Autonomy and Sex: A Strange Relationship

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We've been looking at a particular take on how socio-cultural influences shape personal experience. Many of our classes have examined how our society places demands upon us to meet certain standards of behavior and identity, or prohibits the expression of denigrated feelings, desires, and self-understandings. Psychoanalysis has (at least at some points in its history) taken up the cause of liberation from the damaging effects of these social demands and prohibitions. In this regard, analysts have understood that they have a role to play in helping people to undo the toxic influence of dominant cultural assumptions about how we should live our lives, fashion our identities, or position ourselves in social hierarchies.

In the last class I talked about one of the historical roots of this project of liberation from oppressive social demands. We can call this the rise of an ethic of authenticity. In late 18th and early 19th century Euro-American culture there arose a new focus upon the value of being the particular person one is, free from social expectations. One manifestation of this ideal was the increasing value placed upon developing greater attunement to and fuller expression of the nuances of our emotional lives. I set the stage by simply noting the different attitudes toward emotional expression in contemporary American and Chinese childrearing practices and autobiography (from the work of Qi Wang). I then looked at the development in early modern European culture of a pervasive interest in the particulars of our emotional life. This deeply personal introspective turn was present in the widespread practice of self-reflection by diary writers, in the rise of the modern novel, and in the new effort to capture the particulars of human physiognomy and emotional life in portraiture. This value played a part in the development of forms of interpersonal relationships built around the intimacies of shared emotional experience. For example, in this period we see the rise of the companionate marriage and a new emphasis upon bonds between parent and child being based on affection, not just loyalty and authority.

Being the particular person you are in all the complexity and internal contradictions of one's emotional life might be one way to characterize the modern ideal of authenticity—an ideal that is central to analytic therapy.

But modern attitudes regarding the relations between the individual and the social world cannot be explained simply in terms of the ideal of authenticity, of attending to and honoring our "true self." Modernity also celebrates the ideal of autonomy, of deciding for ourselves through critical reflection what is right and good, and thus governing ourselves rather than passively submitting to authority or social expectations. Autonomy is not simply freedom from interference, not simply the freedom to do whatever I want, but requires the effort to take charge of my life and thoughtfully consider what truly matters. In his history of modern moral philosophy, *The Invention of Autonomy*, J. B. Schneewind describes the rise of this new way of thinking:

> The conception of morality as self-governance provides a conceptual framework for a social space in which we may each rightly claim to direct our own actions without interference from the state, the church, the neighbors, or those claiming to be better or wiser than we. The older conception of morality as obedience did not have these implications. The early modern moral philosophy in which the conception of morality as self-governance emerged thus made a vital contribution to the rise of the modern Western liberal vision of the proper relations between individual and society (p. 4).

Authenticity and autonomy can be, and often are, combined. For example, in my determination to decide for myself the direction of my life (autonomy), I might decide that being authentically myself is the most important aim. But I might decide that authenticity risks being too self-absorbed, and as a result of my autonomous assessment of what is truly significant I devote myself to political change. Even if I do link these two aims, if I believe that in order to be authentically myself I must be engaged in political action, I may not view being true to myself as the fundamental goal. I may believe that what really matters is not that I am giving expression to my true self but that I am making a difference in the lives of other people or helping to sustain my community. In this case, authenticity is a secondary benefit. In short, authenticity requires a certain degree of autonomy, but the exercise of autonomy (thinking for oneself) may not result in a focus on self-development and expression.

Where earlier views about ethics and moral obligations were built upon ideas of obedience to the moral law ordained by God, tradition, or political authority, we are now asked to be self-governing, to figure out for ourselves how we should live. Modern theories of human rights are one expression of the ideal of autonomy. As possessors of rights people are understood to play a role in enforcing them; they are exhorted to claim, defend, and fight for their rights. This view is connected with a particular picture of the relationship between individuals and society, a picture which attributes importance to the individual's freedom and their right to consent to the arrangements under which they live. The individual comes first and enters into society and its social obligations through free consent. The Western rights ethos then has as its highest expression "the lone courageous individual fighting against all the forces of social conformity for her rights" (Taylor, 2011, p. 109).

