

Fantasies and Fetishes

The Erotic Imagination and the Problem of Embodiment

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While the philosophical tradition from Kant to Heidegger has addressed the topic of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), there has been a general tendency to exclude the individual's pre-philosophical exercise of this power, namely, its occurrence in eroticism or what we might call the "play of fantasy." By "fantasy" I mean a specific variation, or product of the imagination, which explicitly cultivates sexual imagery. Yet, the attempt to outline the erotic play of imagination might be particularly rewarding from a phenomenological perspective, if only by providing a springboard to address the concern for sexuality which Heidegger, or Kant for that matter, never brought to the forefront in defining the conditions of our finite nature. Indeed, imagination highlights the distinctly human capability to probe its own limits, thereby sparking the movement of self-transcendence.

If there is an "ecstatic" dimension to imagination, as Heidegger emphasizes, if there is a potential for transcendence, then the enactment of these power(s) must always be coupled with a counter-possibility of our incarnality or embodiment. For if imagination is not merely to be a free-floating phenomenon, as ethereal as its content may be, its distinctive mode of openness, or play of possibility, still requires a corresponding factual site or origin. Though by its production of fantasies, imagination may be associated with a mentalistic function, we will discover that, quite the opposite, its manner of disclosedness actually implies the problem of embodiment. Conversely, the retrieval of the imagination on this concrete footing requires overcoming the metaphysical dichotomy between mind and body, and uncovering the later as a lived dimension of our being-in-the-world.

The emergence of sexuality as a phenomenon implies this bodily dimension. On the one hand, imagination surpasses what is merely given within an environmental context, and hence has as its target something "hyperphysical." On the other hand, whatever its innovativeness, the sexual character of the fantasy cannot completely detach itself from its tie to an environmental context, and hence reinstates a "reference" to the physical, albeit in a transformed and inverted way. In the guise of a "fetish," the physical re-emerges as the creative wellspring for fantasy, as constellating the concrete point or locus of arousal. The vestige of embodiment within the sexual fantasy, then, comes to light in the corollary need for the development of fetishes. To be sure, the task of psychology is to address the dangers that are associated with an individual's becoming fixated on a specific sexual fetish, e.g., items of clothing. In terms of the scope of this phenomenological analysis, my aim is to describe a fetish as a phenomenon that illustrates the emergence of imagination within the situated context of our embodied existence. Yet, in the course of addressing the phenomenon of sexuality, it becomes necessary to discern the ambiguous character of fetishes. On the one hand, fetishes provide a source of stimulation to supplement fantasies; on the other hand, because of their tangibility, they can usurp the power of fantasies and thereby induce a "fixation" on specific physical attributes. By constricting the "play-space" of erotic imagination, a fixation can lead to an "addiction."

My thesis can be summarized as follows: *Erotic fantasies not only give creative license to imagination in its capacity for unconcealment. By underscoring the importance of our embodiment/sexuality through the introduction of fetishes, the erotic imagination also fosters the countertendency toward concealment, which in the most extreme cases may trigger the self's downward spiral (Absturz) into addiction.* To demonstrate this thesis, I will divide my paper into three sections. In the first section, I will show how the erotic imagination can illuminate the “meaning” of our sexuality, thereby signalling its own emergence within the context of being-in-the-world. In the second section, I consider how the dimension of openness, which Heidegger describes as the “play-space” (*Spiel-Raum*),¹ allows a unique synergy to occur between fantasies and their implementation through specific “icons,” i.e., fetishes. In the third section, I will identify a distinctive pathology by which an individual becomes fixated on a physical locus of arousal, e.g., images posted on the Internet, as resulting from a specific aberration of the erotic imagination. In certain cases, we witness the closing off of the play-space of imagination, in such a way that the individual’s tendency to fixate on a fetish supplants the innovative power of fantasy. The description of this pathology becomes important as an evidentiary “indicator” to gauge whether our account of the erotic imagination remains true to the phenomenon, and squares with the “meanings” conveyed by our sexuality within the open expanse of being-in-the-world.

I. Image, Gesture, and Sexuality

While Heidegger may not have explicitly addressed the erotic imagination, his discussions of the creative power of imagination are specifically oriented toward a pre-predicative dimension of meaning. The hermeneutic orientation of his phenomenology allows for a more explicit scrutiny of the imagination than may be accessed on the basis of Kant’s transcendental precepts alone.² Indeed, in Kant’s case, the imagination initially surfaces in an epistemic role to generate the schemata for the application of the pure concepts of understanding to objects of possible experience. Depending primarily upon a model of predication, Kant considers the capacity of the pure concepts to “refer to” or signify the determinate features of an object, in conformity with our finite conditions as knowers. The actual dynamics by which the categories acquire their content, and hence the source of their “meaningfulness,” becomes secondary to their predicative role in the articulation of the universal principles of human knowledge and ultimately the laws of nature. The role that the transcendental imagination plays in schematizing the pure concepts suggests, in yielding their content through “transcend-

¹ Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, GA 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1991), p. 198. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 138.

