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Aurel Kolnai was born in 1900 into a well-to-do Hungarian Jewish family, and converted to Catholicism when he was a young scholar in Vienna. He had some involvement in the early psychoanalytic movement and was also influenced by the phenomenological methods of Edmund Husserl. The present work was originally published in German in 1930.

The fundamental premise of the book is that sexuality is a sphere with its own unique and intrinsic ethical values. Kolnai was essentially not content with arguments in the sphere of sexual morality that explained the immorality of certain practices with reference to the material harm that they might cause. Rather his claim is that the damage is to the inherent value and significance of our sexual being and actions, and that this is the valid source of our ethical disapproval. For Kolnai it is significant that sexuality is often associated in popular thought with morality tout court, and he suggests that this is because of its association with notions such as defilement and purity: notions which touch on our deepest, if most poorly understood, conceptions of human existence.

For Kolnai, a person’s sexual comportment is a valid index of their general ethical status because sexuality is not merely an optional compartment of life, but an element in its very existential structure. In short, sexual ethics is constitutive of our deepest moral being. The first and most obvious point to be made about sexuality is that it involves pleasure -- pleasure centered on orgasm whether realized or desired. Kolnai uses the term ‘voluptuousness’ to summaries the kind of pleasure that is involved here. What makes voluptuousness ethically significant is that it is a threat to the self-possession and integrity of the personality. Although there is ‘self-intensification’, there is also ‘self-surrender’. One ‘drowns’ in voluptuousness and is drawn by it to internal anarchy, and "sexual pleasure is regarded as something which extremely easily and quickly becomes sinful" (43, italics in original).

Kolnai finds sex fearful and inherently problematic as it demolishes the 'boundaries' between body and spirit (where by 'spirit' he means not just the mental and emotional, but also the intellectual and characterological qualities that make us the persons we are). "The self-surrender of spirit to body has a simply overwhelming, totalizing character, with a hint of..."
finality. Its reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy contains a serious ethical minus (65). With this as a premise it is hardly surprising that Kolnai should characterize sexual ethics as primarily focused upon prohibition, control and restraint.

Kolnai goes on to assert that the inherent function of sexuality is union with the other sex. There is stress here on the 'otherness' of the other sex, by which he means both strangeness and completion. Kolnai's world is resolutely filled with men and women with distinct roles to play. There are but two sexes and they exist for each other.

Kolnai's third premise is that the purpose of sexual union is procreation. He does not require that this be a conscious intention or assert that conscious intentions are a mere epiphenomenon of a deeper biological drive (as Schopenhauer had argued), but that procreation is the function of sexuality and thus sets up the parameters for any sexual ethics.

Kolnai's arguments would cause outrage amongst feminists or anyone opposed to essentialist doctrines of human nature. He describes essential differences between men and women in terms that reflect the different roles they play in sexual intercourse and in bourgeois domesticity. Men's sexual desires are for intense, penetrative orgasms, while women experience a more diffuse form of desire and fulfill themselves through their men (bear in mind that this was written before Simone de Beauvoir put pen to paper). Given that the function of sex is procreation, men can be less responsible since they only need to deposit their seed, while women are destined to fulfill nurturing responsibilities. Man is the 'natural leader' and is a more 'centrifugal' figure than woman. Kolnai denies that such hierarchies imply degradation or slavery for women since women have a treasured 'elevated position' in the sphere of 'mood' (84). Kolnai does not say that women should fulfill the duties of domesticity only, but he does say that chastity has a deeper and more urgent meaning for them. Women should not be too overtly sexual, but, to be even handed, men too must control their sexual proclivities.

Kolnai affirms that conjugal love in the context of marriage is the norm, and that departures from this norm are sinful in a variety of degrees. In this context, he discusses the problem of fidelity, prostitution, perversions, solitary sex, homosexuality, fetishism, sadism and masochism. He also discusses the virtue of modesty and makes some remarks about pornography. Given his fundamental premise that the inherent purpose of sexuality, if not the specific intent of sexual agents, is procreation, it will come as no surprise that he regards all sexual activity which is not inherently procreative in form -- that is, which is not of a kind that could produce offspring -- as unethical deviations. He does distinguish departures from the norm which violate the ideal of marriage, such as extra-marital sex, infidelity and heterosexual libertinism, from 'perversions', in that the former do at least respect the inherent demand that sex consist of the genital coming together of a man and a woman. Kolnai is suspicious too, of making sex too great an element in a lived life and considers that a balance must be struck between it and other concerns. While advocating abstinence as the sole valid alternative to married love, he is sensitive to the stresses it can cause when not inspired by, for example, religious devotion.

