

Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving. William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986. 599 pages, \$24.95.

Reviewed by William L. Benzon, Troy, New York

Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving is clearly intended to be a general guidebook on sexuality and love relationships. As such it merits consideration from two points of view. On the one hand, it does provide an impressive range of information, including discussions of sexual anatomy, physiology, dysfunction, and technique, infant and childhood sexuality, gender roles, sexual fantasies, love, intimacy and communication (including advice on how better to communicate), paraphilias, sexually transmitted diseases (including, of course, AIDS), and more. On the other hand, this rich compendium of information and advice is organized according to a paradigm which excludes consideration of important aspects of sexual and emotional experience and which therefore bears examination, not the least because this book has behind it the authority which comes from the very considerable reputation of Masters and Johnson.

To properly evaluate *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* as a compendium of knowledge one would have to assemble a considerable committee of experts, for no one person can possibly be thoroughly familiar with all of this material. I have not consulted such a committee. But I find it difficult to imagine a scholar interested in love and sexuality who wouldn't find a great deal of interesting material in this book, despite the fact that it is not intended for scholars. We all need convenient gateways into literatures we do not know as specialists and *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* can certainly serve this function.

However, I am more concerned with the paradigm informing this book, by which I mean the explicit and implicit assumptions by which Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny (hereafter MJK) shape their ideas. I am concerned about this paradigm because it is one which is both pervasive in our culture and dangerous to our mental and physical health. That it is an ideology which has some right to the claim that it is benevolent and enlightened does not, in the end, counterbalance the fact that, in this arena, its benevolence is undisciplined by the courage needed to accept the deep complexity of our nature—and its enlightenment is limited by an inability to tolerate the ambiguity and imprecision which are, at the moment, inescapable in any full consideration of our inner lives.

The paradigm which governs this book is that of mechanistic science, which presumes easy access to objective knowledge and a clean separation of mind from body. MJK assert that "learning about sexuality in an objective fashion will enable our readers to examine important sexual issues . . . and emerge with deeper insight into themselves and others" (p. 4). No doubt many readers can gain some insight into themselves through reading this book, but the reader who is unequipped with a more variegated and sinuous set of assumptions, such as those of psychoanalysis, will have his or her insights limited by what

Herbert Marcuse called repressive desublimation — the satisfaction of a small insight will block the way to a realization of more painful, but richer and more liberating, insights.

Thus, the reader who has, for example, just seen *Othello* and is troubled by how easily he or she can identify with Othello, or Desdemona, or the reader who, a decade ago, had an epiphanic orgasm but has never had one since, these readers will find nothing in the book which answers deeply to their experience. And, precisely because the names of Masters and Johnson carry such authority, and their book is so obviously comprehensive, this more troubled reader is likely to continue feeling that “it” is somehow his or her fault, that something is wrong with them, rather than the truth — which is that something is wrong with the view of sex and love presented in *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving*.

The book is innocent of psychoanalytic insight — though Freud is acknowledged — and there is no mention of Wilhelm Reich and the tremendous controversy surrounding his account of orgasm. *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* is constructed within a paradigm which excludes Freud and Reich from serious consideration. Those ideas simply cannot exist in this intellectual world. But those ideas are as deep and as serious as any which have been advanced in this century. A paradigm which excludes them simply cannot deal adequately with sex and love.

We can get closer to the book by considering some passages:

The notion that all orgasms are intense, earth-shattering, explosive events is another widespread sexual misconception that can probably be traced to the literary imagination. Although the reflex mechanisms of orgasmic response are fairly uniform, some orgasms are mild, fluttery, or warm, while others are blockbusters. These differences arise from variations in the person's physical state such as being tired, tense, having a sore throat or headache, or from variations in the emotions that accompany the sexual experience. (p. 77)

If, instead, you can accept that fact that sex isn't always the great passionate joining of souls that Hollywood would have us believe it to be — that it's sometimes rather feeble, awkward, and even unsatisfying — then you won't be prisoner of unrealistic standards. (pp. 460-461)

To the extent that sex is a shared experience of emotions and meanings that transcends the purely physical aspects of two bodies coupling, the most intense erotic gratifications — the pleasure bond between lovers — will prove far more rewarding as a total experience than passion devoid of its interpersonal dimension. The synergy of sex born of intimacy and caring, sex in which physical action and the private, inner scenario of the psyche are merged with a partner's feelings and desires, is not easily matched by an earth-shattering orgasm disconnected from the fabric of our being. (p. 563)

What interests me is the position of the “earth-shattering” orgasm in MJK's thinking.