² GA 3, pp. 134–141; tr. 94–99.

dental determinations of time,”³ another level of the genesis “meaning” which antedates the act of predication as such. In retrieving the imagination in various books and lectures, Heidegger develops his hermeneutic account of the preliminary or fore-structure of human understanding (*Verstehen*), in order to uncover this pre-predictive level and mark its genesis within the overall fabric of “meaning.”

If we consider imagination as one axis of creativity for producing images and perhaps fantasies, then intersecting with it we can postulate another axis of language or discursivity. For Kant, this intersection is shaky at best, because for him the problem of “meaning” remains implicit within the confines of the first *Critique*, only to emerge tangentially in his account of “reflective” judgments of taste in the third *Critique*. Heidegger, on the other hand, has an easier time marking this interface, because for him the pre-predicative level that hermeneutics uncovers suggests an affinity between the creative production of images and their capacity for signification, and ultimate expression, in gestures, figures, and words. In terms of his fundamental ontology, Heidegger describes this crucial linchpin, which brings forth the centrality of imagination as defining our temporal constitution qua finite beings, a mode of “disclosedness” (*Erschlossenheit*). Thus, imagination constitutes an original act of disclosedness, whose dynamic becomes most pronounced in the way that language opens up a “world” of meaningful involvements, possibilities, and pursuits.

This openness in which we participate by speaking, however, develops a wide range of “meanings” that extend from a pre-verbal level of “gestures” to a thematic level of concepts. Through his hermeneutics, Heidegger recognizes that gestures can elicit patterns of meaning, and, within the overarching context of signification of the world, serve as vehicles of communication. At first the gestures may assume only a particularly innocuous form, such as a casual wave of a salutation or greeting. The fact that the pre-verbal gestures may not imply anything sexual, however, does not mean that in another context they could expressly do so. The case in point might be a “wink,” that in one context could be interpreted as salutatory, and in another context might suggest an overtly sexual attraction between two people.

Temporarily, we need to defer this concern as to whether Heidegger addressed sexual concerns. Let us first explore issues he did ponder, albeit not as centrally as other thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, namely, the correlation between the use of gestures – with their power of signification – and the character of our embodiment or incarnality. When Heidegger refers to the equipmental context of the “ready-to-hand,” *Dasein*’s dexterity in using equipment, and the significance of doing so for developing the self’s possibilities, e.g., building a house, the condition of embodiment accompanies the fact of our being-in-the-world. Given this situated network of involvements, our hands are not simply physical appendages, but also include the power of signification. As Heidegger states in *What Is Called Thinking?*:

³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), A 139 / B 178.

The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign. Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness.⁴

Heidegger's tantalizing suggestion that "man is a sign", and hands belong to humanity's signifying power, goes a long way toward explaining how we experience meaning outside the framework of predication. Conversely, Heidegger argues in the *Parmenides* lectures that even the so-called formalization of language in writing harbours a vestige of a hand and recalls the condition of our embodiment as situated, finite beings:

The essential correlation of the hand and the word as the essential distinguishing mark of man is revealed in the fact that the hand indicates and by indicating disclosed what was concealed, and thereby marks of, and while marking of forms the indicating marks into formations [*indem sie zeigt und zeigend zeichnet und zeichnend die zeigenden Zeichen zu Gebilden bildet*]. ... The word indicated by the hand and appearing in such marking is writing. We still call the theory of the structure of language "grammar."⁵

The reflexivity of the fact that we ourselves our "signifiers," and can communicate thereby, implies that we can also address an aspect central to our embodiment, which directly or indirectly pertains to the character of our "thrownness" into the world. Heidegger suggests that human existence is factually dispersed in its thrownness, in such a way as to allow for the differences between the genders. And regardless of the uncontrollable "fact" of whether the individual is born as either a female or a male, each individual shows concern for, and struggles with, the ineluctable mystery, enigma, and problem posed by his/her sexuality. Insofar as *Dasein* is essentially "beingwith" others, the self's struggle with its sexuality includes the various complications of the relationships spawned thereby, from dating to parenting, from marriage to divorce. And, by the same token, that struggle contributes to the development of the self's identity through the "intertwining nexus of relationships" between it and its world that "forms the medium of intercorporeality."⁶

⁴ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), p. 16.

⁵ Heidegger, *Parmenides*, GA 54 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982), p.125. *Parmenides*, trans. A. Schuwer and R. Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 84.

⁶ Here Merleau-Ponty's discussion of embodiment becomes instructive. See James B. Steeves: *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), p. 119.

Beginning with Derrida, various critics have argued that Heidegger ignores the importance of the “sexual difference,” of “gender,” as a crucial dimension of our humanity.⁷ Despite the validity of these criticisms, we should not infer that Heidegger denies that sexuality is germane to human existence, or that it cannot factor in as a primary concern to “formally indicate” the enactment of care (*Sorge*) as such.⁸ Indeed, the formally indicative character of human existence implies that the individual’s way of confronting his/her embodiment harbours a latent message as to the relevance that his/her needs and desires may have. Insofar as *Dasein* is not simply an impersonal “what”, but also a “who”, the most rudimentary affects and responses can speak to the inescapable facticity of human existence. Because through the temporalized act of existing, the self addresses who it is in a “meaningful” or “significant” way, even the most primitive needs and desires of sexuality spawn “figures” of meaning or signification. And since Heidegger does not limit language to predication, but instead traces its origin back to a “pre-predicative” level of experience,⁹ he can address the hermeneutic import of the random, idiosyncratic, and “impulsive” aspects of our sexuality.

