

## Notes on the Meaning of Life

*Coming of age in the Beat context of Berkeley in the fifties, influenced by existentialism and full of angst, I accepted readily the idea that I would have to make meanings for myself. I would sometimes say that I had nothing to do with my life except whatever was "best"; my plan was to figure out the best thing to do and then do it. The quest went on for decades. This writing reports one aspect of it.*

*(Readers who may be distressed by portrayal of male sexuality may wish to skip this piece.)*

Most women live most of the time defending ourselves from environments that are pervasively phallic. Not only are we constantly warding off actual fucking, rape, molestation, and harassment, we are also subject to ubiquitous images of looming and lurching phalluses. Even scholarly essays refer to issues arising, points to be made, penetrating analyses, hard cases, thrusts, and upshots (while analyses judged to be inferior may be said to be "all wet and full of holes.")

I became especially conscious of the omnipresence of phallic culture when I discovered that I had devoted a great deal of my best energy over a period of years to a problem that was a problem for me only because I had failed to realize that its form was determined by male sexuality. I had been trying to apply to my own life values that men had derived from their sexual experience, clearly a doomed project.

## THE TWO ETHICS

In the male-dominated groups of mainly young, white, intellectuals and artists that I hung out with before feminism, two sorts of values were openly advocated: ecstatic experience and extraordinary achievement. I came to think of these as "the experience ethic" and "the achievement ethic." The former extols mystical joy: the illumination, the experience of merging and oneness, that may come through practices such as meditation, fasting, and drug-taking; sustained and focused sex; the making of art or contemplation of nature; and so on. Such experiences are sought for their own sake and sometimes also for the psychic and physical powers that may be associated with them. Despite their dangers ("merging" can make one crazy), such extraordinary experiences are often presented as the best that life has to offer. When I was in college, for example, in literature and philosophy and even science classes I was overwhelmed with tales of awesome experiences had by "great" men, and with the message that seeking and having such experiences makes for a truly "superior" life.

The achievement ethic focuses on great works or deeds that are valued partly for their own sake, for the satisfaction of accomplishment, but mainly as means to fame, money, and power. And immortality. Immortality here does not mean perpetual existence as an individual consciousness but, rather, continuing attention to one's works or deeds, and hence oneself, even after one's death. In this ethic, the idea is for works and deeds to have far-reaching influence in terms of both the people affected and the length of time that the influence continues, and one's name should be permanently attached; but an anonymous contribution that lasts even a short time after one's death is taken as better than none at all. (The quality of a contribution tends not to enter into the equation insofar as a crime or an atrocity brings the same rewards as a work of art or heroism.)

Before I had much comprehension of how these values worked, I began to read, think about, and experiment with

them. I had rejected the values I was expected to adhere to—particularly marriage and motherhood—early on as boring, stifling, intolerable; I needed to be independent and unencumbered. So I turned away from the values imposed on females of my time and place and race and class and turned instead to those designed for men.

Understanding these values, experience and achievement, as two separate and competing systems, I thought I had to give priority to one or the other. But extraordinary experience meant pushing myself physically and emotionally, staying awake for days, seeking always the bizarre, the incongruous, the perfectly beautiful: whippets racing across a vast lawn in the fog at dawn. Achievement, on the other hand, meant having an address, being able to get up at least some mornings, working longer and harder and smarter than those I was competing with (it meant competition, which I participated in avidly but hated). It seemed clear to me that the two sets of values were incompatible.

Yet I was attracted to both. The logical purity of the ecstasy ethic seduced me: it made perfect sense to me, trained as I was in individualism, that what one sought ultimately should be a state of consciousness, and that that state of consciousness should have *intrinsic* value, should be an end in itself. The achievement ethic seemed more muddled: what, after all, was one after? Immortality was clearly a fraud, since one would be dead when it happened, and what was the point of fame and money and power? These must themselves be means to some further ends. Less theoretically, I liked the lifestyle of the experience ethic (“All experiences are worthwhile,” I used to say and believe; only years later did I begin to add an “except” clause). Also, the ideology of ecstatic experience promised discipline—and justification—for my emotions, which were often chaotic. On the other hand, I needed the self-esteem that accomplishment could provide. And I liked the work—it was and is deeply exciting to me to make something that I think is worthwhile. I was also attracted by the prospect of immortality, although I felt a bit guilty about it. (I felt *more*

guilty about my desire for fame, money, and power and so did not admit even to myself that I wanted them; they were definitive of the dominant culture that had to be rejected.)

Sometimes I shifted back and forth between the two ethics, going to school, for example, with wholehearted concentration and academic success, and then dropping out so I could live without a schedule. Or, during another period, I alternated between three or four days of writing poetry (with a bit of part-time work for money) and then three or four days with my friends, plunged into emotional and physical intensity. Later, when I was in a job as an assistant professor that seemed to demand that all of my energy be devoted to achievement, as part of my attempt to achieve I wrote an essay in which I argued, against the philosophical establishment, that it is not irrational to "live for the moment," thus realizing an isolated synthesis of the two ethics.<sup>1</sup>

### THE SEXUAL CONNECTION

I have come to appreciate that the form of the two ethics is the form of male sexuality, that is, of male orgasm and reproduction. For men, transcendent experience is associated with orgasm, and immortal achievement with impregnation.

