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## SEXUAL REALITY AND HOW WE DISMISS IT

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### THE BIOLOGICAL-ROMANTIC MYSTIQUE

In the play *Harvey*, Elwood P. Dowd declares that he struggled with reality all his life and finally overcame it. I think he was speaking for all of us. How we overcome *sexual* reality is a case in point.

Let's begin with the question facing our panel: What is sex for? The first answer that most people give is that sex is for procreation. Now suppose that we were to point out the unreality of this answer by suggesting that if the purpose of sex was procreation there would be no way to account for our experience of year 'round estrus since procreation is efficiently accomplished in infrahuman species even when limited to one month out of the year. (Homosexuality, if cited as an example of nonprocreative sex, would only be dismissed as an aberration.)

Our respondents would then undoubtedly go on to the next answer, that sex is an expression of love—the ultimate form of intimacy. Suppose that we were then to remind them of the reality of tits and ass, inflatable dolls, spike heels and patent leather, as well as fanny pinching and the other varieties of rape and harassment.

This would cause our respondents no difficulty, of course. They would simply reply (much as they would about homosexuality) that these are *perversions* of sex, in other words, *distortions* of sex rather than a manifestations of what sex really is. But perhaps realizing that this answer is a bit too dismissive, they might then fall back on a quite different answer, that sex is for pleasure and relief from tension.

This would oblige us to point out that people do not eat bull's testicles or powdered rhinoceros horn to increase their capacity for tension release or sensual responsiveness (much less to achieve greater intimacy). We would call our respondent's attention to the real world in which sex is a test of adequacy, a test of virility for men and of warmth

and responsiveness for women. The scorn expressed in the terms impotence and frigidity is reserved for those who fail to pass these tests.

Our respondents are engaging in a kind of mental trick. Without thinking about it they are making a distinction between the imperfect world of sexual experience and sex as a biological given that underlies and transcends this imperfect world. This logic springs from the experience that most of us have of struggling to control sexual impulses or even of simply witnessing the play of our own sexual reflexes. We feel the stirrings of urges toward sexual union, stirrings that can come upon us unbidden and that press for release. We can keenly experience the need to decide how to gratify them, whether with a partner, in masturbation—or not at all.

However, we are here being affected, not by biology, but by a biological mystique, one that replaced the earlier supernatural mystique. Where before we thought that our wet dreams were the work of incubi and succubi who stole beneath the bedclothes while we slept, we now experience ourselves as inhabited by agents of a more material causality. Although this means that we are a little closer to recognizing that we are having sexual *wishes*, however reified, we are still sufficiently disconnected from them to experience them as originating outside us, not literally outside us, as in former times, but outside our experienced self.

Thus, just as we now know that our wet dreams are caused by what we dream rather than by night-demons, so what we experience as biological sex is caused by our waking fantasies. What fatefully clouds our thinking about sex is the difficulty we all have in being able to distinguish between what is real in sex and what is fantasy. In the past our sexual fantasies were more ego-alien and so the reality they projected for us was corrupting and invasive. We were the victims of demoniacal possession. Although we now are more favorably disposed toward the experience of sex, it still is experienced as something that comes over us, even if now from an internal source, biological rather than demoniacal possession.

To illustrate the way our vision of sexual reality is shaped by our fantasies, an example from the thinking of our forebears will be more compelling just because their reality is now such a transparently naive projection. John Howard Van Amringe (Maeroff, 1984), a dean of Columbia College (an Ivy League school) in the late 19th century said in defense of the all-male private college: "If you can teach mathematics to a boy when there's a girl in the room then there is something wrong with the boy."

To Dean Amringe sex was a biological imperative independent of the context. What makes this kind of conception so persistent is its

imperviousness to negative instances. Even if all boys could be taught mathematics with girls in the room this might only raise a question about the virility of all boys, with the possible exception, of course, of those who fail mathematics.

Now, as it happened, so many boys have learned mathematics with girls in the room, that we need to ask where Dean Amringe went wrong. The answer is that he confused fantasy with reality. He imagined what it would be like to be a boy in a coed college and this just seemed to him to be a highly erotic prospect.

Nowadays, sobered by the reality of coed experience, our imagination is no longer so free to play upon it. However, this is a rather small conquest in the campaign to rescue sexual reality from sexual fantasy. Like Dean Amringe, to many of us sex can feel like a biological imperative straining against arbitrary sanctions. Then whenever the sanctions are removed and we do not feel especially aroused, we do not question our fantasies or our biological mystique, we simply think that there must be something wrong with us.

It was Freud who offered the most sweepingly romantic modern version of this vision of sex. As is well known, he proposed that sex must be constrained to make civilization possible, even to the extent that the human race may die out as a consequence:

Thus we may perhaps be forced to become reconciled to the idea that it is quite impossible to adjust the claims of the sexual instinct to the demands of civilization; that in consequence of its [that is, man's] cultural development, renunciation and suffering, as well as the danger of extinction in the remotest future, cannot be avoided by the human race (1912, p. 190).

Obviously, this is not one of the ideas Freud will be remembered for, one embarrassingly period bound. But Freud is, of course, the modern authority for the image of sex as wild and primitive, at odds with decency, the beast with two backs rattling the bars of its makeshift cage. Perhaps no less than St. Paul he thought of us as daily wrestling with our animal nature. Although Freud's conception is well known, it is not so well known that it was based on an inferential leap.

Now here's a big surprise: the reality that Freud observed was entirely the reverse. Freud's belief in the strength of the sex drive was based on his observations of its *weakness*. The evidence that Freud adduces for his vision of universal sexual repression is his observation of a widespread lack of libido in both men and women that he called impotence, being careful to say that he was using the term in the broadest possible sense. The above citation was the conclusion he came

to at the end of an essay (ibid., pp. 184f) in which he presents the following evidence:

If the concept of psychical impotence is broadened and is not restricted to failure to perform the act of coitus...we may in the first place add all those men who are described as psychoanaesthetic: men who never fail in the act but who carry it out without getting any particular pleasure from it—a state of affairs that is more common than one would think.... An easily justifiable analogy takes one from these anaesthetic men to the immense number of frigid women...

If however we turn our attention not to an extension of the concept of psychical impotence, but to the gradations in its symptomatology, we cannot escape the conclusion that the behavior in love of men in the civilized world bears the stamp altogether of psychical impotence.