Because, on the one hand, the issues of an individual’s sexuality underscore its embodiment, and, on the other, point to the uniqueness of who each of us is, their manner of expression is never simply univocal. Rather, in struggling to come to terms with, address, and express our sexuality, we experience a fissure within ourselves, of the physical and the emotional, of desire and devotion, catapulting us into an openness which unfolds on two fronts. Because tension and ambiguity are the hallmark of our sexuality, crossing the gap between our embodiment and the meaning it has for us, its manner of expression necessarily lends itself to suggestive figures and images. If we trace the source of these images back to the power of imagination, and ascribe to them an explicit sexual content, then we can refer to “fantasies” to describe the erotic play of this imagery.

We have now shown how imagination can provide a conducive setting for the play of erotic fantasies. We have thereby shown that there is a link between imagination and our embodiment. In order to clarify this link, let us consider the converse: namely, how our sexuality can inscribe itself in facets of our embodiment that are specifically suited for playing out sexual fantasies, i.e., via “fetishes” or, put another way, how our embodiment provides the *site* for erotic play.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, ed. Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001), pp. 53–72.

⁸ For a discussion of the importance of gender in this regard, see Kevin Aho, “Gender and Time: Revisiting the Question of *Dasein*’s Neutrality,” *Epoché*, 12/1 (Fall 2007): 137–155.

⁹ Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, GA 29/30 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), p. 496. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 342.

II. The “Play-Space” of Fantasy

Within our psychoanalytic culture, there is a sharp tendency to equate fetishes with a specific sexual behaviour. While there is necessarily some erotic element within fetishes, if by that we mean a locus of “attraction,” they would not be possible if there were not a semantic axis which allowed for the “layering” if not “doubling” of meaning. For a fetish arises when something of a physical origin, e.g., an article of clothing, can signify an additional meaning beyond that, e.g., a further locus of attraction, excitement, or arousal, other than what is “literally” represented by the thing’s primary purpose. In order to pinpoint the *precise nexus between the erotic imagination and fetishes*, we need to clarify different ways of characterizing fetishes, including from “economic,” “psychoanalytic,” and “anthropological” perspectives.

Karl Marx was among the first thinkers to emphasize the importance of fetishes, albeit within an economic context of criticizing capitalism. He coined the expression “fetish of the commodity” to describe the unique occurrence within capitalism in which 1) the value of the product, or what is produced, *usurps the process of production itself* and 2) the market or “exchange” value of a product, that is, to employ Jean-Luc Nancy’s description, “the surplusproperty (in another capital),” exceeds its “use” value (achieved as a product of labor).¹⁰ In this case, the context of signification proper to capitalism and its ‘world’¹¹ allows for a second level of signification of a product’s “value” object beyond its ordinary function as an item of equipment (hence its fetishlike character). Marx’s characterization of the fetish of the commodity proves instructive, because he 1) implicates the context of signification as a prerequisite for fetishes and 2) reserves a place for eroticism by separating “desire” from “need.” Though Marx’s analysis centers on the process of production, we can also apply his basic insight to address the corollary side of the consumer. Thus, *within the framework of contemporary capitalism*, an item of equipment, e.g., an automobile, accrues an additional value as the correlate of *desire*, e.g., what the car “stands for” in terms of its monetary worth, or even, indirectly, as an icon of status, rather than what it denotes in terms of fulfilling a *need* as a means of transportation. For this example illustrates how a fetish arises within a prior context of signification, the projecting-open of a “world” as a horizon of meaningful possibilities and involvements. We must emphasize, however, that the ontological basis of world in Heidegger’s phenomenology surpasses any ontical expression thereof, for example, the ‘world’ of the capitalist within which the fetish of the commodity first originates.

Alongside Marx, we need to consider the approach which transposes the concern for fetishes into an explicitly sexual context, thereby entering a “psychoanalytic” arena.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. D. Pettigrew and F. Raffoul (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 38.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), pp. 216–217. See Michael Harrington, *The Twilight of Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 171.

