedly, and with what the Bible calls 'bowels of compassion'. It is part of our history. Without it we can not make sense of the way we mix sex and sacrifice.

### Ekstasis

I want a word that reminds us both of holiness and madness. Ecstasy as used today tells of exaltation, delight, addiction. I choose the Greek spelling to include ideas of frenzy, stupor, trance, rapture, and, more fundamentally, of simply being out of place. Sex is ecstatic in all these senses.

I define holiness in terms of purity and terror. Purity can evoke worship. There are times when sex is just such an evocation, when flesh seems to prove itself in the worship of purity. But it is well to remember feelings which are never far away when we are moved to worship. Purity as an absolute invokes terror. The invocation can be cruel. If we do not allow for that sex can drive us mad.

There are exchanges of provocation, abuse, and disabuse which cannot be socialised unless we make room for religious experience of cruelty. We have to be able to acknowledge that what is desirable because it is pure may be cruel. Sexual desire is a fearful thing. Perhaps media fascination with the idea of satanic abuse witnesses to a social need which we have difficulty in acknowledging: the need for our shared (orgiastic) experience of sex to admit the fearfulness of God.

### Body

Body can help house some of these ideas.

An art historian (Norman Bryson, in *Vision and Painting: the Logic of the Gaze*, 1983) writes of "a persistent fear: that the body has within itself the power to exceed and overturn its own representations". The sentence keeps recurring to me when I try, and fail, to talk about sex.

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The body as representation: representation of what is within, of all we refer to as instinct; representation of what is always without us, society, world, cosmos. And our fear that we carry with us in that body the power to exceed and overturn any and every such representation. That is the power and the weakness which I am trying to invoke.

What I have said about display, appearance, likeness, taste, cruelty, purity, applies to body first, then to sex. Or is sex the power that is within the body to exceed and overturn the representations of the body?

Certainly sexual performance can turn both body and world inside out. Think too of Being and Having. They meet in our bodies. My body is surely what I am. I am convinced of it. But is my conviction 'safe' as the judges might say? I also have my body. It is my first hold on having, my first experience of the hold having has on me. How does body combine Being and Having? This is where some of us begin to talk of sin, sacrifice, and initiation, others of object relations. Being and Having do meet in the body, but the meeting is unstable and remains so, as birth, sickness, death and sex all witness. Flesh turns itself inside out, and all we can be sure of is metamorphosis.

Perhaps one of the questions we need to be putting to sex is: "Why does the body have within itself this power to exceed and overturn its own representations? (Listen, damn you. It's serious. It's a bloody big question, a big, bloody, question)".

### Conclusion

So how do we make sex more talkable? Two words: metaphysics and mockery, metaphysics for the excess, mockery for the insufficiency.

Talk about the excess and insufficiency of sex gets us into metaphysics. Sexual behaviour implicates us, personally and socially, in acts which are beyond the physical. In sex, metaphysical obligation and opportunity reaches into the chemistry of our bodies and calls on us, with compelling necessity, to participate in the make up of the world.

Examples of this 'call' which I have given include: the embarrassment of orgy, the conversion of deed into representation, the make up of appearance, the chance of conception (or the generation of accident), the discovery of 'it' as more personal than I and Thou, gendering the One and the Many, likeness as sacrificial, taste as both transitive and intransitive, the ownership of bodies, the reciprocal kill, the terror of purity.

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Metaphysics is about the breaking points in our understanding. It is about seizure and our response to seizure. Apprehension precedes comprehension. We are allowed to be afraid of our own knowing. But as the examples suggest, metaphysics is inclined to be grandiose. It goes over the top about the familiar, the everyday. It exaggerates. It has to, if it is to reach beyond the physical, to take us out of ourselves so that we can participate in the make up of the world. But the exaggeration needs a response. In reaching beyond we are left with the need to return.

Mockery is the proper response to the metaphysics of sex. Mockery takes the grandiosity and exaggeration of metaphysics and makes it human. If sex is to find its proper voice, insufficient and excessive as it is, it needs both mockery and metaphysics. Our bodies do indeed have the power to exceed and overturn their own representations. Mockery recognises that power and employs it sociably. Connections between the hormonal activity of our bodies and the make up of the world are exaggerated. The proper response is to shudder. The shudder catches us at the laying on of hands in bed, at the sound of footsteps on the lonely road, when children question the divorce of their parents. If we are unable to do anything with our shuddering, we remain simply fearful. It's too much for us. "What can I do? It's more than I can be expected to cope with on my own". So we back away.

Mockery takes that fear and turns it, reflectively, on itself. (As I write I am thinking of Ben Elton in his television show *The Man from Auntie*.) In such reflection we are moved, not frozen, by embarrassment. Mockery takes embarrassment as a blessing, and returns it to us as what children call a 'dare'. It dares us to use embarrassment to reflect on how self respect is made up. Mockery energises our insufficiencies. It knows that the force of attraction guarantees nothing. It keeps the unforgivable in play between persons. It reminds us that compromise can be effective as well as cowardly. Mockery stirs. It spreads. It is not afraid of smears. It allows for stains. It points, but the point is to combine accusation with invitation. It invites confidence, while disabusing innocence of its certainty. It knows the tease common to baby talk and pornography. It brings cowardice home. It challenges us to own up and to join up: to join with others in owning what we are really like.

But above all, as I said when talking of lust, mockery can be cruel. It can be cruel, yet it feels its own cruelty. It knows that it needs that feeling to achieve the effect it desires - a human response to



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metaphysical excess. Is that why we back away from real sex talk? What I have called the metaphysics of sex is indeed often cruel. Talk has to be able to respond in kind. Can we allow ourselves to feel that cruelty, and, feeling, own why it is necessary?

To make sex more talkable we have to entertain our excesses and our insufficiencies. Sex takes us beyond our limits and abandons us without a guide. To find our way back we need to talk. Talk which allows for mockery and metaphysics can help find that way, without having to deny where we've been.