

THE ROLE OF SEXUALITY IN THE FORMATION OF IDEAS:  
A CRITIQUE

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Dr. Lewis Feuer's paper in the November issue of this Journal (1) is an excellent presentation of Freudian theory as it confronts the philosophy of John Dewey. The format allows the writer to highlight both the deficiencies and strengths of these profound scholars who exerted such a great influence on philosophy, pedagogy, politics, and medicine. It is a first-rate piece, and both the author and the Journal deserve the highest commendation for its appearance.

There are, however, several instances where Feuer over-zealously attacks Dewey's economic interpretation by favoring a point of view of Freud which is even less defensible. I will try here to examine one of these issues. Dr. Feuer accepts the thesis that philosophical realism was an expression of monastic celibacy and that Dewey failed to recognize the role of sexuality in the formation of ideas (p. 127). Freud believed that all intellectual, philosophical, aesthetic, and spiritual interests grew out of a sublimatory defense against certain libidinal interests. This view is entirely unsupported except for vague analogies in the plastic arts and an overriding belief in the libido theory. Dr. Feuer seems to accept this notion, and draws from it some interesting conclusions about celibacy and philosophical orientation.

The singular influence of sex in human behavior lies in the two characteristics of its biological functioning: (a) requiring another individual for its complete fulfillment, and (b) the ease with which it can be entirely abandoned.

Sex is the only biological function that requires relationship, closeness, contiguity at least, for its proper fulfillment, and thus serves a dual role of fulfilling both man's cultural and biological needs. However, there are no convincing data about its aetiological significance, or that man's cultural achievements are all sublimations of the sexual instinct.

The second characteristic, of being easily abandoned while being highly pleasurable, makes it an ideal target for masochistic denial or martyred abstinence, as barter for which one obtains higher rewards in the Christian mythology. Celibacy, sexual flagellation, and the

endless variety of intermediate forms of denial have been most potent sources of establishing credit in a particular system of values which derides the flesh and enhances the spiritual. Thus monastic celibacy is related to productivity through the devotion of the monks to a spiritual value which was esteemed more highly than bodily desires. The sexual function—the only biological activity that can be permanently foregone—was sacrificed to the altar of a God who could literally give eternal salvation. This was a small price to pay for so high a reward, and even at that, only few Christians were capable of such total renunciation.

The point is that the philosophical realism of the monks did not arise from an abandoned sexuality, but rather that celibacy was the result of philosophical realism and a clear choice between certain salvation and an uncertain eternity.

The sexual function can be comprehended most usefully when we do not assign it any privileged or preferred role in human behavior. It is in a species-preservative sense least imperious, since unlike the cardiac, respiratory, or kidney functions, etc., the organism can survive even if the sexual function is totally abandoned. However, it is a major source of pleasure which arises not only from the physiological experiencing of the orgasm but also from the required interpersonal contact. Thus the sexual function can be used to play out almost every aspect of the human drama, from power and manipulation to submission and enslavement. This is not causality, however. Rather we can recognize that spiritual, aesthetic, and the philosophical interests can—and probably do—result from man's insatiable curiosity and explorative needs to master and control his environment in order to insure maximum security in his living. Once this is achieved, sex behavior is possible and the fruits of such activity can then be assured some chance of survival.

#### REFERENCE

1. FEUER, L. S. The standpoints of Dewey and Freud: a contrast and analysis. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1960, 16, 119-136.