The first passage, from the chapter on sexual physiology, is certainly sensible enough — benevolent and enlightened. There is no sense, and possibly considerable harm, in judging one's own activity against a standard more readily attained in fiction. The second passage, from the sixteenth of their suggestions about how to improve your sex life, is much the same as the first. In both cases the earth-shaking orgasm is simply presented as one sexual possibility, one which may be imaginatively compelling, but one which exists more often in film and fiction than in reality. But the third passage, from the concluding epilogue on “The Future of Sexuality,” suggests that something more is going on here.

There is surely no doubt that sexuality in the context of a committed emotional relationship is more satisfying than more casual sex, which MJK concede also has its place. The last sentence of the third quotation, however, seems to me to be a quietly hysterical *non sequitor* in which the earth-shaking orgasm is presented, not as a sexual possibility whose importance has been exaggerated, and unfortunately so, but as a sexual experience which is outside the bounds of an emotionally committed sexual relationship. It is, in some horrible way, evil.

When I first read that sentence, I was expecting the words "is not easily matched by" to be followed by something in a range between "casual sex," and "even the most inventive and playful recreational sex with casual partners." That is, I expected the simple contrast between recreational sex and relational sex—a standard distinction which MJK made quite early in the book (on page 5). They have not, however, given us a just that simple contrast. Instead, we are given a contrast between relational sex and the earth-shattering orgasm. That is, sexuality, defined according to its interpersonal context (relational), is contrasted with sexuality defined according to orgasmic intensity. The terms of comparison and contrast are not of the same type. To be sure, the earth-shattering orgasm is modified by the phrase, "disconnected from the fabric of our being," which can plausibly be construed as characterizing sex in its interpersonal context. But, that only compounds the problem. For it seems unequivocally to place the earth-shattering orgasm outside the context of an emotionally committed sexual relationship.

But, why not have earth-shattering orgasms *within* an emotionally committed relationship? MJK haven't given us any reason why this is not possible, but they certainly seem to deny it. The early passage, the one from the chapter on physiology, simply asserted that not all orgasms are earth-shattering, but that in itself doesn't place passionate engulfing orgasms beyond the pale of emotional commitment. The problem is with the assertion that emotional commitment and engulfing orgasms are mutually exclusive. That is where we see the limitation of their paradigm.

Consider, for example, the fiction of D.H. Lawrence, which is certainly our most important single literary source of passionate orgasms and from which MJK quote to open their chapter on "Loving and Being Loved." Within Lawrence's work those orgasms occur in the context of emotionally committed relationships, not in casual sex. But, is the experience Lawrence depicts in his fiction real? That question is not so easy to answer—unless, of course, you happen to be one of those people who have had such orgasms.

Psychology, however, has not been comfortable with epiphanic orgasms. Wilhelm Reich's (1942/1968) work on the nature of the orgasm; his insistence that, for men, ejaculation is not necessarily orgasmic (which, incidentally, MJK concede, without, however, really acknowledging the quality of orgasmic intensity which is central to Reichian thought), set off a controversy about the nature of human sexuality which is still unresolved and which is simply ignored by MJK. From a Reichian point of view the epiphanic orgasm is an affirmation of our being, not a denial of it. For MJK, the earth-shaking orgasm is an experiential monster, a threat both to personal and intellectual integrity.

The paradigm of mechanistic science, with its separation of mind and body, cannot account for such an experience. Hence, MJK cannot account for epiphanic orgasms in their book. As Art Efron has noted (personal communication) "Their problem is their decision to start at the pure pleasure-machine model of the body, too simple a one for emotional reality, and then to try and fill it in with relationships later on." For MJK, relationships are in the mind, while sexual pleasure is in the body. They have no sense of a rich two-way interaction between mind and body, of physical pleasures and ideas which alter our experience of our own, and another's, body. To be sure, they may talk about such interaction (as in the third quoted passage), but this interaction is not deeply embedded in their thinking. It is just something added on, more to indicate a need than to deal with it.