As preserved within an “economy”,¹² the “libidinous” can be diverted and sublimated, as well as repressed. A “fetish” is one avenue by which an impulse can manifest itself, if only momentarily diverted and not completely sublimated. But the channelling of such impulse in these ways is not simply the result of ego and will, but requires the directive of an “intermediary”, which as the “symbolization” of desire assigns a “boundary” to what is otherwise a raw and uncontrollable impulse. Accordingly, the “symbolization” of desire goes hand in hand with its sublimation. Among contemporary thinkers, Jean-Luc Nancy emphasizes the polymorphic character of eros as seeking diverse and novel outlets of expression; but in order to exhibit this diversity, eros is necessarily polyvalent, that is, capable of embodying diverse meanings and various symbolic configurations – all within the space of sexual difference.¹³ Along with the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist perspectives, we must also include the “anthropological” view of fetishes. In the anthropological perspective, the self exhibits a “*participation mystique*” (cf. Lévi-Bruhl) with its natural environs, in such a way as to “identify” directly with nature, and, through this identification, to construe natural phenomena as emanating mystical powers. Given this “preontological” awakening to their own environmental surroundings (*Umwelt*), human beings symbolize the tension of their closeness to, and divergence from, nature by including “images” of animals in their representation and worship of the divine. What we glean from distinguishing these three different approaches, whether the Marxist (economic), psychoanalytic, or anthropological, the human tendency to give shape to their desires requires their “signification,” of which fetishes are primary examples. From a phenomenological perspective, the signification of desire arises along a wider axis of meaning, i.e., the “structure of significance” of the world itself.

When we contrast Heidegger’s description of the “world-openness” of human beings, from the fact that animals are “world-poor,”¹⁴ we arrive at the insight that illuminates the key dimension of fetishes. Are animals capable of having fetishes? Indeed, the history of philosophy casts a long shadow in underestimating the capability of animals. Be that as it may, the point here is that only through the prior opening of a world can a range of signification arise, which supports multiple levels of meaning as well as allows for ambiguity. As long as the ambiguity of meaning is possible, and there is a context of embodiment to unfold that possibility, we can safely say that something in the order of fetishes is possible. Indeed, a fetish *becomes possible* by referring to a second level of meaning, whose first level remains rooted in the lived dimension of our embodied being-in-the-world, e.g., the nexus of equipmental relations. Given this phenomenological root, we can thereby define a fetish as the endowment of a

¹² See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 154.

¹³ For a pivotal discussion of the economy of image, meaning, as mediating desire and eros, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 17–24, 37–38.

¹⁴ GA 29/30, pp. 509–511; tr. 350–351.

power to “attract,” thereby adding a further level of signification, to what that same thing may ordinarily have within its original context of familiarity. Thus, to take a simple example, black nylon stockings may provide an additional source of arousal, beyond the simple use-value a pair of stockings may have in clothing a woman’s legs within its familiar context of signification. In more extreme cases, the fetish extends the range of “imitation” or “*mimesis*” to include “cross gender” activities, e.g., wearing the clothes of the opposite sex or “*transvestism*.” In this context, we need to clarify 1) that the fetish has a signifying element to it, what we might call an “iconography,” in connection with its tie to our embodiment; and 2) in this regard, we can characterize the fetish as a “physical icon,” in contrast to the “image” of a fantasy, which displays the creativity of imagination and is a conduit for its “play.” Thus “play” or innovation is essential to the “iconography” of the icon, or, put another way, the latter’s power hinges on its “polyvalency,” i.e., the ability to spark arousal by exploiting the ambiguity of meaning(s).

While the concern for fetishes was obviously not central to Heidegger, any more than sexuality was, he nevertheless makes a few casual references to them in his discussion of “world” in the first division of *Being and Time*. He singles out fetishes as an instance of *Dasein*’s absorption in “everyday concerns,” particularly as exemplified in so-called “primitive” peoples.¹⁵ In this case, the individual is so completely “absorbed” as to conflate the sign with what it signifies,¹⁶ thereby becoming transfixed by the iconic power of the fetish. Yet even when the individual is preoccupied in this way, the world is still presupposed as the backdrop of significance even if the sign is not yet freed in its role as signifier, that is, in its role in illuminating a chain of involvements. In this regard, the sign is the intermediary between the individual’s *infatuation* and whatever emerges within the environment to embody the fetish and thereby captivate the individual’s attention. As a result, a fetish may include an emblem or insignia, and, due to the “immediacy” of the experience, may be “acted out” through some kind of ritual or ceremony. In so-called “primitivism,” or even today when sexual activities border on the bizarre, fetishes may frequently include certain rituals or repeated ceremonies commemorating an event, e.g., as in the re-enactment of various sadomasochistic scenarios.

The pre-theoretical use of signs in fetishes suggests that there is a close proximity to whatever emerges within the environment as a potential source of eroticism. But, conversely, a fetish acquires its significance within the wider context of the world. The fetish reveals not only what is immediately encountered in the environment as the specific source of arousal – the thing, equipment, or ready-to-hand article – but also gives direction to the “eros” of desire as a unique concern of *Dasein* or that “for the sake of”. Without this structure of “that for the sake of” there could be no “attrac-

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 112.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 112–113. “...for primitive man, the sign coincides with what is indicated” (p. 113).