This was the sexual reality that Freud observed only to reject it. It is as if he observed that all the boys were learning mathematics with girls in the room and, fully agreeing with Dean Amringe, concluded that there must be something wrong with all the boys. This could not be the natural state of man. Hence Freud's inference that this lack of sexual excitement must be the wound we bear in the service of civilized life.

To be sure, Freud thought he saw a lot of evidence for the presence of repressed sexuality although, of course, none of it was direct and at least some of it suggests that Freud's biological mystique came first. A good example was his concept of the "actual" (literally "present-day") neurosis, a condition in which the sufferer was directly poisoned by the toxic effects of dammed-up libido.

Freud's elaboration of this concept will repay a detailed examination since it is a striking example of the way the biological mystique can collapse under the weight of its reified metaphors.

Freud (1906, p. 273) claimed that an actual neurosis, although appearing to be a psychoneurosis was in fact not a psychological condition, but was instead a case of toxicity (created by dammed-up libido) similar to "the phenomena of intoxication and abstinence after the use of certain alkaloids, as well as Graves disease and Addison's disease:"

Properly speaking, it [anxiety neurosis, one of the actual neuroses, along with neurasthenia and hypochondriasis] *has no psychical mechanism*. Its specific cause is the accumulation of sexual tension, produced by abstinence or by unconsummated sexual excitation (1895a, p. 81, italics added). In the sexually mature male...somatic excitation is manifested as a pressure on the walls of the seminal vesicles...and something positively must take place which will free the nerve endings from the load of pressure on them (1895b, p. 108f).

This experience of sex as a "load of pressure" is not widely shared by women. Not surprisingly, therefore, regarding women Freud did not feel himself to be on equally firm ground: "Where women are concerned,

however, we are not in a position to say what the process analogous to the relaxation of tension of the seminal vesicles may be (*ibid.*, p. 109)."

One immediately must wonder how this "load of pressure" on the vesicular nerve endings can be sufficiently sustained to generate an anxiety neurosis, neurasthenia, or hypochondriasis, since any such pressure would be relieved through masturbation, a nearly universal activity or, failing that, through nocturnal emissions. Freud (*ibid.*) explains that:

neurasthenia develops whenever the adequate unloading... is replaced by a less adequate one—thus, when normal coition, carried out in the most favorable conditions, is replaced by masturbation or spontaneous emission.

Freud (*ibid.*, p. 124) argues that masturbation and spontaneous emissions are "incomplete," and hence the "disburdening" is "inadequate." But how incomplete can masturbatory discharge be if the man masturbates, say, eight times daily? True, it is probably not *emotionally* adequate, but then what is? And that takes us some distance from the seminal vesicles (even though it lurks behind Freud's impressionistic physiology).

Here we find Freud (*ibid.*, p. 111) speaking of "masturbators" who "have been accustomed for so long to discharging even the smallest quantity of excitation, faulty though that discharge is." If even the smallest quantity of excitation is discharged and if the problem is the build up of excitation, how can this discharge be faulty?

Let me pause here to explain why this exercise in exegetics. Freud's argument is even more elliptical than was customary for him, and this may itself be a case in point. One gets the sense that he was working intuitively, working within a world of experience that he could assume was shared by everyone. His readers could be counted on to know that masturbation and spontaneous emissions are not an "adequate unloading" of sexual urges.

Freud may even have had a hidden assumption that "excitation" must build up in order to create an adequate discharge, and thus the "masturbator" who discharges "the smallest quantity of excitation" may be getting a "faulty" result. (This, at least, was how Wilhelm Reich took it in his elaboration of Freud's actual neuroses into a whole system in which the build-up of sexual tension is as critical for bodily well being as is the manner in which it is discharged.) If this indeed was Freud's assumption, these vesicular nerve endings begin to look unusually demanding. They may well want foreplay and even romance.

Freud was as much a captive of the biological mystique as are most men. Coital orgasms are generally the most satisfying and therefore seem to reflect a biological imperative, especially in view of the apparently procreative purpose of sex. Indeed, Freud even questioned whether *coital*

orgasms are necessarily adequately "disburdening." Thus anxiety neurosis could even be caused by "sexual intercourse with incomplete satisfaction" (1895c, p. 124). For example, even men who have "normal" sex lives may develop actual neuroses if they delay orgasm in deference to the woman (1895b, p. 110):

*Coitus reservatus* with consideration for the woman operates by disturbing the man's psychical preparedness for the sexual process in that it introduces along side of the task of mastering the sexual affect another psychical task, one of a deflecting sort. In consequence of this psychical deflection, once more, libido gradually disappears, and the further course of things is then the same as in the case of abstinence.

In other words, civilization requires men to continually defer to women by inhibiting the urge toward sexual discharge. As a result, "libido gradually disappears." This is the effect of unrelieved pressure on the vesicular nerve endings. Thus we are obliged to enjoy sex to the fullest if we are to avoid being poisoned by it and it is every man for himself.

Now how did Freud know that what he saw when he looked around him was not sexual reality but a simulacrum? He responded only as everyone does. Like *Harvey's* protagonist, we cope with reality by rejecting it. My contention is that this was Freud's way of accounting for the difference between his sexual fantasies and his sexual reality (given also his early attempts to emulate the nineteenth century physiology of Helmholtz and Brucke).

My guess is that this was a relatively simple case of Freud's knowing that he had all kinds of forbidden impulses during the day, but when opportunity presented itself he was not always ready. As do most men, he concluded not that he had learned something about sexual reality, but that his ability to respond sexually had been impaired, and that this might even portend the eventual extinction of the human race "in the remotest future" (an idea that has been politely ignored, perhaps as part of the quota of such allowed a man of genius).

Thus sex still was a simple, automatic reflex response, or it would be if people didn't ruin it.

Although Freud reaffirmed his conception of the actual neuroses as late as 1925 (they "must be regarded as direct toxic consequences of disturbed sexual chemical processes," 1925, p. 26), he radically revised his theory of anxiety in the following year. He had come to the recognition that it is not the repression of libido that causes anxiety, it is anxiety that causes the repression of libido. He acknowledged this shift in a charming retraction (1926, p. 109):

It is no use denying the fact, though it is not pleasant to recall it, that I have on many occasions asserted that in repression the instinctual representative is distorted, displaced, and so on, while the libido belonging to the instinctual impulse is transformed into anxiety.

