

The Play-Function of Sex

When we hear the sexual functions spoken of we commonly understand the performance of an act which normally tends to the propagation of the race. When we see the question of sexual abstinence discussed, when the desirability of sexual gratification is asserted or denied, when the idea arises of the erotic rights and needs of woman, it is always the same act with its physical results that is chiefly in mind. Such a conception is quite adequate for practical working purposes in the social world. It enables us to deal with all our established human institutions in the sphere of sex, as the arbitrary assumptions of Euclid enable us to traverse the field of elementary geometry. But beyond these useful purposes it is inadequate and even inexact. The functions of sex on the psychic and erotic side are of far greater extension than any act of procreation, they may even exclude it altogether, and when we are concerned with the welfare of the individual human, being we must enlarge our outlook and deepen our insight.

There are, we know, two main functions in the sexual relationship, or what in the biological sense we term "marriage" among civilised human beings, the primary physiological function of begetting and bearing offspring and the secondary spiritual function of furthering the higher mental and emotional processes. These are the main functions of the sexual impulse, and in order to understand any further object of the sexual relationship — or even in order to understand all that is involved in the secondary object of marriage — we must go beyond conscious motives and consider the nature of the sexual impulse, physical and psychic, as rooted in the human organism.

The human organism, as we know, is a machine on which excitations from without, streaming through the nerves and brain, effect internal work, and, notably, stimulate the glandular system. In recent years the glandular system, and especially that of the ductless glands, has taken on an altogether new significance. These ductless glands, as we know, liberate into the blood what are termed "hormones," or chemical messengers., which have a complex but precise action in exciting and developing all those physical and psychic activities which make up a full life alike on the general side and the reproductive side, so that their balanced functions are essential to wholesome and complete existence. In a rudimentary form these functions may be traced back to our earliest ancestors who possessed brains. In those times the predominant sense for arousing the internal mental and emotional faculties was that of smell, the other senses being gradually evolved subsequently, and it is significant that the pituitary, one of the chief ductless glands active in ourselves to-day, was developed out of the nervous centre for smell in conjunction with the membrane of the mouth. The energies of the whole organism were set in action through stimuli arising from the outside world by way of the sense of smell. In process of time the mechanism has become immensely elaborated., yet its healthy activity is ultimately dependent on a rich and varied action and reaction with the external world. It is becoming recognised that the tendency to pluri-glandular insufficiency, with its resulting lack of organic harmony and equilibrium, can be counteracted by the physical and psychic stimuli of intimate contacts with the external world. In this action and reaction, moreover, we cannot distinguish between sexual ends and general ends. The activities of the ductless glands and their hormones equally serve both ends in ways that cannot be distinguished. "The individual metabolism," as a distinguished authority in this field has expressed it, "is the reproductive metabolism."^[1] Thus the establishment of our complete activities as human beings in the world is aided by,, if not indeed ultimately dependent upon, a perpetual and, many-sided play with our environment.

It is thus that we arrive at the importance of the play- function, and thus, also, we realise that while it extends beyond the sexual sphere it yet definitely includes that sphere. There are at least three different ways of understanding the biological function of play. There is the conception of play, on which Groos has elaborately insisted, as education: the cat "plays" with the mouse and is thereby educating itself in the skill necessary to catch mice ; all our human games are a training in qualities that are required in life, and that is why in England we continue to attribute to the Duke of Wellington the saying that "the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton." Then there is the conception of play as the utilisation in art of the superfluous energies left unemployed in the practical work of life; this enlarging and harmonising function of play, while in the lower ranges it may be spent trivially, leads in the higher ranges to the production of the most magnificent human achievements.

But there is yet a third conception of play, according to which it exerts a direct internal influence — health-giving, developmental, and balancing — on the whole organism of the player himself. This conception is related to the other two, and yet distinct, for it is not primarily a definite education in specific kinds of life-conserving skill, although it may involve the acquisition of such skill, and is not concerned with the construction of objective works of art, although — by means of contact in human relationship — it attains the wholesome organic effects which may be indirectly achieved by artistic activities. It is in this sense that we are here concerned with what we may perhaps best call the play- function of sex.^[2]

As thus understood, the play- function of sex is at once in an inseparable way both physical and psychic. It stimulates to wholesome activity all the complex and interrelated systems of the organism. At the same time it satisfies the most profound emotional impulses, controlling in harmonious poise the various mental instincts. Along these lines it necessarily tends in the end to go beyond its own sphere and to embrace and introduce into the sphere of sex the other two more objective fields of play, that of play as education, and that of play as artistic creation.