tion” to fetishes, insofar as a fetish cannot simply be equated with a physical object or a specific extant thing within the world. Indeed, “that for the sake of,” in referring equally to a possibility of *Dasein* as well as the specific thing’s emergence within a context of significance, distinguishes the “space of engagement” whereby the self can direct its attention to a “second” meaning (of arousal) above and beyond the “first” meaning of the thing’s primary function of use (as an item of equipment). Without the “allocation of this space,” which unfolds along the wider arc of the world including “that for the sake of,” as well as the “in order to” of the equipment, there would be no leeway for “disclosure” in which a fetish could arise. As Heidegger emphasizes in discussing “mythic thinking” in his critique of Ernst Cassirer’s work (1925), the dynamic of spatiality allows human beings to comport themselves toward things in the environment with an attitude of fascination and awe, through ceremony, ritual, or even (sexual) rights of passage.¹⁷ But without space giving direction to such behaviours, of proximity and distance, of intimacy and belonging, we could neither relate to things with the appropriate response nor could they appear with a proportional measure of significance.¹⁸

Though Heidegger employs this term more broadly, we can call this room for disclosure the “*Spiel-Raum*” or “play-space.” By occupying this playspace, *Dasein* can cultivate a multiplicity of possibilities, and thereby disclose itself as an inhabitant of the world. Because it occurs in tandem with the world, the play-space that *Dasein* inhabits is never “free-floating.” This is particularly true when we consider its importance in the arena of eroticism and fetishes. For this arena is specifically outlined by the openness we experience due to our embodiment. Within this openness *Dasein* defines itself through a form of “directionality,” of going “toward” and “away,” an “origin” and a “beyond.” If these “vectors” give expanse and depth to *Dasein*’s openness, then the self, through its embodiment, is already drawn into this arena in which the “play” of eroticism occurs. If only euphemistically, we can call this arena an “erotic zone.” Be that as it may, this zone is not comprised by any specific set of acts, but by the possibilities that emerge in the course of being-in-the-world as such.

However we postulate this arena of erotic play, it must already be “precleared” in terms of the existential constitution of the “there,” or *Dasein*’s disclosedness. Indeed, a so-called “erotic zone” is not something additional, but instead emerges as a phenomenon we can consider only by presupposing the disclosedness of being-in-the-world and the unique dynamic of this “playspace.” When Heidegger outlines the existential constitution of the “there,” and identifies its three structures of dispositions, understanding, and language, he emphasizes its “ecstatic” character. The irony of his charac-

¹⁷ GA 3, pp. 268f; tr. 188f.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the importance of space as an element of Da-sein’s embodiment, see C.Ciocan, “The Question of the Living Body in Heidegger’s Analytic of *Dasein*,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 38(2008): 80. For an excellent account of Heidegger’s disinterest in addressing the problem of embodiment, see S. Overgaard, “Heidegger on Embodiment”, in: *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 35/2 (2004): 116–131.

terization is that, despite its ontological meaning, it also harbours erotic connotations. Yet for Heidegger the “carried-awayness” of the temporal “ecstases” yields the “directionality” of all the self’s other concerns and interests, simply because temporality emerges as the “ontological meaning of care.” If *Dasein* cultivates specific possibilities that exhibit a similar trajectory, then they arise on the basis of a prior ecstatic projection of its own potentiality. Only given this prior clearing can the individual, from the exalted heights and deepest roots of his/her embodiment, experience the frenzied excitement of sexual release. As ecstatic, this “play-space” makes room for further amplification of the sexual experience, increasing its intensity and extending its longevity.

The ecstatic character of the “play-space” makes it possible for a “doubling”, as it were, of the individual’s concern for his/her sexuality. What presumably begins as an interest in, and a response to, a physical desire, transposes itself into an openness of possibility that amplifies its power. Because this openness cannot be simply reduced to the merely corporeal, its emergence necessarily includes the entire structure of significance comprising *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world. When read off this context of significance as a whole, specific signs or “icons” may emerge which are endemic to this sexual play, and, in the guise of fetishes, contribute to its amplification. The importance of the sign lies in holding forth the “object” of desire, the locus of attraction, precisely by allowing it to withdraw and remain absent. The ecstasy of the opening of *Dasein*’s “there” thus assumes an additional meaning, as implying the self’s ascent to the peak of eroticism through the interplay of presence/absence.

We have now shown how Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, his account of the ecstatic constitution of the “there,” paves the way for considering a range of sexual concerns, including their potential signification through such facets of our embodiment as “fetishes.” Having established how our embodiment provides the “site” for the play of eroticism, let us consider a specific expression thereof through an enactment of the “play-space” that produces fantasies or sexual images, the “imagination.”

III. Fetishes and Their Unique Pathology

While imagination is often construed as epitomizing the flight of fancy, we cannot overlook that its context of signification still betrays a worldly origin. In the Kantbook, Heidegger establishes the link between *Dasein*’s self-disclosive capacity and the power of imagination, which, as the harbinger of ecstatic temporality, creates the “play-space” for the manifestation of what is. And, insofar as temporality is the hallmark of human finitude, imagination is a power that human beings exhibit only because they are finite. Moreover, finitude is not simply a negative characterization, but as the premise for setting limits already implies the impetus to surpass them. Eroticism is a capacity ascribed to human beings, not simply on the physical basis of sexuality, but, because the trajectory of finite transcendence already aims at the furthest vistas of our limitations – a point that Giorgio Agamben, who attended Heidegger’s “Seminar in Le Thor 1966,”

makes: “Lovers go to the limit of the improper in a mad and demonic promiscuity; they dwell in carnality and amorous discourse, in forever-new regions of impropriety and facticity, to the point of revealing their essential abyss.”¹⁹

