

Agnes Callard on Sex

Philosophy Bites

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What happens when people have sexual desires for one another? Agnes Callard from the University of Chicago discusses sex, eroticism, and much more in conversation with Nigel Warburton.

Nigel Warburton: This is Philosophy Bites with me, Nigel Warburton.

David Edmonds: And me, David Edmonds.

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David Edmonds: There are, I assume, very few people who think about philosophy when they're having sex. As it happens, there are also very few people who think about sex whilst doing philosophy. Agnes Callard teaches at the University of Chicago. What makes her such an interesting and unusual thinker is a talent for directing her philosophical flair towards everyday human activities, including sex.

Nigel Warburton: Agnes Callard, welcome to Frosty Bites.

Agnes Callard: Thank you.

Nigel Warburton: The topic we're gonna focus on today is sex. Obviously, of interest to most of us. How did you get into thinking about this from a philosophical angle?

Agnes Callard: I was reading this essay called What is Sex For by David Halperin. And in the essay, he has this description of the way sex works in gay bath houses. Where if he has sex with his boyfriend at home, he always has to wonder was he just kinda going along with it? Was he trying to make something up to me? Was there some ulterior motive why he was willing to have sex with me?

But if you go to a bathhouse, then you know that you're just wanted for your body alone. He says, it's an exclusive privilege of the gay male world that there's somewhere you can go to be wanted for your body alone. When I read that, it sounded so appealing. And I was like, I wanna go to a gay bathhouse, and I wanna be wanted for my body alone. But then I started thinking about it and I realized that there's a problem.

There's a logical problem. Suppose everybody there just wants to be wanted for their body alone, and that's really the only thing they want, then why would anyone go into anyone else's cubicle? Like if someone comes into my cubicle, so like they want me for my body alone, or do they want to be wanted for their body? Because maybe they want to be wanted for their body. Maybe they're just pretending to want me for my body and enjoying the fact that I want them for their body.

And if I can never know, if I can never know whether they really want me for my body or they just want me to want me for their body, then I'm actually in the same situation in the gay bathhouse that I am at home with my boyfriend who might have some ulterior motive besides wanting me for my body. And it just struck me that

this is like this fundamental erotic predicament that we can never be assured of being wanted in exactly the way we want to be wanted.

Nigel Warburton: Couldn't there just be several desires that we have possibly not completely consistent, but I might want to be wanted for my body. I might also want that other body that I find incredibly attractive. That doesn't seem to be a conflict for me.

Agnes Callard: So I think absolutely. Right? So you could just have like two independent desires. You wanna be wanted for your body and also you want the other person for theirs. That's of course also true like it could be like your boyfriend wants to have sex with you for the sake of the sex itself but then also wants to make it up to you for something.

Right? So he could have two independent desires there. The point is that there's no scenario you can be in where you can be sure that the person wants you for your body. Because even in the gay bathhouse, they could be there because they want you to want them for theirs. So that was just the beginning of the story and then it made me think, okay, what is it that we really want?

What is it that we want in wanting to be wanted? What do we want from another person when that's what we want?

Nigel Warburton: So what's the answer? At least what's the beginning of an answer to that question? It's very much a philosopher's question I should say as well. I think a lot of people in that situation will just be happy with what they get and not seek an ideal situation. I get the impression that you're focusing on something that would be ideal where everybody's desires are met and you have something which is of human worth as it were beyond just animal satisfaction?

Agnes Callard: I guess the reason why this question strikes me as so compelling is that I think it really is the question that is at stake in sexual desire. That is I think sexual desire is this, this kind of wanting to be wanted. Which isn't the same thing as saying that all sex involves this. Right? So sex is something that nonhuman animals can have.

And I think we don't always care whether sex is erotic. Right? So you might just like wanna wanna get pregnant or something. Right? And in that case, you don't care as much about wanting to be wanted.

So maybe what I'm saying is this desire is at the heart of, let's say, erotic sex. But of course, erotic sex is what we mean a lot of the time when we're talking about sex, is when talking about the importance, the function, the desirability, etcetera of sex, we're thinking about erotic sex. I think it's really interesting that even when people masturbate, they tend to have sexual fantasies. And the fantasies tend to include things like being wanted. Right?

Prostitutes are often required to pretend that they're not prostitutes in effect, to pretend that they actually want the other person. So that just shows how deeply embedded this wanting to be wanted is in erotic sex. I don't think it's like only when philosophers are having sex are they into this. I actually just think this is the thing that

most people want. They may be satisfied with less or they may reconcile themselves to less, but I think it's recognizably the target of a lot of sexual desire.

Nigel Warburton: Let's keep it simple. Stick to two people. You have two people in a room. Each wants to be wanted. Why is that a philosophical problem?