The call to think for ourselves rather than passively accept values promoted by authorities or cultural standards is an appealing value for most of us, even if we may have some doubts about fully attaining it or are critical of some forms it has taken. But autonomy can also be experienced as a burden or feared as a source of social breakdown and anomie. I'm going to explore the perceived burdens and risks of autonomy not with clinical material, but by looking at some surprising influences of this ideal upon modern Western views about sex, in particular, views about sexual masochism and masturbation.

Autonomy and Sexual Masochism

If we think of autonomy as daring to think for oneself rather than blindly accepting the guidance of authorities, what do we make of sexual masochism, of seeking the position of submissive or slave, of the wish to be dominated, humiliated, verbally denigrated, helpless and hurt? Masochism seems to be the opposite of autonomy, of "the lone courageous individual fighting against all the forces of social conformity for her rights" (Taylor, 2011, p. 109). Even if the masochistic position is freely chosen it is still a choice to be dominated. Even if masochistic practice is usually limited in degree and duration, even if the submissive person scripts their own submission, there is still something sexually appealing for them about the enactment of the loss of freedom and dignity.

How do we explain this? What is the appeal?

It would be foolish to assume there can be one explanation for this. The personal histories of masochistically inclined individuals are certainly worth investigating for clues about the appeal of submission for a particular person. I'm going to look at one socio-cultural explanation, namely, that sexual masochism serves as an escape from the modern norms that expect us to be autonomous people who shape their own lives. (This thesis has some resonance with Avgi Saketopoulou's idea that perverse sex is a useful avenue for escaping from the constrictions of the ego in her paper, "To Suffer Pleasure: The Shattering of the Ego as the Psychic Labor of Perverse Sexuality.") The aims of freedom and self-expression are vaunted as the fruit of a hard won ongoing modern struggle against the restrictions and conformity of a hierarchically ordered social world that imposed a monolithic morality upon us. Nevertheless, those same aims to assert my autonomy and personal dignity against any social constraint can also be experienced as a burdensome normative demand that I may fail to live up to or even wish to escape.

Roy Baumeister's book *Masochism and the Self* is a work of social psychology whose central thesis is that masochism is appealing as an escape from the self, or at least from a particular form of self. Baumeister describes this form of self as including an "extended time perspective, long-range goals and involvements, and abstract or symbolically constructed identity. It includes such things as one's career, one's family roles, one's standing in the community, and one's major projects and obligations" (p. 30). One effect of the masochistic role is to put out of action all these components of the self.

Baumeister argues that the form of self that is escaped through masochism has a cultural-historical location in the modern West. Autonomous modern individuals are expected to think for themselves, to critically evaluate the received opinions of their society in order to develop their own standards and values. Indeed, it is in the modern era that we begin to speak of *personal* values and are suspicious of any talk of objective good.

Any set of ideals can come to be experienced as a burdensome obligation. Baumeister contends that modern society does not just offer these ideals but has "come to demand that each person be unique, autonomous, and capable of independent action" (p. 41). And clearly the masochistic role is at variance with these ideals. Baumeister is suggesting a thematic link between two phenomena from different spheres of modern life—first, a new ideal for how

people were to understand their relationship to society (as autonomous individuals), and second, the appeal of a sexual practice that is counter to this ideal.

This is an intriguing interpretation of the meaning of sexual masochism, but Baumeister offers further support through data on the history of sexual practices. He looks at ancient Greek, Latin, and Chinese literatures that make reference to sexual practices. Some of these sources are literary, some are medical or philosophical treatises, some are sex manuals. There are a wide range of sexual behaviors mentioned in this literature: male homosexuality, prostitution, masturbation, anal intercourse, incest, pedophilia, sex with animals, mutual masturbation, cunnilingus, fellatio, lesbian sex, and transvestism. There is a widespread understanding in this literature that sex can be an act of violence (rape) or an assertion of dominance and power over another. But there are no references to sexual masochism, to desire for and sexual arousal in response to being in a position of submission, humiliation, bondage, or discipline.

