

Beyond Reason and Desire: Political thought and the problem of sex

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Published under:

- [desire](#) [1]
- [erotics](#) [2]
- [family](#) [3]
- [other](#) [4]
- [philosophy](#) [5]
- [porn](#) [6]
- [pornography](#) [7]
- [reason](#) [8]
- [Read](#) [9]

Western political theorists avoid considering the ways individuals find meaning in the sexual body. Even those who defend pornography focus on the threat of censorship, not on the positive meanings of pornographic representation.



Consider the film *American Beauty*. It tells the story of a middle aged man's erotic infatuation with a teenager. As his ordinary life of family and work breaks apart, the fantasy of completion, of a perfect meaning achieved through an erotic engagement with the other, comes to dominate his life. He sets about to reform his body, to shape it, in preparation for the erotic encounter that will itself provide a meaning that transcends his ordinary experience. Yet, at the moment when he can move from voyeur to actor, he discovers that he cannot be other than the father he already is. The fantasy of action collapses when words are spoken. The erotic becomes a kind of detour of self-discovery that allows him to affirm again his actual life.

Unfortunately, Western political theorists politely avoid considering the ways in which an individual finds meaning in and through the sexual body. They tend to regard all things having to do with the body as merely private matters. The result has been a failure to understand either

love or eroticism. Indeed, even those who defend pornography focus on the threat of state censorship, not on the positive meanings of the pornographic representation.

If we turn from modern theory to classical sources, however, we find a far richer reflection on the meanings to be found in and through the sexual body. They describe a distinction between what I will call the erotic and the loving subject. The former is represented in the pornographic, the latter in the family. Neither of these understandings of the body appears to the modern political theorist. Nevertheless, both are essential to the individual's sense of self and both are deeply implicated in the individual's relationship to the political community.

The Familial Versus the Erotic

When we describe ourselves, we ordinarily refer first to family. Before any other set of meanings appears, we find ourselves already within a world of family. Family is the site of birth and death, of childhood and parenthood. It organizes the comings and goings of life itself; it is the site of our deepest emotional attachments, of the success or failure of love. Family is, fundamentally, an organization of sexuality, of bodies understood in their reproductive capacities. This capacity is necessarily of interest to the state. Indeed, through family we ordinarily establish our connection to the state.

Of course, not every family produces children, and families should not be held to some standard of child production. But family members, even if only the married couple, are not just close friends. Family is the politically domesticated form of sexuality. This is true whether or not the family is formally recognized at law. The family maintains a set of meanings that control the explosive potential of sex, turning it toward the necessary role of social and physical reproduction. Family links labor to love.

The body appears first of all, and most of the time, as representative of institutions, connections, and practices that link us to others. We read ourselves as citizens, parents, children, or producers and consumers in a complex economy. We explain who we are by pointing to these structures of meaning that appear in and through the body. From citizen soldier, to assembly line worker, to familial matron, the body gains its meaning from its function in social structures that represent temporally extended projects. Not so the erotic. In the erotic, we take back the body from its ordinary condition in which it is read as a representation of meanings outside of itself.

Just as family provides a way to read the body's sexuality, so too does the erotic. By the erotic, I refer not just to sexual passion, but to a structure of meaning by which we make sense of that passion as it is represented, for example, in the romantic and the pornographic. The familial and the erotic are a linked pair; each understands itself in opposition to the other.

The erotic derives its meaning in substantial part from what it is not. To begin with, the erotic excludes children. I don't mean children as in child pornography. I mean children as the ordinary consequence of human sexuality. The erotic begins with a severing of sex from generation, of sexuality from reproduction. This severing can certainly occur within the married couple. Indeed, I imagine most couples imagine themselves as regular co-conspirators in the pornographic. Second, the erotic excludes politics. The erotic tale is a kind of morality play in which the state

does not appear. If politics does appear in the erotic narration, it is there only to make the point that the politician too is deeply attracted by the erotic. Think of the President turning the Oval Office into a secret bedroom.