Agnes Callard: So maybe we start with an even simpler case. Like, there are a lot of ways that I can want another person. So I can want you as a therapist. I can want you for president. I can want you to be my friend.

When I want you in those ways, some of them may include a demand of reciprocity. So like if I want you to be my therapist, there's no demand of reciprocity there. I don't have to be your therapist. Right? Or a president.

But the friend one does. Right? But in wanting you as my friend, I'm not purely wanting reciprocity. Right? If I want you as my friend, I like wish for your good, wish for good things to happen to you, want you to feel the same ways towards me.

What I think is distinctive about sexual desire, and here I'm really speaking about sexual desire, not like romance or something which is yet a further step which I think involves more idealization. But just sexual desire. It's like these I want you as my friend or I want you as my therapist but without the friend and the therapist, we're the only thing that fills out the wanting. Like, what do I want you as? Well, I want you to want me.

But in what way do I want you to want me? Well, in the way that I want you. And the kind of puzzle, the philosophical puzzle is that's all I can say. There isn't any more that I want. And then you might say, well, no, no.

Look, I want sex. Right? I want you to want me sexually. And here's where I don't actually think that that's the way that sex relates to eroticism. That is I don't think when I want someone erotically, I want to perform a certain action with them.

Because you could perform that same action unerotically. Right? And that's not what I want. What I want is the erotic performance. And the question is what is the erotic performance?

And I think, well, it's just the one that expresses this reciprocity of desire. So the way that I have of talking about that is that sex is a ritual and it sort of symbolizes something. It's the ritual that symbolizes this kind of reciprocal wanting. In the way that, say I want to shake your hand, right, I want us to reconcile, because we're at odds. It's not like I have a desire for a handshake, right?

I have a desire for reconciliation and like, yeah, by shaking your hand we would be reconciling. The the handshake would be the ritual that symbolizes or stands for our reconciliation. And I think sex stands in that relationship to mutual desire.

Nigel Warburton: What is the equivalent of reconciliation in sex?

Agnes Callard: It's the reciprocal desire. So it's like this experience of being wanted in exactly the way in which I want the other person.

Nigel Warburton: So you could have an erotic encounter without touching.

Agnes Callard: Absolutely. In fact, I think there's just lots of eroticism that doesn't involve touching. I think in movies, like eye glances are very characteristically

erotic because there's a lot of being able to see that the other person sees you. Like, I'm someone who, as you might be noticing right now, characteristically avoids sustained eye contact and I've sometimes thought yeah maybe I just find it a bit too erotic to do like really hold eye contact for a long time. There was one context in my life where I was forced to do it where I was like actually someone standing over me was like you have to maintain eye contact and I was in tears by the end of it.

Was like really upsetting for me. It's very intimate, right, but doesn't involve touching. I do think touching is non accidentally a really important behavior. Like it will stand in a very natural symbolic relation to this reciprocal desire. But like there's giant cultural variation even just in heterosexual sex.

Like a while ago and I can't remember the details now, but I was reading about this group of people where the way that they express sexual desire is by biting each other's eyelashes. And they find this incredibly erotic, the biting of the eyelashes. And it's partly that it marks the person. Right? So like later, other people know that they had sex with you because their eyelashes are bent off.

Right? And it's not in every culture around the world, for instance, that women's breasts are considered erotic. Right? So the question like what behavior is going to stand for this erotic reciprocity is somewhat flexible. Some of it's gonna be eyelashes, some of it's gonna be breasts.

Usually, gonna involve touching at least to some extent because that's a really immediate way to sense this kind of reciprocity. But it yeah. It could take a lot of different forms.

Nigel Warburton: So is this a neutral sort of descriptive sense of eroticism? I mean, you're presumably saying voyeurism or just looking at somebody who doesn't know you're looking at them can't be erotic because it's not reciprocal. So is it just descriptive in saying this is what we mean by eroticism or what we should mean by eroticism? Were you saying it's somehow better than things which aren't reciprocal?

Agnes Callard: I'm not saying it's better. I'm saying it is the characteristic target of sexual desire. Though, I think maybe I wanna say sexual fantasy is slightly slightly askew from sexual desire. It doesn't quite track sexual desire. So like people might have sexual fantasies about sex with corpses or nonhuman animals or noncontentual sex.

All of those, I see them as ways in which the mind is negotiating and trying to get around this reciprocity. Right? It's really hard to represent the reciprocity. Like, it's actually hard to represent the content inside your mind. And so it sort of makes sense to me that fantasy, especially when the fantasy is divorced from erotic sex, will sometimes turn to these, in effect, easier to represent non reciprocal sexual acts.

Obviously, some of them are gonna be morally worse like rape. But the question, why are these worse has to be answered separately on independent grounds. Anyway, I'm just trying to answer the question, what is sex?