Kolnai's comments on the intimate two-way relation between sex and love within conjugal relationships are also of considerable interest. While he gives sustained attention to the 'spiritual' dimension of love and sex, and tries to uncover their psychological and phenomenological meanings, he is still held captive by the assertion of the procreative function of sex. This prevents him from seeing sex primarily as an expression of love and as a means for the enhancement of love. Although he does not discuss non-coital sex within a conjugal context, it must be assumed that he would find it ethically wanting.

The final section of the book concerns the relations between sexual morality and society. Here it is argued that sexual mores are a legitimate concern for society in that one's social standing is a function of one's adherence to the sexual standards operative in society. Sex is not just a matter of individual virtue but also of social dignity. While he agrees that the law should be very circumspect in the regulation of sexual practices, he also argues that sexuality is so central to the general conduct and character of people's lives that it cannot be of merely private and individual import. The distinction, beloved of liberals, between the private and the public spheres is seen by him as an abrogation of responsibility on the part of the community. Particularly central to the ethical quality of a community is the 'honor' attaching to the sexual probity of its women. Accordingly, Kolnai is very uncomfortable with, though not entirely unsympathetic to, the claims of feminism as he understands them. He has no such ambivalence, however, about the evils of homosexuality and insists that such practices should continue to be illegal. It will come as no surprise that he sees the family as central to society and his insistence that birth-control is a moral evil. He concludes his book with insightful remarks about the broader cultural changes of modernization resulting from the mechanization of life that he sees around him: changes that make it more difficult to give to sex the 'weight' that he thinks it demands.

While I admire the depth and scope of Kolnai's writing I have considerable difficulty...
with the philosophical groundings of his position, and hence with the conclusions he draws. He never challenges the conservative intuitions of his bourgeois social milieu. First, he seems unable to shake off the Platonism inherent in his Catholic background. By Platonism I understand not only the distinction between the body and spirit that structures Kolnai’s thought, but even more the valorization of spirit over body. It is his distrust of the body that leads to the fundamental premise that sex is inherently dangerous and in need of control.

Second, although Kolnai offers us rich modes of description and sensitive discriminations between the ethical qualities of differing practices in differing contexts, he is nevertheless captive to a kind of act-essentialism which is characteristic of Catholic moral theology and the tradition of natural law. What I mean by act-essentialism is the view that moral quality attaches to actions by virtue of the kinds of actions that they are and the kinds of goals that are inherent in them. This abstracts from the agent and his or her motivations, and it abstracts from the context and circumstances in which the action takes place. Even though Kolnai tries to take these latter matters into account -- as, for example, when he says that even marriage can partake of the ethical qualities of prostitution in certain circumstances -- he nevertheless finds himself able to say that marriage is, in itself, the best form of sexual liaison, and homosexuality is, in itself, a morally negative departure from the norm. The basis for these and his other claims is, once again, the essentialist doctrines that the function of sex is procreation, and hence that its ideal form is the genital penetration of a woman by a man within marriage.

The question that needs to be asked of such theories is whether a function can be tied so closely to an activity. Evolutionary biology has taught us that the link between a biological process and its function is a contingent product of chance. This point becomes especially salient when that function has been given human cultural significance. And even if a function were inherently linked to process, would it follow that this should attain normative importance? When arguing that birth-control is prima facie immoral on the grounds that it frustrates the inherent function of sex, Kolnai uses the analogy of a delicious meal and says that it cannot be understood without reference to the nutritive effect of food. But, if this analogy were pressed we would have to conclude that enjoying such a meal for its epicurean qualities, and at a time when we were not hungry, would be sinful. We might as well argue that, because language evolved in such a way as to make pragmatic communication possible, small talk and literature are sinful.

The gap at the core of Kolnai’s thesis is that, despite his acknowledgement that sex has an importance that is sui generis, he makes no attempt to explore phenomenologically what this importance is. Despite his frequent allusion to the spiritual dimension of sex he nowhere attempts to describe what this is except with reference to its procreative function, and to its link to the concepts of impurity and defilement. The promise of the phenomenological and descriptive methodology is not fulfilled because of his acknowledged adherence to Catholicism and his unacknowledged adherence to early twentieth century bourgeois conceptions of respectable behavior.

The decision to offer in English, for the first time, a book written by a middle ranking European intellectual of the interwar years leads me to ask for whom this book would be of interest. It may interest historians of ideas, but too much has changed in the material conditions and social attitudes relating to sexuality for it to be of much relevance to contemporary theorists, or therapists, in the area of sexuality. At best, it may be useful for setting an agenda for further study and research.

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