The two absences, of children and of politics, are related. The erotic shears sexuality of the generative characteristics of the body. It is episodic; it exists neither as a form of historical memory nor as a claim upon the future. Its only temporal condition is the present. Thus, the erotic act produces no offspring: no children, no discourse, no enduring relationship to an other. The characteristic erotic plot is that of the subject making a claim to possession of his or her body against the ordinary institutions of power: family, government, and markets.

Erotics as Antipolitics

If we understand history as the organization of power in the familiar forms of family and polity, then the erotic is a response to the burdens of history. The erotic denies the historical character of power. And, ultimately, the erotic denies our own finitude. It does not recognize aging. No one is ever too old for the erotic. In a kind of parody of power over death, it incorporates a death like experience into the erotic moment. Figuratively, orgasm, as a moment of fulfillment and needlessness, becomes a metaphor for death. This metaphor stands opposed to that of sexual intercourse as knowledge: shared knowledge generates community.

The erotic act represents the possibility of achieving meaning wholly within the parameters of the body. It celebrates the body for its own potential fullness of meaning. The body is represented as "in need", but those needs are met by the body's own resources. No labor is required to achieve this ideal of fulfillment.

This representation of the body is deeply antipolitical. It is not, however, antisocial. In the erotic world, individuals relate to each other as possessors of bodies that are mutual sources of instantaneous fulfillment. Unlike the political body, the erotic body does not reach out symbolically toward the past or the future. The antipolitics of the erotic exists only in the present; it disavows any need for, or interest in, history; it sees the future only as an endless opportunity for more of the same.

The erotic has no need of language because it is a claim that the body can constitute its own meanings. We do not bring arguments of justification or even explanation to the erotic. An anthropology of the erotic would always be in danger of becoming an instance of the pornographic. Consider that icon of adolescent sexuality: National Geographic. Because meaning collapses into act, we are fundamentally voyeurs with respect to the erotic. We do not engage it dialogically, but watch in our own form of speechlessness.

Were we actually to argue for the erotic as a form of freedom, we would convert it into something else: It would itself be transformed into yet another political movement subject to the same historical conditions as every other form of politics.

Eroticism as a Form of Freedom

Much of what I have said explains the attraction of the pornographic. Even liberals who defend the pornographic as a matter of law do not defend its message. Implicitly, they accept the legal characterization of the obscene as "utterly without social value." To be without social value, however, may be a way of opposing social values. That opposition to the social is one representation of freedom.

Pornography is a particularly male form of the erotic, but we have no reason to think that this message of freedom from the burdens of history is of any less interest to women. Take, for example, the sexual fantasies portrayed in romance novels. Where are children, politics, markets? Where is death, or even aging? Romance shares with the pornographic the claim that a life can be complete, full of meaning, and through the singular experience of the other.

In the modern age, the erotic provides us with the ecstatic moment shorn of religion. It stands in the antipolitical tradition of the sacred. The sacred too can displace ordinary forms of language. In another age and another culture, the moment of spiritual rapture and complete identification with the oneness of the universe—Freud's oceanic feeling—was a counterpoint to the political. The erotic takes up this imagery of rebirth, but the new birth is wholly within the boundaries of the physical body. We should not be surprised that as the possibilities of religious transcendence diminish, the pornographic moment becomes the locus of an antistatist vision of freedom.

We view the erotic as a kind of entertainment, but it is a deadly serious entertainment. It is about the denial of death, the state, the family, history, and even language. In the erotic moment, we find release from responsibility. Responsibility is an acknowledgment of the claims that others have upon the self. To the erotic imagination such claims appear to diminish the self. Ethically, we see the erotic as a kind of immorality. Nevertheless, as in *American Beauty*, a life fully constituted by responsibilities can lead to desperation as the self completely loses a center.

The erotic representation is most often embedded in a larger morality play in which family is affirmed, and, through family, the ordinary forms of the political and social order remain intact. The erotic becomes a moment of "self-discovery", which makes possible the reaffirmation of traditional values of family and polity. For example, President Clinton refers to his Lewinsky "transgression" as a lesson for his own moral improvement. The erotic is represented as a detour or a deviation that does not fit into our ordinary time, but does ultimately reconcile us to the life we live. This is not a demand of the erotic itself, but a demand of our ordinary moral and political life. It is the co-optation of the erotic.