It may not be true, as was said of old time, "most of our arts and sciences were invented for love's sake." But it is certainly true that, in proportion as we truly and wisely exercise the play- function of sex, we are at the same time training our personality on the erotic side and acquiring a mastery of the art of love.

The longer I live the more I realise the immense importance for the individual of the development through the play-function of erotic personality, and for human society of the acquirement of the art of love. At the same time I am ever more astonished at the rarity of erotic personality and the ignorance of the art of love even among those men and women, experienced in the exercise of procreation, in whom we might most confidently expect to find such development and such art. At times one feels hopeless at the thought that civilisation in this supremely intimate field of life has yet achieved so little. For until it is generally possible to acquire erotic personality and to master the art of loving, the development of the individual man or woman is marred, the acquirement of human happiness and harmony remains impossible.

In entering this field, indeed, we not only have to gain true knowledge but to cast off false knowledge, and, above all, to purify our hearts from superstitions which have no connection with any kind of existing knowledge. We have to cease to regard as admirable the man who regards the accomplishment of the procreative act, with the pleasurable relief it affords to himself, as the whole code of love. We have to treat with contempt the woman who abjectly accepts the act, and her own passivity therein, as the whole duty of love. We have to understand that the art of love has nothing to do with vice, and the acquirement of erotic personality nothing to do with sensuality. But we have also to realise that the art of love is far from being the attainment of a refined and luxurious self-indulgence, and the acquirement of erotic personality of little worth unless it fortifies and enlarges the whole personality in all its aspects. Now all this is difficult, and for some people even painful; to root up is a more serious matter than to sow ; it cannot all be done in a day.

It is not easy to form a clear picture of the erotic life of the average man in our society. To the best informed among us knowledge in this field only comes slowly. Even when we have decided what may or may not be termed "average" the sources of approach to this intimate sphere remain few and misleading; at the best the women a man loves remain far more illuminating sources of information than the man himself. The more one knows about him, however, the more one is convinced that, quite independently of the place we may feel inclined to afford to him in the scale of virtue, his conception of erotic personality, his ideas on the art of love, if they have any existence at all, are of a humble character. As to the notion of play in the sphere of sex, even if he makes blundering attempts to practice it, that is for him something quite low down, something to be ashamed of, and he would not dream of associating it with anything he has been taught to regard as belonging to the spiritual sphere. The conception of "divine play" is meaningless to him. His fundamental ideas, his cherished ideals, in the erotic sphere, seem to be reducible to two: (i) He wishes to prove that he is "a man" and he experiences what seems to him the pride of virility in the successful attainment of that proof; (2) he finds in the same act the most satisfactory method of removing sexual tension and in the ensuing relief one of the chief pleasures of life. It cannot be said that either of these ideals is absolutely unsound; each is part of the truth; it is only as a complete statement of the truth that they become pathetically inadequate. It is to be noted that both of them are based solely on the physical act of sexual conjunction, and that they are both exclusively self-regarding. So that they are, after all, although the nearest approach to the erotic sphere he may be able to find, yet still not really erotic. For love is not primarily self -regarding. It is the intimate, harmonious, combined play — the play in the

wide as well as in the more narrow sense we are here concerned with — of two personalities. It would not be love if it were primarily self-regarding, and the act of intercourse, however essential to secure the propagation of the race,, is only an incident, and not an essential in love.

Let us turn to the average woman. Here the picture must usually be still more unsatisfactory. The man at least, crude as we may find his two fundamental notions to be, has at all events attained mental pride and physical satisfaction. The woman often attains neither, and since the man, by instinct or tradition, has maintained a self-regarding attitude,, that is not surprising. The husband — by primitive instinct partly, certainly by ancient tradition — regards himself as the active partner in matters of love and his own pleasure as legitimately the prime motive for activity. His wife consequently falls into the complementary position, and regards herself as the passive partner and her pleasure as negligible, if not indeed as a thing to be rather ashamed of, should she by chance experience it. So that, while the husband is content with a mere simulacrum and pretence of the erotic life, the wife has often had none at all.