Nigel Warburton: We've kind of left the body out of this. We're very much talking about people at a distance from one another, touching has come in, but sex is often

penetrative, driven by biology, physiology, changes in the endocrine system properly, all kinds of things going on.

Agnes Callard: Yeah, absolutely. So we use voice and certain shapings of voice to communicate meaning to each other. Right? And that's driven by biology because we've got mouths of a certain shape. Right?

And deaf people do it really differently. But it makes sense and of course it's partly our mouths and stuff evolved to like for instance allow us to distinguish between vowels and consonants, right? To hear the difference between d and t, like a voiced and an unvoiced sound. You have to be able to like have a tongue that hits the roof of your mouth and either voice it or not voice it to do that, right? Okay.

Even just like handshake or bowing, there are let's say affordances of the body that are going to make that be plausible way to express the variety of things that those movements can express. But I think that there's a little bit more to be said about sex, right, which is just that we have a kind of natural hunger, like hunger for food, that it's being like leveraged or deployed in this sexual act in much the way that like the fact that our tongue can hit through of our mouth or something is being deployed in speech.

Nigel Warburton: Something else that is important in sex for a lot of people is orgasm, and we haven't talked about that at all.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. So there was like a time when I thought, oh, the point of sex is to have orgasms. And there are a lot easier ways to have orgasms than having sex. And so it's interesting that we choose this pretty circuitous route. And I now think of something like orgasm is a way for sex to end with a bang.

So, like, every ritual has to have an ending. Right? You can't be going on doing it forever, and you have to know when it's over. And orgasm is, like, pretty good for that, and it ends in a way that's, very positive and satisfying, so you'll wanna go back to it next time. But I think it's better described as the way that sex ends, often, or at least sometimes, than the goal.

First, because of the thing I said, which is that there seem to be a lot easier ways to achieve orgasm than having sex with people. And also just that, like, there's actually something odd or off about somebody who is, like, very bent on orgasms, either their own or the other person's, actually. There's something very unsexy about someone who's just trying to make you have an orgasm. That's like a very unerotic somehow.

Nigel Warburton: That's really interesting. It's a sort of it's not a desire for the other person. It's a desire for a score as well.

Agnes Callard: Yeah. Exactly. It almost feels like a desire to get the thing over with. If they're just trying to get you to have an orgasm. Right?

You know, I once went to a restaurant. It's a very fancy restaurant called Alinea in Chicago. I went with my ex husband. It was his mom when we were still married. And it's the fanciest fanciest restaurant we've ever been to, and we like saved up.

This was like a big deal for us to go to this restaurant. The food was amazing. It was the most delicious food I ever had in my life. But at the end of it, were both kind

of wretched. And then was like, you realize that was the first time that we ever went to a restaurant and we didn't have a conversation.

We didn't have a philosophical conversation. We didn't talk about anything really. There were so many courses and they were constantly coming over and explaining the courses to us and telling us how to eat them, instructing us how to put something in our mouth. Oh, you have to eat this in one bite. You have to, you know, that it felt like too much of a focus on the body.

The way that I described it was like pleasure torture. We wanted to have a nice meal. We didn't wanna be that directly reminded of the thought you're on the hunt for pleasure or something. And I think that there's something similarly weird about having sex and being very single mindedly on the hunt for pleasure.

Nigel Warburton: Sex is something almost everybody does and even some of the people who don't do it would really like to. How come there's so much written in other spheres but not so much philosophy about this?

Agnes Callard: One explanation I have is it's all Aristotle's fault because it there's tons of it in Plato. Plato is super into what is eroticism and what is its true expression. And he thinks like eroticism is like distorted philosophy or something like that. Right? Which is weird view, but at least he tried.

Right? And there's extremely erotic writing in Plato, especially in the Phedrus, that's really trying to pick up on the experience of this kind of desire, the physicality of it, and then to give an interpretation of it. And then Aristotle's just like not a philosophy topic, that just doesn't show up. I mean, and Aristotle is the guy who talked about everything. Dolphins and worms and constitutions and everything, but not sex or at least not sexual desire.

With the exception of there's this one passage in the prior analytics that Halperin brings up in his essay where he uses it as an example of a certain kind of logic, certain kind of syllogism. He happens to use an erotic example. Right? But it's not like a topic for him. So sometimes I think, yeah, it's just Aristotle's fault.

He kind of set philosophy off in this non erotic direction. But there is a wonderful aside in a philosophy essay. I think the guy's name is Solomon. And he says something like, whenever you philosophize about a topic, something about you becomes manifest. Your personality, your idiosyncrasies become very visible in the way that you philosophize about the topic, and nobody wants the world to know what their sexual idiosyncrasies are.

So philosophers are not willing to talk about it, basically. That's a second theory.

Nigel Warburton: Heck, miss Kannath, thank you very much.

Agnes Callard: Sure. This is fun.

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