Likewise, there are medieval Christian texts written to assist priests in their role as confessors. These manuals discuss various sexual practices within the framework of clarifying which practices were acceptable (few) and which were sinful (many), and offering guidance on how priests could discuss these issues with their penitents. These writings refer to male and female homosexuality, sexual infidelity, seduction, rape, masturbation, prostitution, oral sex, anal sex, sex with animals, artificial devices in sex, incest, and coprophilia. Again, there is no reference to sexual masochism.

When do we begin to see references to sexual masochism? In modern Europe. There are a few hints of masochism in the 16th and 17th centuries, and then a flood of references to it in the 18th century and later. Masochistic pornography appears, both written and visual. There were private clubs for masochism, and prostitutes who catered to masochistic tastes. The history of prostitution shows no evidence for masochistic customers until the 18th century. There is also little evidence of masochism outside of Euro-American societies, even in the modern period (although here, Baumeister's evidence is not as detailed).

Early modern Europe is the culture in which sexual masochism first appears as a sexual practice. This is also the period that sees the rise of the distinctively modern Western ideals of developing oneself as a unique individual who asserts their independence from social expectations, challenges governmental authority and cultural orthodoxy, and critiques received opinions on morality in order to develop their own views. Perhaps these modern views of what it is to be autonomous and self-authenticating have not always been experienced as a liberation but have also sometimes felt like burdensome obligations. Sexual masochism, where one is dominated, used, and even abused, may feel for some like freedom from having to live up to the demands of autonomy. In the masochistic position one doesn't have to figure out what to do but submits, obeys, perhaps even being told that one is not a unique and valuable individual. For some this may be experienced as a relief that frees them up to just feel the sexual sensations that occur, without having to worry about whether they present as an acceptably independent person. If masochism may be a revolt against the perceived demands of autonomy, one may also wonder if sexual masochism is a circumscribed break from autonomy, an adaptation to that ideal that helps to sustain it by providing a temporary reprieve.

Masturbation and Modernity

If sexual masochism appears to arise in the late 17th and 18th centuries, with no reference to it before that, the same cannot be said of masturbation. Masturbation is a sexual practice that is refenced in the texts Baumeister consults, both ancient and medieval. Nevertheless, there is a significant change in attitudes regarding masturbation in the modern era. Thomas Laqueur describes this change in his book, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. If in earlier literatures masturbation was seen as a minor moral lapse or the subject of jokes, in the 18th century it becomes the focus of concern as a serious moral failing, a source of medical illness, and a threat to social order.

Prior to the modern era masturbation merited little attention. There is little concern with masturbation in classical medical texts of Greece and Rome. In popular and serious literature it was the subject of humor, but was not considered ethically important. It constituted a lapse of propriety for a gentleman and was associated with people of low status who lacked other sexual options. Even Christian moralists who were concerned with the broader problem of sexual excess did not view masturbation as likely to be excessive. It received far lighter penances in confession than other sexual lapses. By the 16th century many books on moral education were being printed, but there's no mention of masturbation in them.

Beginning in the 18th century there is a radical shift toward condemnation of masturbation on medical, moral, and religious grounds. This attack was not part of a broader criticism of sexual pleasure. In fact, the critique of masturbation happened at the same time that there was a rising chorus of voices supporting sexual pleasure as a natural good that prior Christian ethics had erroneously condemned. A central theme of many of the philosophers of the Enlightenment was the attempt to liberate sensual pleasure from the restrictions of prior Christian moralizing. Yet this could go hand in hand with censure of masturbation. Catholic clerics were a frequent target of Voltaire's polemics. One of his arguments against the priesthood was that the requirement of celibacy led to the vice of masturbation. Kant condemns masturbation in no uncertain terms in his *Metaphysics of Morals* as "a complete abandonment of oneself to animal inclination," hence depriving he who practices it "of all respect for himself" (pp. 549-550 of *Practical Philosophy*).

Masturbation shows up as the bogeyman in discussions of other sexual practices. Opponents of birth control in the 19th century strengthened their argument by associating birth control with masturbation: both prevented pregnancy. At the same time, advocates for birth control argued that the fear of pregnancy would turn people away from good sex toward the deviant practice of masturbation. A 19th century text on perversions that sold over half a million copies stated that masturbation caused more moral and medical problems than all the other sexual vices combined.

