

The Romantic Myth of 'Making Love'

James Earl

Thank you. I'm James Earl. I teach philosophy at The American University in Richmond, and I'm a relationship counsellor in private practice.

In this paper I will be arguing that the romantic idea of **sex as an expression of love**, leads, very often, to a sense of confusion, frustration and failure in couples. I'll try and explain why this idea doesn't work, why we nonetheless hang on to it, and I will propose a slightly different way of thinking about sex in long-term relationships.

The most common problem in couples I work with is where the desire of one or both individuals has faded, and sex become dull, infrequent or stopped altogether.

In the past I have, I'm sure rather unhelpfully, reframed this failure for them as a kind of success: success in building a safe and secure sense of home for themselves, where warmth and stability are in inverse proportion to erotic tension. This was usually met - quite rightly - with some version of 'ok, but can't I have my cake and eat it?'

This admittedly clumsy reframing at least had the virtue of introducing clients to the concept of tug-of-war between two equal but opposing wants: love and desire, stability and excitement, which are essentially two ways of breathing, difficult to perform together: one the long sigh of contentment and the other the sharp intake of surprise.

Two popular accounts of this tug-of-war can be found in the late Stephen Mitchell's excellent *Can Love Last?* and the better known *Mating in Captivity* by Esther Perel. They are to my mind both descriptions of a problem, But it's not the problem, that in my view, lies at the heart of this common loss of desire.

Mating in Captivity is actually, to my mind, a sophisticated reworking of the boredom hypothesis: a description of desire weighed down by domesticity. This is a superficially persuasive idea, and it might be seen to explain the amazing popularity of affairs which, by definition, are unhinged - unhinged into domestic routine (Relate estimates that 80% of long-term relationships involve infidelity). It may also accord with our individual experience: I'm sure all of us have wondered whether we really want to snog the face off someone we just went to Sainsbury's with.

But it seems to me to be a weak explanation, because if it were true it would seem to apply only to this one human appetite, sex. If I am never going to be bored with Lebanese food, or Rembrandt self-portraits, or Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, why should I become bored with the sex I used to enjoy with a partner?

Maybe this particular appetite, sex, is different? Is it by its very nature restless, always seeking the new? - an insatiability, relentlessly seeking the unknown?

I think Esther Perel implicitly advocates this romantic, restless notion of the erotic: she suggests creating space between the individuals in a couple, trying to find to a new 'newness', and fostering a sense of not-knowing.

I'm not at all sure this is necessary, even supposing it is possible. One female client summed it up dismissively to me, like this: 'oh, I see, in addition to everything else - being his best friend, co-parent, business partner - now she's telling me I have to be *mysterious* too!'

While it is undoubtedly a good thing for the individuals in a couple to be strong and independent, and to create space, I don't believe *mystery* is the prescription for curing fading desire in long-term relationships.

If we consider any individual's private erotic thoughts, feelings and fantasies, - or our own - I would suggest we find not so much a *restless* eroticism, but a *remarkably consistent* eroticism.

By this I mean the *themes* in sexual fantasy which excite us remain relatively consistent across most people's lives. If BDSM is erotic to you when you're 20, it is likely to remain the same when you're 50 - conversely, if the fantasy of a threesome didn't excite you when you were younger, it is unlikely to excite you when you are older.

This is not to say our erotic tastes are entirely static, but it is to say we have a sexuality that is individual to each of us, and which appears to do a job of work for us: it is, in this sense, a therapeutic part of us. Michael Bader in his excellent book *Arousal* shows how the individual fantasies of each one of us relate to our early experiences, either as defences against shame or guilt, or as a way of treating early, painful emotional experiences and replaying them as pleasurable ones.

From pain to pleasure, tragedy to triumph, discomfort to delight. For example: a child who felt not listened to, helpless in the face of their family's stronger will, might grow up to wanting full control in their lives, but simultaneously enjoy a submissive role in the bedroom, recreating the painful early experience and injecting it with erotic pleasure. This thesis I think explains the common appearance of inversion in sexual fantasy.