Conversely, in signifying this ascent toward these vistas, imagination maintains a prior orientation or reference to our embodiment, to the thrownness that differentiates each of us by gender and roots the individual in his/her incarnality.²⁰ If world marks the overarching structure of signification, then it is by eliciting further valences of meaning from the basic gestures of the body that the erotic imagination is born. This polyvalence (of meaning) allows a single phenomenon to implicate multiple levels of significance, and thereby gives fuel to the creativity of imagination. In this way, the power of imagination is unleashed to develop the greatest possibilities of fancy, for the significations that it can draw upon are as vast as the entirety of human experience itself, i.e., the world.

In the erotic imagination, what distinguishes the manner of the individual’s engagement with it also distinguishes its manner of disclosedness, the “play” of the “play-space”. Though play is often thought of as effortless, this does not mean there are not opportunities for its enhancement. Let us take a specific sexual activity, which above all requires fantasy, and bears the namesake in question, i.e., “role-playing.” The fantasy and its manner of “acting it” occur in tandem, such that the specific possibilities enlisted not only have a “worldly” reference, but, because at least the participation of one other individual is involved, emerges within the situated domain of our being-with others. Here the erotic imagination calls upon a dynamic central to the craft of art itself, or “*mimesis*.” For the fantasy is simultaneously an “imitation” of the sexual act, but, through the vision of the erotic imagination, re-crafted, as it were, within the wider expanse of the “play-space” at the heart of “roleplaying.” This *mimesis* thereby illustrates how the erotic imagination transposes the physical act of sex into a signifying gesture, allowing for its (i.e., one’s sexuality’s) emergence within the wider expanse of possibility.

Insofar as temporality constitutes human existence as care, and the care as the being of *Dasein* is implied when the self expresses its sexuality,²¹ a given sexual fantasy necessarily replicates this temporal character. Thus, the erotic imagination not only pieces together a graphic scenario of sexual possibilities, but crafts them in order to juxtapose what withdraws into absence as a farfetched wish with what simultaneously has become present as the figures of people, places, and things punctuating one’s

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 204.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe im Ausgang von Leibniz* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), p. 173. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 137.

²¹ Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), pp., 80–81, 139, 200.

environment.²² The mimetic act that sparks fantasy, then, comes to fruition as the innovativeness which ignites the creativity of erotic imagination. In accord with Heidegger's view that temporality is central both to the constitution of human existence and the genesis of imagination,²³ we discover that the temporal interplay of absence/presence lies at the root of all erotic fantasies. Indeed, fantasies captivate us by allowing the image to ignite desire, while simultaneously withholding the avenue for its fulfilment. The counter-pull of absence is as vital to fuelling the fantasy as any explicit content it may present.²⁴ If the power of fantasy does not reside in its actualization, then the intensity of its play is based on "anticipation" (*Antizipation*), which projects forth the vector of possibility *as* possibility. In regard to its temporal constitution, this vector defines the "directionality" or "*worauf*" of the erotic fantasy, or, in the language of Kant's account of imagination, the "schema" of the future. In simplest terms, the erotic craft of *mimesis* takes shape through this temporal schema, underwriting the "meaning" in the play of fantasy – whether the discrete images are intertwined to form a "narrative" or evenly loosed grouped to constitute a vortex of eroticism and arousal.

Though Heidegger not does explicitly address sexual fantasy, his allusion to "mythical fantasy," in his critique of Ernst Cassirer, proves to be illuminating. Specifically, Heidegger remarks that Cassirer overlooks the "labyrinthine and abysmal" side of fantasies, which can only be uncovered when "guided by the phenomenon of the transcendental power of imagination, and its ontological function within the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*."²⁵ Insofar as sexual fantasies in particular may have this subterranean character, their significance depends upon "configuring" them in the "images" of creativity that spring from the imagination. Given this wellspring of creativity, the key to the erotic imagination lies in its novelty, i.e., as a medium that is always "reinventing" itself and giving new expression to its creativity through the power of "play." In this regard, the erotic imagination becomes a point of departure, a "lover's leap," that targets, in Agamben's words, the "limit of the improper" or what is taboo and forbidden.²⁶

²² For a further discussion of the power of imagination to give determinancy to the indeterminate, see Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, pp. 20–24.

²³ M. C. Dillon, "Sex, Time, and Love: Erotic Temporality," in *Sex, Love and Friendship: Studies of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love 1977–1992*, ed. Alan Soble (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, 1993), pp. 316–325. Also see Frank Schalow, *The Incarnality of Being* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), pp. 60–64.

²⁴ For an interesting account of the creative power of imagination, and the production of a "symbolic order," see Joanna Hodge, "Kant, Heidegger, Irigaray," in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 171–172. "Since the imaginary, precisely by contrast to the notions of reality established in a symbolic order, permits a positing of that which is not and an analysis of potential which is neither given or even susceptible of being given..." (p. 171).