I need hardly argue for a link between orgasm and ecstatic experience: orgasm *is* (supposed to be) ecstatic experience.<sup>2</sup> Patriarchal psychologist Abraham Maslow calls attention to the link in the context of a discussion of what he calls "the peak experience," noting that some of his subjects (who were overwhelmingly male) give accounts of their mystical experiences in terms that are also used to describe orgasms:

There were the same feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simulta-

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<sup>1</sup>"Aprudentialism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (July 1974): 203-10.

<sup>2</sup>Of course not everyone finds ecstasy desirable.

neously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before, the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe, the loss of placing in time and space with, finally, the conviction that something extremely important and valuable had happened, so that the subject is to some extent transformed and strengthened even in his daily life by such experiences.<sup>3</sup>

As ecstatic experience is associated by men with orgasm, so impregnation is taken by them to be an achievement. A classic example from patriarchal literature is provided by Diotima, when, in Plato's *Symposium*, she speaks explicitly from a male perspective and asks:

Who, when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones? Who would not emulate them in the creation of children such as theirs, which have preserved their memory and given them everlasting glory? . . . [A]nd many others there are in many other places . . . who have given to the world many notable works, and have been the parents of virtue of every kind; and many temples have been raised in their honor for the sake of children such as theirs. . . .<sup>4</sup>

When I understood that men associate intense experience with their orgasms and immortal achievement with their giv-

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham M. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, second edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 164. I take Maslow's account to be propaganda designed to get people so focused on sex that we don't have time or energy to change the social and political structures that control us.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, "Symposium," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1982, 1920), marginal number 209, 333-4. Jerome Schiller, a scholar of classical Greek philosophy, read this piece (it was part of a dossier I submitted for a promotion I did not get); he suggests that I would do better to refer to Plotinus here because Plotinus—but not Plato—says clearly that "in contemplation, we produce."

ing genetic material to a baby, the conflict I had felt between the two value systems began to dissolve: in the male imagination, I realized, orgasm in intercourse and the impregnation of a woman are *one and the same event*: for at least many men, to have an orgasm in a woman's vagina is—ideally, “naturally”—to impregnate her. (Hence, many men reject contraception because for them, at a gut level, it stymies not only their capacity to reproduce but also their very orgasms.)

For women, in contrast, orgasm and pregnancy are *independent*. Indeed, in contemporary u.s. society, it is likely that female orgasm is only occasionally a precursor to pregnancy; most episodes of heterosexual activity evidently do not include female orgasm at all.<sup>5</sup> For women, reproduction is emphatically *not* a matter of having an orgasm which, even if it occurs on the occasion of impregnation, is as nothing compared to nine months of pregnancy and childbirth: surely it is these, along with the raising of children, that constitute reproduction for women.

This difference explains why men find no conflict between the two ethics, but I do. For men, it is obvious that through ecstatic orgasm one creates babies, and through other experiences that break through the usual limits of personality one may create great art and science and heroism. For them, spewing forth seed is *both* ecstasy *and* creation of a new reality. For me, orgasm was not at all connected with *achievement*. And reproduction was certainly not connected with any kind of positive experience, for I had been pregnant in high school and had an illegal abortion. While men intuitively identified orgasm with reproduction and so ecstasy with creation, such connections for me were at best abstract and weak. For men there was but one integrated system: orgasms produced the next generation. For me, the two values were in conflict. The conflict plagued me because I didn't notice that the values I was struggling with were men's, designed by and for men, and I did not

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<sup>5</sup> Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* (New York: Dell, 1976), especially the chapter on intercourse.

realize that men's values cannot be authentic for me.

Once I began thinking about the two ethics as projections of male sexuality and therefore as not applicable to me, my problem with them disappeared. I stopped trying to choose between them. And by then I had developed other kinds of values. I had become more aware of the lousy lives most women live in patriarchy and had begun to make changing the conditions of our lives a central concern. I realized that I did not, after all, like either of the two values I had been struggling over: "merging" frightened me because it makes one vulnerable, and achievement angered me because it is competitive. Both, I came to think, are promulgated in hierarchical culture to keep people from paying attention to what is really going on. True power is reserved for only a few, so others must be kept occupied with individualistically seeking the elusive rewards of ecstasy and immortality.

As I began to think in this way, I became more and more clearly aware that what moves me most deeply is not sex or ecstatic experience, not reproduction or achievement, but wimmin, the worldwide movements of wimmin.

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*I thank Fox (then Jeanette Silveira), Claudia Card, and Julien S. Murphy for suggestions about this essay.*