

What Is The Erotic?

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It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances; the mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

- Oscar Wilde¹

1. Introduction

This attempt to reflect on what it is that we might be talking about when we talk about ‘the erotic’ follows on from the discussion I introduced at last year’s conference: in terms partly of content (ruminating on what philosophy might have to say about sex); partly, and in some ways more importantly, in respect of philosophical methodology, which I understand as extended rationally structured conversation. It’s in that spirit, then, that I hope to stimulate a continuing discussion. Perhaps I should start by saying a little about definition, if only because people so often think that the best way – maybe the only way – to get clear about a something is to start by defining it: “Start by define your terms”, students are often advised. But that’s a mistake, and the fact that some philosophers have themselves sometimes encouraged people to follow them in that mistake doesn’t help. As I’ve argued elsewhere, only ideas can be defined; real things can’t be.² A circle, for instance, is defined as a plane figure bounded by a single line every point of which is equidistant from a point at the centre of the figure. Change the definition and you change what’s defined; it’s no longer a circle that you’re defining. The wheel on the front of that bicycle over there, however, cannot be defined, but only described. (If you don’t believe me, try it.) It may rust, buckle, become scratched, be detached from the bicycle and so on; yet, for all these changes, it remains that wheel. The best that can be said is that such and such characteristics, or set of characteristics, are enough for it to be
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described as a wheel; anything like that is *sufficient* to make the thing a wheel. What’s necessary for that to be the case, however, can and does change: how buckled may the wheel be before it is no longer a wheel, or how many spokes are necessary for it to remain a wheel? Unlike in the case of circles, we decide what counts, and what continues to count, depending on our particular and contingent purposes – for instance, using the thing as a wheel for the bicycle we are constructing or as an example in a

language lesson of what ‘wheel’ describes in English. So it’s no use trying to define ‘the erotic’ if we want to know what makes an experience erotic. Rather, we need to think about how we actually use the term: ‘For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.’³ (PI 43) (Notice that *words* — such as ‘meaning’ — that can be defined; for words are ideas.) It’s enough to say what a word means by pointing out that that’s how it’s used. Often, of course, the term ‘erotic’ is used in a context of, or with a connotation of, sex. Indeed, that’s why it’s sometimes thought that the connection between the erotic and sex is a necessary one, that if an experience is an erotic one then it has to have some sort of connection with sex. But that doesn’t seem right: an erotic experience *need* not be sexual, despite that fact that most are, just as chairs needn’t have four legs, even though most do. Think of food, music, reading: what makes a particular experience of eating caviar or foie gras erotic need not — though it may be — sexually mediated. I’ll come back to the other possible components later.

And there’s something else I think needs emphasising at the outset too: when I talk about what ‘we’ mean, and how ‘we’ use the word ‘erotic’, I mean... well, actually I’m not sure who I *do* mean. ‘We in this culture’? Well, no; here in this room we come from a variety of cultures. So what I am going to go on to suggest about the erotic might not fit all that well with what other people, from other cultures, might emphasise. On the other

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hand, however, I’m not claiming that meaning, norms or both are culturally relative, however: what I’ll go on to say is *sufficient* to make something erotic is enough — or so I think — in any culture in which the erotic is as a matter of fact experienced. But that’s not to say that any and every culture must have a notion of ‘the erotic’ or that everyone must recognize erotic experiences or things if and when they come across them. I’ve no idea if ‘erotic’ exists in Mandarin, Urdu, Tamil, Swahili, Yoruba, Arabic, Farsi or Welsh.... Hopefully that’s something we can talk about. Still, where people do talk about erotic experiences there *is* something they’re actually talking about, however ‘is’ may be understood: that’s to say, whatever you take the relation to be between language and reality

So what are the components that are sufficient to make an experience an erotic one? Is any *one* of them enough? Or is it rather a matter of a set of them which, taken together, is sufficient? And if the latter is the case, will any combination of components do, or are there one or more components which, taken singly, are necessary for the set of which they are a part to be sufficient? I'll return to that question later. First, however, let's see what components are in the picture.

2. Sex

First, as I've already suggested, there's sex – whatever that may be and whatever counts as sexual. It's not that in the absence of any connection at all with sex, an experience isn't erotic, whether we're thinking of Victorian table legs or of something rather more interesting. Rather, sex is enough to put consideration of the erotic on the agenda: sex is enough, even if it's not necessary. Not, of course, that this takes us very far – not least as it's not clear just exactly what counts as sex. Nor is this the place to go into that. Still, whatever does count is enough, even though sexual and erotic experience is not identical. So what else, then? I think there are two important elements here,

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two components of erotic experience whether or not that erotic experience is sexual.

3. Postponement

The first element, I'd like to suggest, is something like postponement, suggestion, a half-open door rather than a fully open one, a possible making ready for something: something very often but not necessarily sexual. We describe an experience, or an activity, as erotic rather than sexual in those cases where it's a matter of engendering rather than satisfying sexual desire; and that is how the one shades or leads into the other. Where a sexual experience is one that in some way or another involves a direct – perhaps a physical – stimulation of sexual regions and/or organs, an erotic experience is one that engenders and/or engenders a desire for such an experience. Consider for instance how an erotic fantasy differs from a sexual one; and how it is that there are, for instance, books on women's erotic fantasies as well as books on women's sexual fantasies, but none, or very few (I think) on men's erotic fantasies, as contrasted with men's sexual fantasies. Is it that in north-west European culture men don't have erotic fantasies, which are

reserved exclusively for women? Again, there's a lot more to be said here.