Few people realise — few indeed have the knowledge or the opportunity to realise — how much women thus lose, alike in the means to fulfill their own lives and in the power to help others. A woman has a husband, she has marital relationships, she has children, she has all the usual domestic troubles — it seems to the casual observer that she has everything that constitutes a fully developed matron fit to play her proper part in the home and in the world. Yet with all these experiences, which undoubtedly are an important part of life, she may yet remain on the emotional side — and,, as a matter of fact, frequently remains — quite virginal, as immature as a school-girl. She has not acquired an erotic personality, she has not mastered the art of love, with the result that her whole nature remains ill-developed and unharmonised, and that she is incapable of bringing her personality — having indeed no achieved personality to bring — to bear effectively on the problems of society and the world around her

That alone is a great misfortune, all the more tragic since under favourable conditions, which it should have been natural to attain, it might so easily be avoided. But there is this further result, full of the possibilities of domestic tragedy, that the wife so situated, however innocent, however virtuous, may at any time find her virginally sensitive emotional nature fertilised by the touch of some other man than her husband.

It happens so often. A girl who has been carefully guarded in the home, preserved from evil companions, preserved also from what her friends regarded as the contamination of sexual knowledge, a girl of high ideals, yet healthy and robust, is married to a man of whom she probably has little more than a conventional knowledge. Yet he may by good chance be the masculine counterpart of herself, well brought up, without sexual experience and ignorant of all but the elementary facts of sex, loyal and honourable, prepared to be, fitted to be, a devoted husband. The union seems to be of the happiest kind; no one detects that anything is lacking to this perfect marriage; in course of time one or more children are born. But during all this time the husband has never really made love to his wife; he has not even understood what courtship in the intimate sense means; love as an art has no existence for him ; he has loved his wife according to his imperfect knowledge, but he has never so much as realised that his knowledge was imperfect. She on her side loves her husband; she comes in time indeed to have a sort of tender maternal feeling for him. Possibly she feels a little pleasure in intercourse with him. But she has never once been profoundly aroused, and she has never once been utterly satisfied. The deep fountains of her nature have never been unsealed; she has never been fertilised throughout her whole nature by their liberating influence; her erotic personality has never been developed.

Then something happens. Perhaps the husband is called away, it may have been to take part in the Great War. The wife, whatever her tender solicitude for her absent partner, feels her solitude and is drawn nearer to friends, perhaps her husband's friends. Some man among them becomes congenial to her. There need be no conscious or overt love-making on either side, and if there were the wife's loyalty might be aroused and the friendship brought to an end. Love-making is not indeed necessary. The wife's latent erotic needs, while still remaining unconscious, have come nearer to the surface; now that she has grown mature and that they have been stimulated yet unsatisfied for so long, they have, unknown to herself, become insistent and sensitive to a sympathetic touch. The friends may indeed grow into lovers,, and then some sort of solution, by divorce or intrigue — -scarcely however a desirable kind of solution — becomes possible. But we are here taking the highest ground and assuming that honourable feeling, domestic affection, or a stern sense of moral duty, renders such solution unacceptable. In due course the husband returns, and then, to her utter dismay, the wife discovers, if she has not discovered it before, that during his absence, and for the first time in her life, she has fallen in love. She loyally confesses the situation to her husband, for whom her affection and attachment remain the same as before, for what has happened to her is the coming of a totally new kind of love and not any change in her old love. The situation which arises is one of

torturing anxiety for all concerned, and it is not less so when all concerned are animated by noble and self-sacrificing impulses. The husband in his devotion to his wife may even be willing that her new impulses should be gratified. She, on her side, will not think of yielding to desires which seem both unfair to her husband and opposed to all her moral traditions. We are not here concerned to consider the most likely, or the most desirable, exit from this unfortunate situation. The points to note are that it is a situation which to-day actually occurs; that it causes acute unhappiness to at least two people who may be of the finest physical and intellectual type and the noblest character, and that it might be avoided if there were at the outset a proper understanding of the married state and of the part which the art of love plays in married happiness and the development of personality

A woman may have been married once, she may have been married twice, she may have had children by both husbands, and yet it may not be until she is past the age of thirty and is united to a third man that she attains the development of erotic personality and all that it involves in the full flowering of her whole nature. Up to then she had to all appearance had all the essential experiences of life. Yet she had remained spiritually virginal, with conventionally prim ideas of life, narrow in her sympathies, with the finest and noblest functions of her soul helpless and bound, at heart unhappy even if not clearly realising that she was unhappy. Now she has become another person. The new liberated forces from within have not only enabled her to become sensitive to the rich complexities of intimate personal relationship, they have enlarged and harmonised her realisation of all relationships. Her new erotic experience has not only stimulated all her energies, but her new knowledge has quickened all her sympathies. She feels, at the same time, more mentally alert, and she finds that she is more alive than before to the influences of nature and of art. Moreover, as others observe, however they may explain it, a new beauty has come into her face, a new radiance into her expression, a new force into all her activities. Such is the exquisite flowering of love which some of us who may penetrate beneath the surface of life are now and then privileged to see. The sad part of it is that we see it so seldom and then often so late.