Although this was a momentous shift in Freud's understanding of repression, it may be accurate to say that it represented no shift in his understanding of sex. Three years later, *Civilization and its Discontents* appeared, Freud's great statement of his belief in the sexual renunciation required for civilization to endure. He was as far as ever from conceiving of the possibility that the "complete" sexual satisfaction that he envisioned could *only* be made possible by civilization.

The nerve endings call out for satisfaction, "complete" satisfaction. "Civilization" represented an opposing force. The irony is that it is "civilization" that led Freud to the view that the sexual reality he saw was a simulacrum, a pale shadow of the passionate and unfettered sexuality immanent in our natures. It is our institutionalized otherworldliness that formed Freud's vision. It is "civilization" that led Freud to his belief in the defectiveness of his and all his cohorts' sexuality.

All of this is to say that when people are asked what sex is for they respond reflexively, wittingly or unwittingly making a distinction between sex as they know it and sex as they imagine it should or could be. This is the sex of corrupting demons, surging hormones, and heavenly choirs. If this much is clear, I would now like to reverse this way of thinking about sex in favor of discovering what sex is about by looking around us.

## TWO PARADIGMS

What would sex look like to a Martian? My guess is that he would rather quickly conclude that the purpose of sex is to *possess* another person. To pick a seldom discussed but nevertheless highly revealing example, most cultures are and have been fascinated with bridal virginity. This should not be dismissed simply as a concern with property rights. A man feels quite differently if what is stolen from him is his wife as compared with his ox or his car, and he takes title with a good deal more gusto. Here is how one scholar put it (Tannahill, 1980, p. 371):

Bridal virginity has been a preoccupation of most societies throughout history, but although it is usually associated with questions of legality and legitimacy there is much to suggest that the specifically sexual aspect was also important, particularly in places such as Sparta, Crete, and Rome, where the wedding ceremony incorporated a kind of formalized representation of kidnapping for the purpose of rape—which, psychologically, is a more extreme version of defloration. Indian Muslims, at some stages of history, are recorded as practicing public defloration as proof of the bride's premarital chastity, while both they and the tribal Kurd were accustomed to display a cloth stained with hymeneal blood for the same reason. In both cases the avowed object helps to mask a strong element of masculine boasting over the act itself. Muslims appear to have

been particularly fascinated by defloration. In the Islamic paradise, the believer was promised 10,000 virgins who, deflowered each night, have their virginity miraculously restored on the following morning.

This is the sex act as a ritual of possession. "Masculine boasting over the act itself" suggests, of course, that the sex act in this context has little to do with sensual pleasure, much less intimacy, but is a celebration of masculine status. Most societies throughout history and most contemporary societies are, of course, authoritarian and sex is therefore a celebration of status and role, much as is the rest of the pattern of human relationships.

This means that the man who *cannot* boast over the act itself is as much in trouble as is the woman who cannot produce hymeneal blood. Indeed, with men's higher status comes greater vulnerability to humiliation. Thus, my use of the term "possession" is intended to convey the way sex can be a masculine province, but I want to stress that the prerogatives and entitlements that thereby accrue are also duties. Just as are women, men are prisoners of the ritual.

Now what of simple lust? My argument is that lust best describes the sex of our fantasies and that although that is the sex we know best, it only clouds our vision of sexual reality. All the people Freud observed who were sexually apathetic were not simply, or not necessarily repressing (or otherwise avoiding) their sexual potential, they were reacting to (or against) the sexual reality that in fact existed. Men of Sparta, Crete, and Rome, the Indian Muslims, and the Kurd, may have at times not looked forward to their ritual consummations. On the other hand, the believer who is to spend his time in paradise with 10,000 virgins may be counted on to look forward to it since fantasy partners can be expected to be unerringly arousing, unlike his real partner, someone chosen by his family as a good social and/or economic investment.

Certainly it is difficult to see what there would be in it for the woman to experience being possessed in this way. From this standpoint sexual apathy does not look like the product of repression; it looks entirely appropriate. Consider this picture of contemporary sexual reality (Davenport, 1977, p. 149):

In most of the societies for which there are data, it is reported that men take the initiative and, without extended foreplay, proceed vigorously toward climax without much regard for achieving synchrony with the woman's orgasm. Again and again, there are reports that coitus is primarily completed in terms of the man's passions and pleasures, with scant attention paid to the woman's response. If women do experience



orgasm, they do so passively. In the Ojibwa, a North American Indian group, it is reported that women are passive during intercourse and orgasm; however, they may take the lead in initiating coitus. In the Guinea survey of young single adults from several African ethnic groups, the women overwhelmingly reported passivity during coitus, embarrassment at expressing satisfaction during intercourse, distaste for caressing and many admitted an inability to achieve orgasm.

Embarrassment, distaste, and anorgasmia seem obviously appropriate once this picture of sexual reality is presented. Of course, it rarely is presented, making it easy to think that sexual apathy is wholly a consequence of sexual repression, and there goes sexual reality.

It is less obvious what the men experience. The fact that "without extended foreplay," they "proceed vigorously toward climax" suggests not only that the women are sexually dispossessed (as well as possessed) but that these men who are strangely in a hurry must not be having peak experiences either. This haste is a good indicator of ritualization and role-enactment.

There can be no question that sex from within the old paradigm represented a requirement to demonstrate proficiency at one's role. Examples are available as far back as recorded history takes us: Ancient Egyptian physicians signified on their papyri that a man was impotent by writing that he was "incapable of doing his duty" (Tannahill, 1980, p. 65). Essential to the role is the capacity to possess the partner. Whether or not the act is *enjoyed* is not a relevant question from within this paradigm.

There is an almost universally shared impression among sexologists that men did experience a kind of unfettered sexuality in Ancient (Taoist) China. However, a closer look indicates that this was only the freedom to perform (Tannahill, 1980, p. 168):

Just as the European of early medieval times knew, without quite understanding why, that sex was sinful but occasionally permissible, so his contemporary in China knew, without quite understanding why, that sex was a sacred duty and one that he must perform frequently and conscientiously if he was truly to achieve harmony with the Supreme Path, the Way, Tao.

Ask any Sultan whether a harem was as much a garden of erotic delights as Reubens would have it, considering the schedule of sexual encounters that he was expected to adhere to undeviatingly, with time off only for illness (*ibid.*, p. 189):

It might reasonably be expected that where polygamy flourished there would be no need for prostitution. But this was very far from the case. The conscientious Chinese husband, in fact, frequently went to prostitutes not for sexual intercourse but to escape from it.