4. Transgression

Second, it seems to me that there's also often, although not always, some element of transgression, or at least of something unusual or forbidden (and again, unusual for those concerned, not in any statistical or conventional sense). That's why, or one of the reasons why, familiar sex can become unerotic and why unfamiliar sex – in respect of place, context or accoutrement – may be particularly charged. Breaking (some of) the rules, whether statistical, normative or both, itself (further) stimulates sexual desire as well as already being an expression of it. Hence in our increasingly visual culture the incidence of

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voyeurism, as the advertisers know very well. If that's roughly right, then three things follow. First, the connection of the erotic to the sexual is immediately seen to be something real, and not just a linguistic convention: for more is more forbidden in more cultures about sexual activities than any others. Perhaps that is why it's sex that plays a pre-eminent role in erotic experience, why it's a sufficient even if not a necessary component of it. So, second, and to the extent that there is erotic experience that is *not* always or necessarily connected to something sexual. that's because whatever its content is, it's *that* that's forbidden, half-forbidden, forbidden to most though not all and so on: reading, perhaps, or eating certain foods. Third, the relation of the erotic to the sexual or to whatever else need not be chronologically linear. An erotic experience, that's to say, is not necessarily any sort of prelude to something else, though of course it may be. That's how it is that sexual activity and pleasure may themselves be erotic – or not.

5. Acting

Third, and arising directly out of the last observation, there's the matter of acting. Note the immediate ambiguity here. On the one hand, we are agents and acting is what we do; on the other, we also "act", not as agents but as actors. Not only do we *act as agents*, but we also *act agents*. Is there any culture from which acting is absent? Furthermore, as Elizabeth Farrelly reminds us in *Blubberland*, 'the relationship between the hidden and the visible is not necessarily that of the iceberg. Traditional and tribal masking ... has a more complex and more interesting

phenomenology. There the mask is, simply, magic. ... masking is not about resemblance, but in some magical way, “becoming”.⁴ Is there any culture where masking does not play some erotic role in relation to sexual activity? And isn't that, whether literally or metaphorically, a pretty standard way in which erotic and unerotic sex is distinguished, the business of our at once being both ourselves and not ourselves, where the

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mundane “inner” and “outer” become if not confused, then at least differently conjoined?
For to be a person is a matter of doing, of constructing, personhood no less than of expressing it or of enacting a particular given personhood. I'm tempted to speculate that that's one reason why – perhaps the most important reason why -- sexual activity is so central to being a person (we “have sex”, something non-persons such as hyenas don't). Is the etymology of ‘person’ and its European equivalents not – for once -- genuinely informative? (Again, I have no idea whether or not this is peculiar to European languages and thus understandings of what a person is.) ‘Person’ comes from the Latin, ‘persona’ -- ie, ‘mask’ – which itself derives from ‘personare’, to sound through. In English, these ambiguities remain well marked through the use of the term, ‘persona’: a person's persona may be a means whereby they conceal something about the person they are; or – as in the earlier quotation where masking is described as a way of becoming – a means of becoming someone different from the person they have hitherto been; or of course both, and at the same time. Acting, then, in both senses, is integral to being a person; acting out a role at work, acting out the role of dutiful parent, spouse or child, acting up, as on the traditional Friday night, acting oddly and so on. But – actors apart -- of all the contexts in which we act (a part) most often and most overtly it is that of sexual activity that is the most common. That's where we often put on a mask; and sex is what we often do precisely as a way of masking, of putting on a mask and/or an act, whether literally or metaphorically.

5. Conclusion

That, I'm tempted to suggest, is at once what makes sex erotic as well as what in part makes the erotic itself erotic. So how does masking, or acting, relate to postponement and

transgression? Well, insofar as putting on a mask or an act is
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something we do temporarily, it cannot but be a postponement of what is then a reversion to the person one is. This, I think, is an important way in which, as I suggested earlier, erotic experience may be pleasurable for what it is as well as, or even rather than, a prelude to some other experience. It's a means of accessing and adopting, however briefly and temporarily, a particular persona, of becoming someone one is otherwise not. And that, of course, is already transgressive, inasmuch as one is supposed to be who one is and not someone else. "Give us a break" as the phrase goes; allow me to have a break from being the person I mostly and usually am; allow me to do something, and thus to be someone, I'm not.

The elements of postponement and transgression together are enough to make an experience or a phenomenon erotic. Sex, while not a necessary component, is usually part of such an experience, just because it occupies a central place in the story of our personae in this particular culture.

Notes

1 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (Wordsworth Editions, Ware,, 1992) ch. 2, pp. 34-5; quoted in Elizabeth Farrelly, *Blubberland: the Dangers of Happiness* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA., 2008), p. 36.

2 Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, pp. 3-6.

3 *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 43.

4 *Blubberland* op. cit., p. 83.

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