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# Damon Young, "On Getting Off: Sex and Philosophy."

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**Damon Young.** *On Getting Off: Sex and Philosophy.* Scribe 2021. 288 pp. £12.99 (Hardcover ISBN 9781912854233).

Sex is something we normally prefer doing to thinking about because overthought sex loses its veil of mystery and becomes a simple medically described body function, which hardly anybody likes to lose themselves in. For that reason, it is always hopeful when somebody prefers thinking of sex and does it with some humor and necessary attention. Last year Damon Young, the author known for his philosophical insight into very non-philosophical activities like fighting, exercising, or reading did so in his book *On Getting Off*. One could think that this time he stepped into dangerous territory since sexuality is a maze of meanings, hints, and allusions, which may but need not be true. But his book is fresh, readable, and revealing so it proves one does not have to get lost in that maze.

Despite the term 'philosophy' in its name, the book is not philosophical in the hard scientific sense of the word: its list of references is written in a playful and easily readable way (a very rare occurrence), its language is (as the title suggests) colloquial and it is not aimed at the scientific audience first. Its 15 chapters resign from the systematic interpretations of the topic, but instead, each of them begins with the short story posing some problem of sexuality (e.g., its disgustingness, its animality, its beauty, but also masturbation, sex with robots, etc.). The problem is then developed and considered from more than one point of view. Not only these introductory short stories but also the philosophical thoughts are often based on great works of fiction. There are stories from Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Wolfe's *Orlando*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Mann's *Death in Venice*, and others. The predictable objection that fictional sex is not real is aptly overcome by claiming that the good literature does not falsify reality, but offers its competing visions without proclaiming a winner (22).

At first, it is necessary to explain what is meant by sex: Irving Singer's division between libido, Eros, and romance is offered (5), later this triad is compared to the psychological sexual functions: attraction, consummation, attachment (111). Young considers the word 'sex' clinical and safe because it refers to the division into male and female and to genitals as well. Due to this multiplicity of meaning, more colloquial words like to screw or to fuck are used and explained (30), slang is always preferred to the formal terminology. Young's reason for philosophizing about sex is simple: the world of desires is extraordinary, even perverse; it is a mixture of genres (41). Quite significantly, the premature ejaculation on somebody's body can therefore be seen as a failure, dominance, but can also be turned into a companionship because facing such failure one can say 'we are not alone here in this absurd world'. (43).

Even though, the book is written from the heterosexual-male point of view it does not diminish other orientations, queer sex, and other genders. From a moral standpoint, it is based on the presumption that 'our organs are not the sanctioned means to some sanctioned end' (182) which may sound irritating to a few remaining devotees of Catholic sexual ethics. But only with this presumption, it can go through the pleasure of paid sex, masturbation, or gender differences. So Mesopotamian Enki masturbating to give life to his country stands in sharp contrast to the Biblical God and his Spirit that 'barely touches anything' (144). Although this thought is finished by pronouncing masturbation neither sinful nor worth praising—it is simply banal (156)—morality is not condemned, it is considered important, because surprisingly for those who see sex as a mere gene promotion, immoral sex is much less enjoyable. The question that is the reason for the very existence of sexual ethics is touched right at the beginning: feeling the sexual arousal while being under the influence of sexual hormones makes the desired person a mere object offering itself for some fun.

That is why for a pubescent author a girl 'became legs first, and a person very distantly second' (4). That is also why the licked lesbian from Nagata Kabi's manga *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* considers herself 'someone who failed at being a person.'

Then, what is sex like? It can be gross; it can be a killer of love. The high feelings, existential oneness, and above all, the inner motions are so much disturbed by the simple and sometimes brute strokes of sexual act that one cannot help but wonder. The author shows this contrast of love and brutality in a description of the 'intellectual' sex ('I am not some brute, you see' (85)) in which his partner asked him to choke her. The fact that the role-based dominance and submission (88-9) is not assigned to the gender here is encouraging. Sex is also seen as a kind of joy over anatomy when the author becomes enthusiastic over frenulum (56-8). However, it often takes the form of uncertainty expressed by the repeated question 'Was it good for you?', which reveals the fact that we 'simply cannot perceive pleasure as pleasure. It is alien to us' (78). As Nagel noticed, we can think we know what the other enjoys during sex, while we just imagine ourselves being them. This problem is followed by interesting thoughts about the reasons why kinky sex, masochism, and sadism attract so much when we are aroused but repulses when the climax is over (94).

There are numerous attempts to describe the pleasures of sex with the help of other philosophers. It is the anxiety of the past (the former stroke) and future (the upcoming one), uncomfortable unpredictability, connected to teasing, the absence of pleasure which itself is a pleasure (59). The sociological works of Erving Goffman (64, 68) heavily back this feature. Bataille's view of men who get off on spoiling spiritual loveliness, or by revealing the hideous animal quality of sexual organs (80) is rejected because it is valid only for 'some' men. Sexual intimacy is not seen as a divine union but as a conversation (84) for which Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is employed. Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* is often mentioned, as well as Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Nietzsche's works and Merleau-Ponty's are not forgotten. The fetish of sexual imagination is compared to Rousseau's political philosophy because it also promoted goodwill while authorizing violence (205). In the chapter about beauty which often motors sexuality, Plato is mentioned frequently (121), and in the next chapter solves nudity and its beauty. Nudity is seen here as a revelation of the real self, in de Montaigne's words the end of 'lying, treachery, dissimulation' (33). Of course, Freud and Kant cannot be omitted, even though Kant's virginal rejection of masturbation and Freud's overloading sex with meanings is lightened by claiming that we should approach the meaning of sex enthusiastically but with attentive pause (232).

Even though the thoughts are often based on other philosophers' works, the history of erotic philosophy should be given more space than a short description in which the author wonders, why sex was a problem for Plato (10-11), or why Epictetus described passion as a defeat. This short history is meant to be funny, but sometimes it oversimplifies the problem. When Schopenhauer's philosophy is described, for example, the claim that he envisioned a life of numbed tranquility but failed to achieve it (17) is close to a misunderstanding. Also, the account of his *Metaphysics of Sexual Love* is simplified by the claim that he saw love as nothing more than the instinct to make babies (229). Schopenhauer in reality saw life as everything but tranquil and was aware of the fact that the emancipation from the principle of sufficient reason is possible mainly by asceticism is rare. He also knew that making babies is hardly ever the first reason why people engage in sexual activities, which is why he did not believe that anybody would engage in sex without the pleasure it brings.

Among objections, one physical issue must be also mentioned: the hardback book with violet covers seems to be of bad binding which a reader must be afraid of opening fully without destroying it. I am sure such a book would never survive a wild sexual encounter, so one must hope nobody is going to use it that way. These matters aside, the book is a very good philosophical exploration of

such a private activity as sex and must be recommended not only to philosophers but also largely to the general public.

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