This is quite another version of civilization and its discontents.

And then, of course, there is Polynesia. Among sexologists, this is the other lodestone for the biological-romantic mystique. As Haeberle (1978, p. 464), the well-known historian of sex, put it:

Various explorers returned home with news of sexually uninhibited "noble savages" in distant parts of the globe. The French Captain Bougainville and the English Captain Cook found sensuous, happy people in Tahiti and on other Pacific islands, and this discovery cast serious doubt on the sexual standards of Europe.

In Mangaia, for example, there even is a word for the sound of moist genitalia bumping together (Marshall, 1971, p. 118). Haeberle reports that Cook was especially impressed to find that the Tahitians "had sexual intercourse in public and 'gratified every appetite and passion before witnesses'." However, this should have been a clue to the possibility that this was not the sexual freedom it appeared to be. An additional clue in Cook's own account was his observation that "Among the spectators were several women of superior rank who...gave instructions to the girl [who participated in a demonstration witnessed by Cook] how to perform her part" (Haeberle, *ibid.*).

Our suspicions are confirmed by Marshall's (1971, pp. 118f) more systematic ethnographic account of Polynesian sexuality:

The Mangaian, or Polynesian girl takes an immediate demonstration of sexual virility and masculinity as the first test of her partner's desire for her and as the reflection of her own desirability... One virility test used by Mangaian women is to require a lover to have sexual intercourse without making contact with any part of the partner's body other than the genitalia.

Polynesian men have no complaints about the women's sexual demands; they are fully prepared to meet them (*ibid.*, pp. 124, 126):

The Mangaian emphasis is not on upon the number of times a night that a man can achieve climax; rather, he sets his sights on the number of nights a week that he is capable of coitus. In his teens and twenties, he aims at every night capability...

He also judges potency by his ability (or that of others) to get the same woman pregnant twice in one year...

Mangaian men are aware that in central Polynesia it is said that the name of an island "travels on a man's penis." Mangaian men do not wish to let the name of their island "fall."

Marshall reports that "invariably, tira [impotence] is said by informants to be 'common'." He speculates that a cause may be "the stress upon nightly copulation." He also adds that "the shame factor in impotence is very great" (caused by the demands of "civilization?"), and so we can expect that Captain Cook was offered no chance to witness a public exhibition of this feature of Polynesian sexuality.

Most societies are authoritarian and in them we are not likely to find areas of freedom, sexual or otherwise. Along with bridal virginity, the arranged marriage is the institution that best conveys the temper of the typical human society. Arranged marriages are only one part of the pattern of arranged *relationships*. This proved to create an almost insurmountable problem for the makers of a recent film done in the Australian Outback with an aboriginal cast. Once one person was selected to play the lead, this automatically projected his relationship grid onto the rest of the tribal group, the network of kin and clan roles that determined who could talk to whom about what, and with what degree of deference. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that once the filmmakers chose the lead, all the other roles were cast.

Of course, the Australian aborigines are known to represent an extreme form of ritualization. In fact, this has somehow been to their credit. In the early days of cultural relativism, ethnologists would almost take pride in the fact that this technologically paleolithic people had a marvelously complex kinship system, as if this demonstrated an unexpected gentility. The unstated message apparently was that the aborigines, naked and unsheltered, actually were just as human as we since in their relationships they were not indiscriminate and promiscuous. This is not a convincing point in any case, since infrahuman species are even more dominated by the pressures of status and role than are humans, and "promiscuity," however bad its name, is the mark of human groups.

What both man and beast share is a fear of one another that is reduced by making all members of the group predictable, although the fear resurfaces as "fear of the stranger" (this is the term used in the Harvard Cultural Index), a fear of anyone who does not fit the categories. It is only after the strange wolf has gone through a period of probationary groveling, and this includes sexual groveling, that the pack can feel

unthreatened enough to include him. (Sexual deference and submission, although a familiar component of infrahuman sex, has never found representation in our biological mystique, perhaps because it plays no part in the procreational model).

In our progress toward developing individual egos we have reduced the fear in a new way; we now have been able to internally locate and make sense of much of our experience. We can even risk a little promiscuity. But fewer arranged relationships has thus far meant fewer relationships of any kind since our fear of the stranger is by no means eliminated and we now lack adequately reassuring meeting-and-greeting rituals. This has even resulted in preventing some people from having any partners, an astonishing development, at least from a tribal perspective. We now find ourselves groping for the lost rituals. We now write to advice columnists asking how to make or break a date, how to refuse an invitation, or how to get our guests to leave.

In contemporary non-authoritarian Western cultures individual needs and desires (feelings) are now beginning to rival duty as socially appropriate motivations, although the fight still goes on (e.g., the abortion controversy). With the rise of individualism in the West came the idea of romantic love, the decline of arranged marriages and, most significantly, the endorsement of women's sexuality. Although much has been made of the contribution of Victorian modes of thought to our present sexual anxieties, in fact the Victorian period can be understood as a reaction against the changes that the anti-authoritarian revolution had set in motion. If Victorianism represented a revival of sex-as-duty, this was only a delay in the general Western movement away from ancient tribal conceptions of sex and of human relations as a whole. After all, even the grimmest of Victorian pieties are easily matched by the possession-consciousness found in present-day China, India, Russia, Latin America, and of course, the Islamic cultures.

Perhaps the most signal accomplishments have been the appearance of the ideas of emotional intimacy and of authenticity. As a consequence, devotion to duty has become a much less compelling criterion of integrity. Conscientiousness, at least as contrasted with fidelity to one's feelings, is now often a nonheroic virtue.

Husbands no longer offer their wives for the night to male houseguests. Indeed they are no longer as likely to offer their last crust of bread or any other prized possession. A houseguest is now less likely to be responded to ritualistically, less likely that is to be responded to on the basis of his or her status as a house guest alone. We feel freer to respond differentially, to respond to a guest in accordance with how we feel. This

is, of course, a momentous step in the development of the human ego. It represents the ushering in of nothing less than a new paradigm for human relationships.

However, we have only begun to grasp its implications and we will need a few more centuries to work it through. As for hospitality rituals, we still are limited in how differentially we can respond. To the pain of many a host, and to the profit of many an advice columnist (as I noted above), we still have no way to get rid of houseguests or even guests for the evening without loss of face.

