

The Nature of Sexual Desire

James Giles

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Give a philosopher a question and you get a hundred in return! *The Nature of Sexual Desire* approaches this enduring question from a philosopher's perspective. Thus, the author's opening gambit is to posit that sexual desire is a problem and an 'unsettling state of affairs'. This immediately arouses a sense of desire in the reader – a desire to understand what exactly he means and how this 'problem' might be solved.

One might be well advised to first read the opening paragraph of the last chapter in this book to obtain a perspective on the whole book. By doing this one is given a basis upon which to approach the content. Giles states that in his previous chapters he has presented '... a phenomenological analysis of sexual desire... and its relation to romantic love subsequently disclosed, [however] one still wants to know why sexual desire exists at all.' (p. 180)

For those of us more used to reading scientific and clinical texts there is a challenge in this book if for no other reason than, like most philosophical arguments, it takes time and an exercise of mental gymnastics to come to grips with the concepts. For example, one hardly arrives at the end of the first paragraph before one is forced to consider the question '... what is it exactly we desire?' This question is immediately followed by the author's dismissal of any of the ready answers that might have sprung to mind. Giles tells us that '... a careful examination of most [of the reasons] will show that they fail to capture the essence of the longing in our hearts.' (p. 1). For this reader this statement alone presented several challenges. First, I had to question the author's understanding of the term 'sexual' and whether he thought sexual desire was a function of the heart. Does he perceive the heart as a sexual organ, or was he using the heart as a metaphor? If the latter, is he confusing love with sexual desire? Does he argue that love is a necessary requisite for sexual desire to be evoked, or are they separate phenomena? The primary question is, however, does James Giles satisfactorily explain the nature of sexual desire?

Already I have fallen into the trap of questioning the questions and this is where those who want an easy read will slow down, possibly before they even reach the middle of the first chapter. One must be a lover of philosophical reasoning to exact the best out of this book.

As I started to read this book my first thought was to find where Giles defines 'sexual desire'. There is no succinct definition but there is much to be discovered hidden below the layers of philosophical discourse. Whether I am more enlightened on the topic *per se* is debatable. My mind, however, has had a great workout.

I shall attempt to summarise Giles' arguments. His contention is that desire plays a 'central role in our psychology' (p. 15). Our daily encounters frequently have a degree of 'sexual awareness' and that this is generated by desire. He goes on to explain that in most instances it is merely a faint feeling and only on occasions is intense, which culminates in a physical sexual act (of any kind). He postulates that while we experience sexual desire consciously we are not necessarily aware of its goal. This leads him to query the reproductive determinant and expand on the phenomenology of desire.

Sandwiched between the first chapter, where the primary question is posed and the third chapter, where he tackles the matter of the object of sexual desire, Giles takes on some of the big names in sexology. He dissects the theories, clinical experiences and research of Ellis, Freud, Reich, Masters and Johnson, and Kaplan. We are all familiar with the flaws in their respective theories; however, Giles introduces a different perspective on the generation and the meaning of these flaws.

Giles is thorough in his exploration of the human sexual experience and in the fourth chapter he takes on the issue of gender, transgender and sexual orientation. It is in this chapter that he explores the fundamental link between gender and the nature of sexual desire. There is an interesting discourse on the relationship of sexual desire to one's sexual engagement with inanimate objects.

While Giles' presents an interesting and stimulating view of the nature of sexual desire his critique of sexology relies more upon historical texts than modern ones. For those who work with individuals or couples with sexual desire concerns, Giles' book does not provide any practical advice. We do, however, see sexual desire through the refracted light of the philosopher's prism that might illuminate the personal, existential experience.

The very nature of philosophical discourse demands that the reader seeks to make sense of one argument by finding the philosopher's way of unpeeling that argument. Reading such a treatise is time-consuming and requires dedication. For busy people who do not have enough time for the contemplative life, reading this book might be likened to the 'sexual process' – it starts slowly and builds up, but one must end in a bit of a rush!

Professor Rosemary Coates
Centre for International Health
Curtin University
Western Australia