For myself, I am satisfied both that epiphanic orgasms exist and that they are of central importance. For evidence and discussion I would recommend, in addition to Reich (1942/1968), Efron (1985), Maslow (1970), and Singer (1974). Thus, I cannot, in the end, find deep comfort in MJK's tolerant attitude about sexual climax, that whatever you experience is fine. It is no doubt harmful for a person to feel bad about himself or herself because his or her sexual experience does not meet some standards. But MJK leave no

room for the possibility that a person may be vulnerable to romantic myths of sexual ecstasy precisely because they are so conflicted about sexuality that they cannot achieve a deeply satisfying orgasm. Relieving such a person of his or her attachment to sexual mythology is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. This only removes a secondary source of anxiety, but it does not relieve the basic conflict.

Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving contains much valuable and interesting information. But, in the end, it is a symptom and victim of our inability to deal with sexuality (and loving, too). The objectivity they claim for their book is not vigorous enough to carry them beyond deeply embedded fears and assumptions.

One thing that we do need to help carry us beyond those fears is a more adequate set of conceptual tools for dealing with our emotional lives. We need a conceptual language which doesn't saddle us with unproductive dichotomies between mind and body, emotion and reason. It is to that need which I wish to address myself.

In so doing I will be frankly speculative. I am assuming that we need a conceptual language which, ultimately, is about the nervous system. That assumes a great deal, but I am also convinced that our knowledge of the nervous system isn't quite so meager as many specialists would have us believe. Yes, we need more observations, we always need more observations. But we are even more desperately in need of ideas. And ideas never come directly from the accumulation of observations. They come from speculation. Our current opportunities for speculation are as rich as our need.

Consider Warren McCulloch's concept of behavioral mode, as developed by Kilmer, McCulloch, and Blum (1969). Kilmer et al. suggest that an animal must always be in one of several mutually exclusive behavioral modes as eating, sleeping, fighting, exploring, mating, grooming, and so forth—Kilmer et al. list 15 modes, but the particular number and composition of this list are not crucial to the concept. And they argue that a structure deep in the core of the brain, the reticular formation, determines behavioral mode. Using its extensive *inputs* from the rest of the brain, the reticular formation makes a global assessment of the animal's needs and environmental possibilities and settles on a mode. Using its extensive *outputs* to the rest of the brain, the reticular formation commits the animal to a mode by facilitating activity in some brain centers and suppressing it in others. A behavioral mode is that overall pattern of neural attention and regulation which most facilitates one type of activity. One pattern of brain activity is best for eating, another for exploration, another for mating, and so forth.

In order to properly appreciate McCulloch's conception we must clearly realize that the central nervous system regulates action in two worlds, the external physical world and the internal visceral world. It directs activity in the external world through the somatic division of the peripheral nervous system (which controls the skeletal muscles) and activity in the viscera through the autonomic division of the peripheral nervous system. It is conventional to associate the somatic nervous system with voluntary activity and the autonomic with involuntary activity. However, the reticular formation is so situated that it is responsible to and for both somatic and autonomic activity so that behavioral mode organizes activity at a level which is deeper than the distinction between voluntary and involuntary action.

This is a very important point, for the distinction between voluntary and involuntary action is very easily developed into, or at least associated with, more sweeping distinctions between reason and emotion or even mind and body. These more general distinctions are usually taken to be *fundamental* and, quite often, their terms opposed; reason and mind *against* emotion and body. Certainly these dichotomies pervade discussions of sexuality. The concept of behavioral mode suggests, however, that these oppositions are not fundamental, that there is a deeper unity between emotion and reason, body and mind. Thus, at least one consequence of adopting behavioral mode as a concept around which

to construct a neuropsychological concept of sexuality is the loss of easy distinctions and oppositions between mind/reason and emotion/body. Those distinctions still have *experiential* force, but we are no longer bound to *think* of them as fundamental.

One of the most impressive lines of evidence consonant with this general line of reasoning comes from recent work in neurochemistry (see e.g., Bloom, 1981; Krieger and Liotta, 1979). Investigators have found neuropeptides in the brain whose chemical structures are identical to those of gut hormones, produced in the endocrine system. Because of the blood-brain barrier the chemicals could not have been conducted from endocrine glands to the brain through the bloodstream. The chemicals must have been created in the brain.