It seems as if this pain is caused by having to endure the unwanted guest, but it actually is created by the new paradigm. From within the old paradigm it was a point of pride to endure the unwanted guest. Dedication to duty and the subjugation of feelings was the path of virtue. Further, without realizing it we made a virtue of necessity: by subjugating our feelings we made ourselves reliable to one another and this protected us from the always-imminent encroachments of interpersonal anxiety.

Freedom from ritual means freedom to experience interpersonal anxiety. With regard to my example of hospitality rituals, it is the freedom to risk alienating an unwanted houseguest. Not surprisingly, in the face of such a risk we instinctively fall back on ritual, but where before we took pride in not acting on our feelings, now this is cause for shame. By a kind of paradigm slippage we now lose face if we are inauthentic. We are caught in a paradox, feeling compelled to be ritualistically nonritualistic.

This is why we now feel oppressed by the unwanted guest. We are ashamed of our inability to be "authentic" because authenticity is still understood from within the old paradigm, which is to say that it is ritualistically defined.

To review, continuing with my illustration: in the past we could take pride in our ability to treat the unwanted guest as handsomely as the wanted one, not realizing that we could not have handled any greater range of options, that we were in effect making a virtue of necessity. This necessity to avoid interpersonal anxiety forces itself on us when we try to act more assertively and we then feel ashamed of having to fall back on tribal rituals. The ultimate accomplishment in consciousness raising would be to be able to tolerate recognition of our vulnerability to interpersonal anxiety.

Essential to the new role definition is the capacity to make contact with the partner. We now hear that sex is *communication* (a rather

foreign notion to the Indian Muslim, the Taoist Chinese, the Polynesian, the Victorian, or for most other peoples, past or present.) This is why when asked what sex is for, most people will now say that it is an expression of love and the ultimate form of intimacy. This is taken ritualistically, as I have been arguing, with the result that we now feel obliged to respond to our partners and to make our partners respond to us. One way to put this is to say that sex as a ritual of possession is in the process of being replaced by sex as a ritual of mutual affirmation.

The new purpose for sex has been structured in the old way, integrated in accordance with our duty-bound habits of thought. In the past we felt ashamed of not being able to perform in sex. We still do. Only now we also feel ashamed of *wanting* to perform.

## THE JOB OF SEX

Sex therapists are repeatedly struck by the way most people feel compelled to perform in sex, having to respond on cue. In fact, the conception of sex as a performance is built into the language. We say that a man is or is not *able* to *get* an erection. If he is not able to he is *impotent*, which is to say *powerless*. If he is not *able to maintain* his erection, we say that he lost it, not that it got lost or that it went away.

But, as I discussed earlier, when people are asked what sex is for, they don't say anything about it being a test of adequacy or a performance. They say that sex is for procreation, release, or the expression of love and closeness. Yet these are the same people who, when they are not being asked what sex is for, will unapologetically speak of sexual *prohess*.

Yet there is no necessary inconsistency here. When people say that sex means release and closeness it is true that they do not think of themselves as describing sex as a test of adequacy, but what they are in fact doing is giving the criteria on which the test is to be graded. What sex therapists observe is that in sex people are trying to be adequate at the new role definitions. They are trying to be adequate in the pursuit of pleasure and intimacy.

Sex partners work at being mutually reassuring. Sex talk is all encouragement and flattery (I have at times likened it to infield chatter). Sex means always saying yes. It is all hyperbole; no one believes or expects their partner to believe anything said in sex. Perhaps the most telling clue to sex-as-performance is the fact that in sex we all try to keep everything as *smooth* as possible.

What does keeping things smooth and always saying yes have to do with release, pleasure, love, or closeness? What we all are doing is trying to act as abandoned and intimate as possible. This is the test. And this is why when asked what sex is for no one mentions the pressure to be responsive; they just say that sex means *being* responsive.

Recall the biological mystique. This responsiveness is thought of as biological, as a reaction pattern waiting to be triggered. No matter how hard people work at sex, they still believe that the reaction pattern they are after is spontaneous. They see themselves as working only to trigger it.

## SEXUALITY EX CATHEDRA

I said that this is what sex therapists observe, that most people are concerned with performing, with proving their adequacy in sex. But when sex therapists are asked what sex is about they give the same answers as everyone else. Just as everyone else, and despite what they observe in their daily work, sex therapists do not emphasize the way that our orientation toward sex is dominated by the concern with performing and with tests of adequacy. Indeed, they do not mention it at all. This is the most striking example of our rejection of sexual reality.

Here is an example from the work of one of the best known and most widely respected husband-and-wife sex therapy team. There is nothing unusual about this example; I have chosen it only because of its unimpeachable representativeness. As they note in their introduction, the Zussmans wrote a book based on their clinical work with over 800 couples. What is of interest to us is their statement about the nature and purpose of sex. Regarding the purpose of sex they declare (1978, p. 12):

If you want to get really close to another person, sharing your sexuality is the most intense [they mean the best] form of communication available.

And regarding the nature of sex:

There are no standards to meet, no goals that must be reached, no rules except a responsibility to not hurt others or to allow yourself to be hurt.

Now, I hardly need tell you that this was *not* a summary of what the Zussmans found to be the nature and purpose of sex from their work with the 800 couples. I would be surprised if even one of these couples

experienced sex in the way the Zussmans describe it, as without goals or rules and as an unparalleled form of communication.

The obvious answer to this point is that the couples that the Zussmans worked with are *deviant*. But, I think we are entitled to ask, deviant from what? The Zussmans would undoubtedly say that these couples are deviant from the couples that they did not work with. So they worked with 800 couples and then based their conception of the nature and purpose of sex on couples that they did *not* work with.

The answer to this point might be that there is nothing unusual about inferring normal functioning from the study of pathological functioning. However, as you might expect, the Zussmans offer no basis for their inference. It is as if, from a study of the weather, one were to conclude that the normal day is sunny and clear.

Think of it this way: How many couples would the Zussmans have to work with before they began to revise their conception of the nature and purpose of sex? Sixteen hundred? Thirty-two hundred? Thirty-two thousand?

I think the answer is that even if they worked with *everybody*, this would have no affect on their conception of sex. If they worked with everybody and found that everybody felt this pressure to prove their adequacy in sex, the Zussmans would feel bad about that but it would not affect their conception of sex. They would just think that they were witnessing an epidemic of sexual afflictions.