Another example: the child who felt the parental bond was stronger - either in passion or perhaps aggression - than their own relationship with the parents, may feel excluded, and experience a longing for the *other* relationship. The adult then creates an unconscious therapeutic re-engagement with the pain of being on the outside in the fantasy of voyeurism. Watching becomes more exciting than doing.

There is of course no guaranteed one-to-one mapping between types of early emotional dilemma and adult sexual fantasy, but in general we can say that our sexuality is expressive of our emotional past and often the pain in it.

This explains why we rarely become bored with our own private erotic material, despite the fact that this material remains consistent: because our erotic fantasies and preferences are, if you like, ongoing treatment plans.

From this perspective, the boredom hypothesis seems even *less* likely.

This gives us the hint to what is going on in long-term relationships. It is not boredom, but the experience of a disjunction between our own sexuality, and our actual sexual activity with a partner.

This is not obvious at the beginning of the relationship, when we are caught up in erotic novelty. It kicks in when novelty can no longer carry the show.

The slow decline of novelty-eroticism is accompanied by a gradual re-emergence of individual sexualities. At this point it would be really useful for a couple to start talking about how they might share a playfulness around their sexual difference. However, it is exactly at this point that we are traduced by the 'making love' model, which ignores what might be a natural evolution from erotic novelty to erotic difference, and sells us the idea of *merging in sex to express our deepening love*.

'Making love' takes top place in a depressing moral hierarchy of sex. It is the most proper kind of sex, expressing a mystic union of two people.

Lower down the hierarchy is just 'having sex' or shagging. You can do this with anyone who consents, and love is superfluous - so it is inherently animalistic and shallow.

Lowest of the low is masturbation which, although it gets called coyly 'self-love' evidently lacks both love, and even the redeeming presence of another person.

In fact, from our previous analysis, this hierarchy makes absolutely no sense: not only is the attempt to merge in making love extremely unlikely to succeed, but also the low place accorded to masturbation takes us yet further from acknowledging our individual sexual needs.

And this is what many couples experience - a failure in their ability to authentically use sex to make love, which nonetheless appears as the moral imperative, and therefore a duty; while simultaneously shamefully aware of their own, unintegrated, erotic needs.

Often, in time, one or both parties will desexualise themselves to accommodate the disjunction. Others will split - reliving the intensity of novelty-eroticism by having an affair - or by developing secret fantasy lives where private erotic needs get partially met. Both strategies are immensely popular. Some braver couples try open relationships: which unlike the affair is agreed-to novelty. A few give up long-term relationships and try *constant* novelty, which of course in the end stops being novel. But very few try - or are encouraged - or given the tools - to explore sexual difference as a profound new stage of their relationship.

Our wedded-ness to this moral hierarchy of sex with which we, as therapists, can unconsciously collude, is the product of many things: from Church teaching - which, when it is not pre-occupied by the one thing almost all of us are trying to avoid, reproduction, advocates making love as the only sin-free form; through to Walt Disney.

But a less acknowledged reason is socialised gender difference. I think there is a lot of evidence that many men seek sex not because they have overpowering libidos, but because they lack the many forms of intimacy that many women have been brought up to enjoy, such as a wide group of friends, more tactility, phatic communication, and deep and meaningful communication. Hence sex becomes a way for a man to feel *emotionally* close: though in a neat inversion, the conventional construction of masculinity sex makes it a *physical* need. How many times have I heard the man in a heterosexual couple say, 'without sex, I don't feel connected to you,' to which a common reply is 'not connected? I have kids with you, share a domestic space with you, share my life with you, have a mortgage with you - how do you not feel connected?'

In a world of man-made language, where intimacy becomes a synonym for sex, we see the whole idea that 'sex should be about making love' is a man-made model of sex-as-intimacy-duty.

And dutiful sex is dreadful, as everyone knows.

The alternative is not sex as shagging - which is anyway only the other half of the male binary of making love/shagging - but certainly sex as play, sex as individually therapeutic, and - in a couple - sex as an exploration of difference. This we can imagine being endlessly engaging.

This is sex, freed from the demands of love.

James Earl

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