²⁵ GA 3, p. 269; tr. 189.

²⁶ For further discussion, see Agamben, *Potentialities*, pp. 202–204.

By fostering play, and thereby amplifying erotic desire, fetishes assume a special role. For it is necessary that there are “aids” presented from the “environment,” whether visual, auditory, olfactory, and perhaps even tactile,²⁷ which emerge to “fill out” or “concretize” the significance of the fantasy. And, by the same token, the unique dynamic of the fetish is to elicit desire, without necessarily being able to satisfy it. As today’s Internet, a technological “medium” for dispersing sexual images, attests, the spectrum of fetishes seems to expand into every nook and cranny of the erotic imagination, even into its darkest corners. While the imagination of every individual may harbour an array of fantasies, the Internet *gives explicit definition to them* by portraying every possible fetish – including the most bizarre and perhaps even “perverse”. As in every aspect of human concern, the proliferation of fetishes can provide a vehicle to enhance one’s pleasure, only by simultaneously harbouring the risk of entrapment. In ontological terms, the “openness” has an elasticity to it, which can always snap back into its opposite, or closing off. And the erotic imagination, at least to the extent that it seeks tangible examples to fill out its images, is no different. For the continual enumeration of fetishes may lead down a dark path which gives priority to the examples themselves and sacrifices the openness of erotic imagination for increasingly narrow and even truncated expressions thereof. Though it would take us too far afield here, Heidegger’s student and friend, Medard Boss, outlined the roots of such “fixations,” and their destructive potential to the individual’s identity, in his book *Meaning and Content of Sexual Perversions*.²⁸

In revisiting the importance of his *Auseinandersetzung* with Kant in *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger makes this provocative statement:

Indeed: as thrown projecting-open grounding, *Da-sein* is the highest actuality in the domain of imagination, granted that by this term we understand not only a faculty of the soul and not only something transcendental (cf. Kantbook) but rather enowning itself, where all *transfiguration* reverberates. “Imagination” as occurrence of the *clearing* itself.²⁹

In this same context, he emphasizes that being historically clears itself only in tension with its opposite tendency to withdraw into concealment and thereby shelter its mystery.³⁰ While in *Contributions to Philosophy* Heidegger ponders the historical

²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 62–63. While criticizing Heidegger, Nancy points to an important interface between “touching” and “sense,” thereby emphasizing how meaning emerges specifically through the space cleared by the site of “embodiment.”

²⁸ Medard Boss, *Meaning and Content of Sexual Perversions*, trans. Liese Lewis Abell (New York: Grune and Stratton: 1949), pp. 145–146.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), p. 312. *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 219.

³⁰ GA 65, pp. 389–392; tr. 271–273.

clearing of be-ing (*Seyn*) as enowning (*Ereignis*), he nevertheless casts light, relative to Da-sein, on the openness at the heart of human experience. As such, the erotic imagination illustrates this interplay between unconcealing and concealing, as the “play-space” within which human beings experience their sexuality as “meaningful” as well as pleasurable. The key to eroticism lies as much in the element of concealment, for it is by preserving the “veil of mystery” that physical sources’ attraction, e.g., nudity, retain their allure.

Because the clearing is always overshadowed by the possibility of its opposite, the preceding passage from *Contributions* also suggests that a tendency toward closure is as much endemic to imagination, as is the impetus toward openness. Though in the Kant-book Heidegger emphasizes the positive character of imagination, we cannot ignore the counter-prospect that the power of its efficacy can also be diverted, if our phenomenological analysis is to remain true to the thing itself. In this regard, the account of the erotic imagination proves to be especially fruitful, because it illustrates how the negative tendency toward concealment is interwoven into the “play-space” of desire and eroticism. As is one of Heidegger’s basic tenets, in every instance of unconcealment, a measure of concealment also occurs.

The factual confirmation of this “negativity” occurs in the way that the physical trigger of erotic fantasy, or fetishes, can actually usurp the creativity of the former and divert the dynamic of the “play-space” into a kind of fixation. If fetishes pose this problem, it is because, as an aid to fantasy, there is a point of diminishing return as to their effectiveness. Indeed, fetishes display a distinct pathology. Specifically, their efficacy in stimulating sexual arousal requires further enhancement, *with the paradox that*, as the fantasy becomes secondary to the fetish, that is, the tangible expression of the latter, i.e., the physical icon, usurps the novelty of the former, i.e., the image—thereby undermining the source of arousal it (the fetish) would seek to sustain. If the “novelty of the possible” is the unique dynamic that ignites the erotic imagination, then its counterpoint lies in the “familiarity” which breeds, if not contempt, a least a kind of “ennui.” As a corollary to this ennui, the pathology of fetishes lies in fixating on the physical stimuli through this *ubiquitous presence* of the icon, to the point of spawning an “addiction.” The proliferation of internet pornography is a good example of how addiction arises as a result of “reducing” the fantasy to the variety of visual icons and fetishes displayed on a computer screen. Correlatively, the prevalence of fetishes, as restricting the play-space of erotic imagination, corresponds to a specific form of desire as “ontical craving.”³¹ By virtue of its “ontical” expression, such desire derives ontologically when the possibility of unconcealment gives way to its opposite, thereby “abandoning” the individual to the fickle attraction of material things. As concretely

³¹ For a discussion of this concept of “ontical craving,” see Michael E. Zimmerman, “OnticalCraving versus Ontical Desire,” in *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire: Essays in Honor of William J. Richardson, S. J.*, ed. B. Babich (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), pp. 501–523.

experienced by the individual, this abandonment (*Verlassenheit*) to the sheer attraction of beings constitutes an “intensified” mode of the self’s tendency to “fall” (*Verfallen*).