Indeed, we read about just such epidemics in the daily newspaper. Michael Carrera, a prominent sex educator, made a prototypic statement in a newspaper interview publicizing his recent and generally well-received resource book on sex for the general reader (Stein, 1981):

People want to have an orgasm like a *grand mal* seizure. In their frantic search they forget who they are with and why they are there. Instead of following their own inclinations, they tend to measure themselves against outside standards.

People are so frantic about having superior orgasms, as measured against "outside standards," that they *forget why they are there*. They forget the nature and purpose of sex. They forget that there are no rules or standards in sex and that it is not a test of adequacy. So there are no rules or standards in sex, unless you forget that and, at least according to Carrera, people usually do.



There is the irony here that if it is true that people forget that sex is a test of adequacy, therapists (of all kinds) forget that they, perhaps more than anyone else, take the ability to fulfill sex role-demands as an ultimate test of adequacy (maturity). Although this practice by no means began with Freud, he gave it much of its present currency among therapists. He quite literally adopted prevalent sex-role definitions as his measures of maturity. Thus, impotence was explained as an inhibition of aggression and frigidity as a resistance to surrender since it was clear who was supposed to be aggressive and who passive.

Despite the fact that sex is so obviously treated as a test of adequacy by both laypersons and professionals, everyone feels neurotic about experiencing it this way. (I have, 1984, referred to this as performance-anxiety anxiety.) Carrera is only reflecting everyone's latter-day anxiety about the role concerns that we can no longer respect but that both laypersons and professionals alike have yet to work their way out of.

There also are no rules or standards in sex unless you count the rule that there are no rules or standards. This is, in fact, the most oppressive of the rules. The rule of no-rules is just the idea that sex should be spontaneous, that people should let it happen and stop interfering with it. Just as people think that no matter how hard they are working at sex they are simply trying to trigger a spontaneous reaction pattern, so even sex therapists will offer rules that are not rules because they are designed only to liberate our spontaneous sexual selves. For example, Hartman and Fithian (1972, p. 186), a leading West Coast sex-therapy team offer the following no-rule rule designed only to avoid an eventuality that "often seriously inhibits...lovemaking activities:"

The couples who function best are the ones who are always saying yes to the lovemaking activities in which they are involved. The implicit suggestion here [meaning the lesson to be learned from this observation] is that couples encourage their partners, and engage in those activities which they do enjoy, reaffirming by saying yes that they are enjoying the activity. We strongly encourage all our therapeutic couples to lead their partners into positive and pleasurable activities to which they, with complete abandon, can say yes because they are genuinely enjoying those particular activities. A negative response often seriously inhibits further lovemaking efforts and should be avoided whenever possible.

Hartman and Fithian precede this advice with a cautionary tale about a woman who interrupted sex, with disastrous consequences:

Several years ago while observing a research couple in coitus, the female in the midst of coital activities said to her partner very loudly

"stop." Needless to say, the entire lovemaking activities halted. All the enjoyable feelings and the degree of arousal which had been present went "down the drain," and then in a somewhat embarrassing and uncomfortable situation, both partners attempted to continue with their lovemaking activities—never fully recovering the momentum well underway at "stop."

This sense of a "momentum well underway" strikingly conveys the vision of sex as an event about which there should be no rules except for rules that will insure that it happens right. Although I do not pretend to be able adequately to solve this ontological conundrum, I can at least recognize that the sex experts are, like *Harvey's* protagonist, struggling with reality, but unlike him I think they are not so much overcoming it as being overcome by it.

Hartman and Fithian's morality tale, Carrera's admonishments, and the Zussman's propositions all represent the familiar apocalyptic vision of sex that regularly appears in the women's pages (men read the sport pages). The tone is consistently deploring. Sex therapists and sex educators accurately perceive sexual reality only to reject it. We are told in the most unflattering of terms that we do not take enough time for sex, and that when we do take enough time for it we do it too fast, and that even when we take enough time for it and do it slowly enough, we treat it like an Olympic event.

This is to say that these are not observations of our sexuality that the experts are using to formulate a model of our sexual reality. Such observations cannot be developed further because their effect is to *dismiss* sexual reality. Carrera's comment expresses impatience with people for forgetting the nature and purpose of sex: *people are ruining sex*. Hartman and Fithian show no interest in why the woman they observed suddenly shouted "stop." By irresponsibly injecting a personal note into what Hartman and Fithian like to call the "lovemaking activity," she irreparably jarred it, this result being an object lesson for all of those who would take liberties with sex.

Perhaps more than any other branch of sexology, the professional sex-film movement best captures the way many of those in the field dismiss sexual reality in the name of sexual liberation. The guiding assumption is that people have been taught to say no to sex; this makes them "sex-negative." They must be taught to say yes to sex, to be "sex-positive." They must be taught that sex is not dirty.

Again, the sexologists are only purveying the general consensus. Popular wisdom now has it that sex is not dirty. This proposition is always

presented as a counter-dogma and professional sex-films are unabashedly propagandistic. Booklets accompanying films made by a major sex-film producer are titled the *Yes* books (Multi Media Resource Center, 1972-3). The actors in these films are unfailingly *nice* and the tone is upbeat and cheerful.

With the goals of "permission" and "desensitization," the image of sex presented in these films is one of hearty good fellowship, an image far removed from the threat to civilization that Freud envisioned. Whatever you want to do is *OK* (the only exception being that you should not impose your demands on your partner and should not allow your partner to impose his or her demands on you).

As I put it (Apfelbaum, 1984b, p. 332):

The sexual reality found in professional sex films is a far cry from the sexual reality we all know... What it actually represents is a denial of sexual reality.

The people in professional sex films rarely have sex problems and those they do have are easily solved. They always know what they want and they always ask for it with a smile. They are understanding and patient and never want more than their fair share.

In short, they always say yes. This is not presented as an ideal; it is presented as the way sex *is*, or would be if only people would allow it. There is no evidence of any thought being given to why sex may be considered dirty. The idea is that our guilt about sex and our sexual inhibitions are a historical accident, a vestige of our Puritan and Victorian heritage that has no basis in reality.