Why? We do not know. One plausible speculation, however, is that the neuropeptides somehow tag or label neural patterns according to the behavioral model which they serve (see Van Valen, 1982). That is, as gut hormones, these chemicals prepare the viscera for enacting various modes. These same chemicals label the neural patterns needed to regulate activity in these modes. Thus, we have chemical coordination of neural and visceral activity within a given behavioral mode.

Unfortunately, very little empirical or theoretical work has been done to extend McCulloch's conception (but, see Benzon and Hays, in press; Benzon, 1981, doesn't use the term behavioral mode, but the argument could easily be recast to do so). Putting aside the need for conceptual and empirical development, in order effectively to use the concept of behavioral mode we obviously need to relate it to more familiar concepts. One possibility is to link behavioral mode with the psychoanalytic theory of organ modes (e.g., oral, anal, and genital sexuality). The psychoanalytic theory provides a way of seeing that intimate bodily experiences pervade and determine mental and emotional life far beyond the actual activities of eating, eliminating, and sex. Certainly the basic physical actions on which psychoanalytic theory focuses would be assigned to different behavioral modes. And, because behavioral mode is a neuropsychological concept about the relationship between global brain states and specific actions it provides the beginnings of a neuropsychological mechanism for the psychoanalytic theory. The critical problem would be to see how a global brain state (mode) could become separated from the physical action it initially served. How, for example, can the eliminative mode be invoked without a physical need for defecation? How can that pattern of attention become a general state of mind no longer linked to a physical need?

Having raised such questions, I am no doubt being irresponsible in not attempting to answer them. But I am only interested in indicating where the concept of behavioral mode could be used, not in working out the details necessary to make that use effective. I want to consider one more example, one which returns us to sex and to love as well.

Tiger and Fox (1971) report a study conducted by J. Shepherd on the sexual and marital choices of children raised in a kibbutz, where the children are raised communally and thus in close association with children and adults who are not blood relatives. The study showed that there were no romantic or sexual relationships between children who were raised together before the age of six. The authors conclude that one type of bonding to a person seems to prohibit forming yet a different bond with that same person. In particular, they suggest that "despite the myth of many cultures, it may be difficult for parents also to be lovers" (Tiger and Fox, 1971, p. 58).

In our terms, bonding is mediated by a behavioral mode. For each type of bonding there is a different behavioral mode. The Shepherd study indicates that people strongly bonded through one behavioral mode cannot bond through another. This, Tiger and Fox suggest, may be at the root of the widely perceived conflict between love (or affection or tenderness) and sex in marriage. Do we gain anything at all by seeing this conflict as one involving behavioral mode?

This conflict between love and sex is often seen as a conflict between a higher (more spiritual) nature and a lower (more animalistic) nature. But the concept of behavioral mode doesn't allow us to make such distinctions primary. A central point of the concept is to see a fundamental unity between cerebral states and visceral states. If the conflict between love and sex is a conflict between behavioral modes, then it is a conflict between two mind/body systems, not between mind, on the one hand, and body on the other. The touch of love is physical, as is the thrust of sexual desire. Both systems envelop the mind, each in its own way enabling a certain conception of the world and of the object of desire.

This tension between love and sex has become central to our experience; we cannot merely wish it away. It has provided much of the energy in our literature since the Renaissance and it has been the object of much psychological and philosophical thought. But it does not receive very much attention in *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving*. There is a brief section on love and sex (pp. 226-229) which does acknowledge that it is a complicated subject. But there is no sense of just how problematic and agonizing this tension can be. Ironically, this follows immediately after MJK approvingly quote Harry Harlow as saying that poets and novelists know more about love than psychologists. MJK do not call upon poets or novelists, nor literary critics, nor even psychoanalysts.

It would be easy to be charitable and say that, after all, MJK cannot possibly cover everything. But in this case they have missed the most insightful discussions. Those discussions are not very scientific, not very objective, nor are they conclusive. But they are the best we have. As such, these messy and subjective humanistic discussions provide a better mirror through which people can reflect on their own experience than the more objective material summarized in *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving*.

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