Two Halves of the Whole

The linkage of the pornographic and the romantic imaginations is the lesson of one of the most powerful representations of the meaning of sexuality that we find in the Western tradition: Aristophanes' myth of the circle men in Plato's *Symposium*. Originally, he tells us, people were "nothing like we are now." Instead, they were circular. Each was composed of two equal halves; each pairing was either of members of the same or of different sexes. Homosexuality is just as grounded in our original nature as heterosexuality. Out of "arrogance", these circle people tried to "set upon the gods." In response, Zeus split them in half. Each of us today is only a half of a

whole. Eros is the desire to return to that original state of completeness through a recoupling with our other half.

In Aristophanes' myth, the aim of the erotic relationship extends no further than the experience of the beloved. In and through each other, lovers find the completion that was their former selves. Eros is neither about children nor about the simple satisfaction of physical desire; it is about an experience of meaning in and through a union with a particular other who is our mythical other half. Aristophanes' recovered lovers are speechless. Those who find their proper halves are wondrously thrilled with affection and intimacy and love, though they could not even say what they would have of one another. Language is incommensurate with this experience of fullness. Eros is not only outside of language, it is outside of time. This is represented symbolically in Hephaestus' offer to weld the lovers together so that "you can live your two lives in one, and, when the time comes, you can die a common death." Time stops for the lover and the beloved.

Children are irrelevant in Aristophanes' account. Lovers find their completion in each other, not in what they produce. Children are represented as merely an incidental byproduct of this search for completeness: "In all these clippings and claspings (if) a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place and the race would be continued." Similarly, work within the ordinary operations of the city is outside of the domain of eros: "If man should conjugate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention and his energies to the everyday affairs of life." City and family are both matters of indifference to lover and beloved.

At issue is the reading of the body, which Aristophanes tells us presents itself as a gaping wound. We find ourselves as if we are injured, and our deepest need is to make ourselves whole. Wounded, Aristophanes' circle people nevertheless have in their relationship to each other, all of the resources they need. To experience the beloved is to lack nothing and thus to be ready to die.

Blurring Line Between Romance and Pornography

Aristophanes' myth is simultaneously a romantic and a pornographic representation. The same set of meanings is present in the most romantic play of our tradition, *Romeo and Juliet*. Here too, the attraction of the lovers for each other is without explanation. It comes over them as if it were a realization of meaning inherited from a primordial past; a response to a wordless need, without justification in their ordinary experience. We find the traditional linkage of family and polity: The polity domesticates sexuality through the form of the family and thereby assures its own continuation. Romance cannot justify itself against the demands of family and state; it exists in another dimension. Yet not to acknowledge the demand of the beloved would be to live a life, no matter how successful in ordinary terms, of endless need, and ultimately of profound meaninglessness. What do the lovers want? To be bound to each other forever. There is no turn toward generation of either a new familial order or a new political order. And to be bound to each other forever is just what they achieve. The real appearance of this romantic fantasy is death, not the death as life in Aristophanes' myth, but real death delivered by those instruments of power that control our ordinary experience: family and polity.

The blurring of the line between romance and the pornographic remains true of both genres today. They seem to differ in that the romantic claims that there is a unique beloved, while the pornographic is unconcerned with particularity. Yet, if the romantic other appears without explanation, without cause in our ordinary experience, then there is no distance between the one and the many. Both the romantic and the pornographic make a claim to meaning through the "stranger", who appears as if from nowhere. Each is a flight from labor and time.

Bible Stories

Compare these myths of the erotic to the sexual body in *Genesis*. There, we find a strikingly different understanding. Yet, it is again one that is deeply at odds with liberalism. The Garden of Eden is a place without sexual shame or distinction between family and public life.

Adam and Eve are represented initially as living in a timeless present of reciprocal fulfillment. They become "one flesh". Sexuality has not yet entered the domain of morality; there is no shame. Neither has it entered the domain of time. There are no children. The image is very similar to that of Aristophanes' circle men. It is an image of complete fullness in and through the other—the ideal of the erotic.