The thinking here is slipshod to the point of capriciousness. Sex guilt and sexual inhibitions are world-wide. The sexual restrictions found in China, India, and Russia can hardly be traced to the Puritans and the Victorians. Even the Church Fathers did not originate sex guilt. Indeed, Augustine, in his *City of God* (Book XIV, Chapter 18), argued that he saw evidence of sexual shame all around him (he at least did not dismiss sexual reality, even if he took it too much at face value), and that it was this rather than some purely supernal vision that led him to conclude that sex is inherently shameful.

No one has yet offered a way to reasonably comprehend the idea that sex is dirty. It seems to me that the best way to comprehend it is to think of it as a reaction to the exploitive side of sex, a not inconsiderable side of sexual reality. In this light the counter-dogma that sex is *OK* (not dirty) represents a laundering of sexual reality.

The dirty side of sex is disposed of rather ingenuously in the codicil to the proposition that sex is OK. Recall that it is OK as long as you do not impose your demands on your partner and do not allow your partner to impose his or her demands on you, that is, as long as it is not exploitive. Implicit in this guideline is the assumption that sexual exploitation and the imposition of sexual demands is obvious, conscious, and avoidable—rather than difficult to detect and universal. In other words, sex is clean as long as it is not dirty.

Although this proposition is nonsense on the face of it, it represents a real position. It represents a flat-out dismissal of sexual reality. It means treating rape, harrassment, and other forms of sexual exploitation as distortions of sex rather than as part of what sex really is. This means blaming the victim, especially in the case of the institutionalized soft-rape that is universally part of marital contracts. Thus, a woman in the past was duty-bound to allow herself to be possessed even if the most it could mean to her was thinking of England. Sex was a dirty duty, literally a favor women did for men. Now that sex is to be thought of as not dirty, this woman is expected to enjoy what still is a duty, and if she does not she is found wanting (by herself as well as others). She had no right to complain then and she has no right to complain now.

In the moral perspective of the pre-modern era the unpatriotic Englishwoman (or the one who recognized that this exhortation misrepresented the object of her charity) was considered simply to be mean-spirited. Now (with Freud) we think she is *afraid* of sex, that she is afraid of closeness or of letting go. What gives this conception so much plausibility is the fact that it is descriptively correct.

My contention is that such a woman, to continue with our example, is not literally afraid of sex, however convincingly this may appear to be the case. She is afraid of being inadequate. This is easy to miss because both laypersons and professionals ignore the way that sex is a test of adequacy.

This underlying fear of inadequacy is also easy to miss because there are, of course, always reasons why such a woman is unable or unwilling to fulfill the required role demands. She may have been raised as a strict Catholic, she may have suffered incest, or she may be turned off by her husband. It never is difficult to find such influences and such a woman and any therapist she goes to is quite likely to believe that these influences are the cause of her problem, rather than that they prevent her from being automatically responsive and hence create feelings of inadequacy by making it hard for her to enact her role.

Thus, this woman and her therapist can be expected to believe: (1) that there is no good reason for sexual antipathies, (2) that there is no good reason to experience sex as a test of adequacy, even though (3) they both take it for granted that one's capacity and willingness to fulfill one's sex role is, in actuality, an ultimate test of one's adequacy (maturity). They both think that she should not experience sex as a test, and this is the new test. (Feeling tested may be the most spontaneous of sexual responses, even if it does not fit our fantasy of sexual spontaneity, since it appears to be the most difficult to extinguish.)

Since performing in sex means always saying yes, at least as I have proposed, it should be clear that the Yes books and the yes-films must intensify the pressure to perform, just as sex educators and sex therapists decry the concern with sexual performance while giving rules about how to perform better. Professional sex films are, in effect, training films for the new sex roles.

I single out sexologists not only because they are in the best position to observe sexual reality, but also because more than anyone else they are expected to be able to look at sexual reality without being put off by it. However, I also have been suggesting that everyone dismisses sexual reality.

## **SEX IS COMMUNICATION**

The best example of how we dismiss sexual reality is our new (barely a century old) idea that sex is the best form of communication. Recall that the Zussmans called it the most "intense" form, which presumably means the same thing. Now, what is the reality being dismissed here?

Everyone is well aware of the fact that sex talk is all encouragement and flattery, as I noted above. Outside of that, people can't talk in sex. For example, sex as we know it usually happens in bed just before going to sleep, with the man on top. As likely as not, the woman's head gets pushed up against the headboard or the wall, but she dares not say anything about this because it might interrupt sex, the best form of communication. (With regard to my earlier parallel with infield chatter, it would be as if a ballplayer were to shout to his teammates that it was getting awfully hot in the outfield.)

Now some may object on the ground that sexual communication is nonverbal and so this woman would not be expected to *say* anything; she should communicate her discomfort with body language. So she squirms

uncomfortably and her partner, perceiving her as writhing with pleasure, gives her a few extra shoves.

In fact, in the best representation of sexual reality available in the professional literature, Masters and Johnson (1979, pp. 64-81), reporting on their observations of volunteer couples in the laboratory, found that discomfort was ritualistically concealed. Their sample was composed of 307 committed heterosexual couples, chosen for their freedom from sexual difficulties. The women were often made uncomfortable by the rather abrupt and vigorous way their partners fondled their breasts, especially during their menstrual periods. Although the women admitted their discomfort to Masters and Johnson, on only three occasions (out of thousands of observations) did a woman ask her husband to be more gentle and no woman ever asked her husband to stop. The same problem arose over early and deep digital penetration of the vagina by their husbands, as well as overly vigorous clitoral manipulation.

The husbands were, if anything, even less likely than their wives to communicate dissatisfaction. The most frequent complaint made to Masters and Johnson by the husbands was that their wives did not grasp the shaft of the penis tightly enough. Not one of the men had ever mentioned this to his wife either during the period of observation or at any other time.

The level of communication is perhaps best conveyed by the report that although it invariably was the man who decided when to penetrate, all the men were under the impression that it was in some sense a mutual decision since, as the investigators learned from interviewing them, they only went ahead "when she was wet." In their discussion of this finding, Masters and Johnson point out that lubrication signifies only the capacity for penetration, not the desire.

Although the husbands were conspicuously unable accurately to perceive their wives' states of mind, what was most revealing was the husbands' belief that their perceptions *were* accurate despite the obvious ambiguity they were faced with. They asked no questions. Yet they were consistently oblivious to their wives' discomfort even though the women's pained grimaces were plainly visible to the observers. The men assumed their wives were enjoying it and few of the women punctured this illusion. When the men were interviewed afterward they expressed surprise to learn of their wives' discomfort and the unanimous reaction was, "Why didn't she tell me?" The answer to this should have been, "She didn't *tell* you because sex is the best form of communication."