The turn against masturbation was not limited to verbal argument. Beginning in the 18th century a number of potions and pills were marketed as inhibiting masturbation. Laqueur writes that in

the 19th century “capitalism and technology rose to the challenge: a steady stream of appliances—erection alarms, penis cases, sleeping mitts, bed cradles to keep the sheets off the genitals, hobbles to keep girls from spreading their legs—earned at least twenty patents in the United States alone” (p. 46).

Laqueur argues that the reason masturbation became the object of such intense disapproval at this time was because it threatened to take one of the most important modern virtues and turn it in a problematic direction. Autonomy is the capacity to stand back from the taken for granted expectations and rules of society and subject them to critical scrutiny. Masturbation came to represent a dreaded possible consequence of the new value attributed to the individual’s independence from the social world. Masturbation threatened to turn the primacy of the autonomous individual into its dark doppelganger. The fear was that it transformed the project of becoming a “self-determining, self-governing, morally autonomous person” (p. 53) into a scheme for solipsistic sexual and personal self-sufficiency, with no need of anyone else. “In other words, as the virtues of privacy, solitude, and autonomy were being created, their vice was being shaped as well” (p. 233). At the heart of the condemnation of masturbation was the fear that autonomy could be perverted into a self-absorbed refusal of social engagement or interpersonal need.

What is less clear (to me) is Laqueur’s explanation for the waning of this harsh view of masturbation in the latter part of the 20th century. It is not as though autonomy has simply fallen out of favor. His view seems to be that autonomy has intensified and been transformed through its connection to other cultural trends of personal self-expression and feminism, so that masturbation is now seen as one of the virtuous practices of sexual liberation. In the late 20th century masturbation comes to have positive connotations in many quarters as “a model of virtuous self-sufficiency, moral action, and freedom from the overwhelming power of patriarchy and heterosexuality” (p. 258). Nevertheless, old cultural forms rarely completely die. There remain examples today that may be viewed through the older disapproving lens, like the resentful incel withdrawing from a wider social world, compulsively masturbating to internet porn.

But whether or not we have the perspective to understand contemporary trends, there was certainly something striking in the sudden rise of outrage, condemnation, and panic about masturbation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Linking this phenomenon to the contemporaneous rise of the value of autonomy raises broader questions. How is it that a value we uphold or cherish can have consequences we do not foresee or condone? Was the attack on masturbation really an attack on autonomy itself rather than on a perceived distortion of it? Does every value create its backlash, or the capacity for its deviation? For example, does the modern value of authenticity, as the project to be true to ourselves and develop our unique personal form of life, create new possibilities and justifications for narcissism?

Social forces that shape personal experience do not always appear in the form of oppressive demands to conform to social expectations. If Baumeister and Laqueur are right, the very call to

assert one's autonomy in opposition to social pressures may be experienced as a burdensome demand (to be escaped masochistically) or provoke irrational vigilance against its distorting transformation into isolating (masturbatory) self-sufficiency.

A Brief Link to the Blass and Greenberg Papers

Perhaps every ideal is vulnerable to being put to unintended uses, some of them unfortunate, others just strangely unforeseeable. This suggests the value of humility about ethical and moral philosophy, even about the ideals we hold most dear. But I don't think it underwrites a total skepticism or absolute relativism about our ideals, a topic which is taken up in Rachel Blass' (2016) introduction to the "Psychoanalytic Controversy" debate about sexuality.

Questions about the value and consequences of ideals also apply to analytic ideals, to views about which analytic aims are most beneficial to patients. This is true whether these aims are viewed as "treatment goals" or "life goals," as Greenberg (2015, p. 21) puts it. What analysts are hoping to do for their patients, and how they believe they can bring this about, is conceptualized very differently in different analytic schools. The likelihood of definitive resolution regarding the relative merits of one analytic theory over another is about as likely as the definitive resolution of debates about autonomy, authenticity, sex, gender, the best forms of relationships, or of families, or political arrangements, etc. But engagement in such debates is essential. That's how a culture, and its specific social practices like analysis, are renewed and sustained. This is a renewal that involves becoming something different over time (even when cultural changes are promoted as a return to an idealized past).

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