To be sure, Heidegger’s description of the “intensified falling” of human existence casts considerable light on the problem of addiction, including that corresponding to a specific genre of sexual “fixation.” In contrast to “behaviouristic” models, the phenomenon of addiction cannot simply be reduced to a diagnosis of an individual’s having an obsessive-compulsive disorder. On the contrary, whatever “demons” the individual may be battling, these do not rise to the level of addiction until they *overtake* the individual’s power to prioritize the possibilities of his/her existence and thereby *subvert* the capacity to exercise self-concern altogether. These dual vectors of “overtaking” and “subverting” distinguish the “*worauf*” or “*whereto*” of the “flight” of addiction, as a mode of *Dasein*’s intensified falling and plunge into “unownedness” (recalling the Latin root, “*addictus*,” meaning to become “dispossessed” or “unowned”).³² Having made this link between fundamental ontology and an important topic in phenomenological psychology, allow me to outline the implications that my analyses of fetishes have for providing a phenomenological description of the erotic imagination.

Conclusion

The phenomenological character of our analysis reminds us that, even in the case of considering the pathology of fetishes, the “pathos” in question does not simply refer to a medical “diagnosis,” but instead to the Greek sense of the conflict, suffering, and struggle involved in each person’s attempt to come to terms with his/her sexuality. Conversely, the realization that fixations occur when fetishes usurp the creativity of erotic imagination, harks back to the most basic tenet that Heidegger espouses at the outset of his phenomenology: “Higher than actuality stands possibility.”³³ In term of the erotic imagination, this dictum proves to be doubly true, not only because its power originates ontologically from *Dasein*’s “play-space,” but also by “reinventing” itself through the space of possibility. Within the context of eroticism, we hear the echo of Heidegger’s basic tenet in the maxim that “less is more.” That is, the “less” emphasis there is on the overtly graphic form of any single icon (and the more on the power of fantasy), the greater is the potential for eroticism and the *translation* of a physical source of arousal into a kind of play. Indeed, this “*mimesis*” of our own basic physical responses, which transposes them into the wider orbit of a “play-space,” constitutes the basic “spark” of eroticism beyond merely sensory stimuli. In this “mimetic” process, the image is not simply a “representation” (*Vorstellung*) of an indeterminate stimuli, but instead, as a signifying act, expands the horizon of meaning (*Sinn*) itself. The sexual fantasy, then, has its own “polymorphic” or innovative character, that “augments” or “extends” meaning,” rather than just “re-presenting” it. Whether we employ Heidegger’s

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 240. Also see Schalow, *The Incarnality of Being*, pp. 24–26.

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 63.

methodology, or even, subsequently, Paul Ricoeur's,³⁴ the self-interpretation of how our (erotic) experiences become "meaningful" defines the task of hermeneutics. In this manner, the phenomenological analysis of eroticism is thereby re-enacted or "repeated" on the deeper level of the hermeneutics of being-in-the-world.

We can thereby draw three implications from our phenomenological analysis. First, by addressing the erotic imagination, we extend Heidegger's treatment of that power beyond what can ordinarily be revealed from the point of departure of Kant's "transcendental" perspective. Secondly, by providing an alternative context to address the concern for sexuality, we outline another avenue for developing the problem of embodiment, which lies dormant within Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Thirdly, by identifying the individual's potential to become "fixated" on certain sexual stimuli, we distinguish an important corollary to the phenomenon of "addiction," the analysis of which proves to be especially germane to the field of phenomenological psychology. That is, the correlation of addiction with fetishes, suggests that the "symbolic" character of the latter extends the "hook" whereby an individual comes under the "power" of what he/she cannot control (i.e., as addicted, as "unowned") – whatever physiological basis the addictive source may have.

While this ontical focus may be annexed to the domain of "applied phenomenology," our ability to outline its importance further indicates a commitment to the "*evidentiary*" character of the phenomena. Indeed, only by heeding the "concreteness" of the "thing itself," can we address a side of imagination that is as elusive as is its potential for eroticism. In this way, the phenomenological description of imagination, and its erotic development, can be conjoined with a hermeneutic account of Da-sein, and thereby situated within the wider purview of the question of being (*die Seinsfrage*).³⁵

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³⁴ See Leonard Lawler, *Imagination and Chance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 69.

³⁵ I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments in helping me to revise this article, as well as the editor for his encouragement.

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