Needless to say, the question "Why didn't she tell me?" was asked with some asperity rather than with genuine curiosity. The men acted as if they had never heard that sex is communication. They were no more interested in discovering what the women were actually experiencing than Hartman and Fithian were interested in discovering why the woman they were observing shouted "stop." The show must go on.

The men just wanted to know how to make the women satisfyingly responsive. This is the sex-as-duty paradigm. The idea is that the women owe them the response they need. It is not a matter of simple suzerainty since the men feel bound to meet the women's needs, as I have already noted. Perhaps what has happened is that the new mutuality is still understood from within the old paradigm, meaning that sex is now organized as a ritual of *mutual* possession.

It may seem that these findings and impressions concerning heterosexuality are not applicable to homosexuality and especially not to the paraphilias (perversions) in which there is no partner. To adequately treat this potential objection I should first point out that these forms of sexuality have typically been treated as irrelevant to any consideration of what sex is. They are treated as inconsequential aberrations (or worse) partly because they do not fit the procreational model, but primarily because they are threatening departures from the roles everyone relies on (to pick examples at random, the pre-Columbian Peruvians dragged homosexuals through the streets at the end of a rope, hanged, and burned them; the Aztecs disemboweled them, Tannahill, 1980, pp. 293f).

Krafft-Ebing, in his influential *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), only mirrored everyone's gothic imaginings about "degenerates" (the perversions were the breakdown products of neural-moral degeneration). In view of this, it was quite remarkable for Freud (1905) to look at *Psychopathia Sexualis* and, rather than being repelled by it, to even be able to see himself in Krafft-Ebing's gallery of grotesques, the result being his conception that each of the paraphilias represents a component of normal sexuality, rather than a perverse or distorted form of normal sexuality. Freud postulated that these components then work together in most of us to create an ensemble that represents a balancing off of all the component impulses. Thus, we can learn about the components of our own sexuality from these specialists.

What can we learn? Freud thought we could learn about components of the sexual instinct, but in Freud's time the search was on for biological causes, a reaction to the reckless purposivism of the earlier "Nature-philosophy," a vitalistic, mystical movement in which both organismic and cosmic events were seen as governed by supra-organic influences. In

those more innocent times, biology appeared to offer a safe refuge from such irresponsible speculation.

However, we need not be dependent on Freud's answers to use his insight that the paraphilias offer clues to the components of everyone's sexuality. They can be understood as ways both to meet sexual-role pressures (to perform) as well as to escape these pressures. Thus in S&M or B&D sex the roles are clearly set out in advance, as is the whole scenario, a scenario that escapes the requirement to be mutually affirmative. The compulsion to act appreciative is entirely disposed of.

Although other of the paraphilias appear to lack an object, they can be seen as versions of sex-as-possession. Exhibitionists, voyeurs, and fetishists are all men (as are almost all child molesters) and their sex pattern is essentially an exaggeration of this essential component of male sexuality. It is as if they possess what they *can*.

Similarly, this element of male sexuality is exaggerated in homosexual men. Here I refer to cruising, to the bath and toilet scene (with its glory holes), and to contacts with large numbers of partners (in a 1982 study of AIDS victims, the centers for Disease Control in Atlanta found that the median number of sexual partners these men had in their lifetimes was 1100; a few of the men reported as many as 20,000).

Similarly, lesbians typically engage in romantic and tender sex. When compared with gay men, the contrast exaggerates that found between straight men and women. Thus it is possible to lay some claim to generality for the proposition that what we now find in sex is people who either play out a ritual of mutual possession or who are refugees from it.

The way the new paradigm has been understood in terms of the old is best captured by Hartman and Fithian's recommendations (above) regarding proper sexual conduct. Had they been writing in the pre-modern era they would not have been at all hesitant about offering rules of conduct. There was no other approach; all problems in relationships were solved by proposing rules of conduct and the experts never tired of telling us how to behave. Hartman and Fithian would simply have said that a lady just does not express unseemly sentiments during sex since this can be highly vexatious for the gentleman concerned. No one would have wondered what feelings she had to suppress and at what cost. Self-actualization, authenticity, and mutuality, in whatever rudimentary forms they existed were taken simply as self-indulgences that one should have the strength of character to restrain.



But nowadays things are not so easy for arbiters of sexual conduct. Now we worry, in a word, that the lady will be uptight. So Hartman and Fithian recommend "Accentuating the Positive—Always Saying Yes" (this is the heading under which their cautionary tale is presented), but only by saying yes to "activities which they [sex partners] do enjoy" and "to which they, with complete abandon, can say yes because they are genuinely enjoying those activities." In other words, sex is communication, but only if what you want to communicate is unconditional acceptance.

Hartman and Fithian risk redundancy (complete abandon implies genuine enjoyment) to make it clear that they do not intend to offer rules of conduct. They want people to follow their recommendations *spontaneously*. In other words, what this ontological struggle represents is the new paradigm caught in the death grip of the old. We are being admonished for treating sex as a test of adequacy, thereby instituting a new criterion of sexual adequacy, the ability to treat sex as if, in the Zussman's words, "there are no rules or standards," and in Carrera's words, to follow our "own inclinations" rather than to measure ourselves "against outside standards." And, it is to be hoped, Hartman and Fithian's woman who shouted stop will in the future follow the rules with complete abandon.

What we're being accused of is inadequacy—in meeting the new performance criteria. If this were not so, the experts wouldn't be *dismissing* reality; they would be interested in it. They would be thinking less about "momentum" and more about what those who would interrupt sex need to say. This is to say that they would be less dominated by the biological mystique, with its assumptions of fixed patterns and roles, a conception that much better fit a time when all our patterns and roles were divinely inspired.

Thus, in their present mode sex therapists and sex educators do no more than purvey the popular consensus. They preserve the paradox created by the possession-consciousness on the one hand and the insistence on mutuality that characterize contemporary verities. Ideally, sexologists will soon begin to entertain sexual reality rather than to dismiss it, with the exciting consequence that we might then begin to approach the genuine mutuality made possible by our democratic institutions, and to reclaim another bit of our natures from the *ausland*.

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