It must not be supposed that there is any direct or speedy way of introducing into life a wider and deeper conception of the erotic play-function, and all that it means for the development of the individual, the enrichment of the marriage relationship, and the moral harmony of society. Such a supposition would merely be to vulgarise and to stultify the divine and elusive mystery. It is only slowly and indirectly that we can bring about the revolution which in this direction would renew life. We may prepare the way for it by undermining and destroying those degrading traditional conceptions which have persisted so long that they are instilled into us almost from birth, to work like a virus in the heart, and to become almost a disease of the soul. To make way for the true and beautiful revelation, we can at least seek to cast out those ancient growths, which may once have been true and beautiful, but now are false and poisonous. By casting out from us the conception of love as vile and unclean we shall purify the chambers of our hearts for the reception of love as something unspeakably holy

In this matter we may learn a lesson from the psycho-analysts of to-day without any implication that psycho-analysis is necessarily a desirable or even possible way of attaining the revelation of love. The wiser psycho-analysts insist that the process of liberating the individual from outer and inner influences that repress or deform his energies and impulses is effected by removing the inhibitions on the free-play of his nature. It is a process of education in the true sense, not of the suppression of natural impulses nor even of the instillation of sound rules and maxims for their control, not of the pressing in but of the leading out of the individual's special tendencies.^[3] It removes inhibitions, even inhibitions that were placed upon the individual, or that he consciously or unconsciously placed upon himself, with the best moral intentions, and by so doing it allows a larger and freer and more natively spontaneous morality to come into play. It has this influence above all in the sphere of sex, where such inhibitions have been most powerfully laid on the native impulses, where the natural tendencies have been most surrounded by taboos and terrors, most tinged with artificial stains of impurity and degradation derived from alien and antiquated traditions. Thus the therapeutical experience of the psychoanalysts reinforces the lessons we learn from physiology and psychology and the intimate experiences of life.

Sexual activity, we see, is not merely a bald propagative act, nor, when propagation is put aside, is it merely the relief of distended vessels. It is something more even than the foundation of great social institutions. It is the function by which all the finer activities of the organism, physical and psychic, may be developed and satisfied. Nothing, it has been said, is so serious as lust — to use the beautiful term which has been degraded into the expression of the lowest forms of sensual pleasure — and we have now to add that nothing is so full of play as love. Play is primarily the instinctive work of the brain, but it is brain activity united in the subtlest way to bodily activity. In the play-function of sex two forms of activity, physical and psychic, are most exquisitely and variously and harmoniously blended. We here understand best how it is that the brain organs and the sexual organs are, from the physiological

standpoint, of equal importance and equal dignity. Thus the adrenal glands, among the most influential of all the ductless glands, are specially and intimately associated alike with the brain and the sex organs. As we rise in the animal series, brain and adrenal glands march side by side in developmental increase of size, and at the same time, sexual activity and adrenal activity equally correspond.

Lovers in their play — when they have been liberated from the traditions which bound them to the trivial or the gross conception of play in love — are thus moving amongst the highest human activities, alike of the body and of the soul. They are passing to each other the sacramental chalice of that wine which imparts the deepest joy that men and women can know. They are subtly weaving the invisible cords that bind husband and wife together more truly and more firmly than the priest of any church. And if in the end — as may or may not be — they attain the climax of free and complete union, then their human play has become one with that divine play of creation in which old poets fabled that, out of the dust of the ground and in his own image, some God of Chaos once created Man.

References

1. W. Blair Bell, *The Sex-Complex*, 1920, p. 108 This book is a cautious and precise statement of the present state of knowledge on this subject, although some of the author's psychological deductions must be treated with circumspection.
2. The term seems to have been devised by Professor Maurice Parmelee, *Personality and Conduct*, 1918, pp. 104, 107, 113. But it is understood by Parmelee in a much vaguer and more extended sense than I have used it
3. See, for instance, H. W Frink, *Morbid Fears and Compulsions*, 1918, Ch. X.

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