To eat of the tree of knowledge is to bring on the problem of labor. To have knowledge of good and evil is to be subject to the pain of labor. To know the good is to have to struggle to achieve it. The fact of labor—reproductive and material—characterizes a life bound to time: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." To labor to produce the good, in the face of one's own finitude, is the problem for man. There is always a sense that the erotic, which produces nothing, is beyond good and evil.

These ideas are sharpened considerably in the story of Abraham. Abram and Sara cannot have children prior to the covenant. In return for entering the covenant, God promises Abram that he will found a great nation. The nation is simultaneously a political and familial idea. Both family and polity must mean something; each must embody an idea. Here, the founding idea is simply that of the covenant. Again, we see that the family is the product of labor, not nature, and all labor depends upon an idea of the good.

The Abraham story carries this concept of embodiment significantly further. It tells us that the nation must be borne directly on the body. The covenant requires circumcision: "So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant." The flesh itself must appear as a text. Naked, man still finds himself a representation of the covenant. The erotic body of the time before the Fall is denied any presence.

This same theme is suggested in the destruction of Sodom, where we find a link between corrupt sexuality and corrupt politics. Sodom represents a failure in the construction of political history. That failure stems from the corruption of sexuality, vividly portrayed in the attempted rape of the messengers of God by the men of Sodom. The covenant with God, which makes possible a meaningful history, is embodied in the sexuality of the family. This is what Abraham achieves as a result of the covenant; it is what Sodom lacks.

The story of Sodom is more than a tale of divine intervention. It also suggests the continuing dangers of sexuality. Alternative readings of the body and of its sexuality are never fully suppressed. They remain there to challenge the political meanings of family. What after all is Sodom but a vision of the pornographic as a representation of a kind of political freedom.

In *Genesis*, then, we find a claim that the body must be read in a divine language. There is no domain of the private family held out as separate from politics, because both family and polity embody an idea of the sacred. This does not make either family or state any less the domain of love. Rather, both are love's proper domain. The sacrifice of Isaac is so powerful an image because he is the much loved child of Abraham and Sara.

Powerful Promises of the Erotic

These classical accounts of family and polity resist two moves essential to the assumptions behind Western political theory. First, they resist the temptation to begin with the desiring individual as the elementary unit of explanation. Instead, these accounts begin with an idea of man as a user and producer of symbols. Second, they resist the division between the public and the private. For liberalism, the problem is to generate the public order out of private interests. The private, on the other hand, needs no explanation. In the classical accounts, familial and political life intersect at the point of production of the next generation. Children are no more private than public.

The consequence of these dual assumptions of liberalism—that of metaphysical individualism and the primacy of the private—is a failure to understand the character of love. Love links us with others because it shows us a world that is ours. That world claims us not because it somehow appears independently worthy of our love, but because it is who we are. A full life is one that has been full of love. With that, we point to the most basic structures of our ordinary experience: family and community. Love is not bound by these terms, but surely it starts here.

Despite our deep and loving attachments to others through the structures of our ordinary experience, a part of the self believes that the truth of our condition is never found within the ordinary. We feel family and state as labor. We cannot detach love from labor. We long for the erotic fulfillment in and through the body. We want to be captivated by a meaning that is complete in the instant.

We agree with Aristophanes that life is too hard and long to transcend the conditions of our own finitude. More than that, we do achieve the erotic moment. We do forget our ordinary selves, our commitments to family and community. But we never forget for long. We are thrown back into the burdens of production of self and others. We wake up as if from a dream, and take up again the labor of loving.

From within the polity and family, the madness of the erotic itself promises only death. This is the lesson of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *Anna Karenina*, and even of *American Beauty*. The lesson must be learned again and again for we cannot do without the promised freedom of the erotic. It is, however, a lesson that most modern political thinkers cannot learn.



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- [desire](#)
- [erotics](#)
- [family](#)
- [other](#)
- [philosophy](#)
- [porn](#)
- [pornography](#)
- [reason](#)