

The Masturbation Fantasy Paradox: An Overlooked Phenomenon?

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Masturbation is often accompanied by fantasizing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some people cannot fantasize about the person they are in love with while they masturbate. This putative phenomenon, the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox (MFP), may be a particular case of a more general principle put forward by Sigmund Freud in 1912.

*Ob ich irgendwann aufhöre, blöde Fragen zu stellen?
Fragen wie: [...] "An wen denkst du beim Onanieren?"*[1]

1 Introduction

Common sense has it that human imagination is the realm where the individual is absolute master.[2] This optimistic idea was epitomized in a famous poem by Emily Brönte:

Where thou, and I, and Liberty,
Have undisputed sovereignty.[3]

Counterintuitively though, it appears that some things cannot be imagined.[4] This was succinctly expressed by Samuel Butler:

"Imagination will do any bloody thing almost."[5]

Usually this is not a problem as most people never try to imagine the impossible: they do not know what they do not miss what they do not know.

The physical act of masturbation is typically accompanied by verbal stimuli (reading 'ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main'), audiovisual stimuli (photos or videos), or the mental process of fantasizing (Fig. 1).

Some authors have expressed doubts about the desirability and indeed the possibility of fantasizing about the person they are 'in love with' while masturbating.

In this equation the variable 'in love with' is, of course, imprecise. It can equally be argued that the masturbator 'loves', 'has a crush on', 'adores', 'is romantically infatuated with', 'has a pash on', 'worships', 'takes a fancy to' the significant other or 'the loved-one'. [6] However, in order not to nip the argument in the bud, we should adopt the 'principle of limited sloppiness' in this matter. Let us, therefore, use 'in love with' and 'the loved-one' as the blanket terms of choice.

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Figure 1: **Gustav Klimt**, *Seated semi-nude with spread legs (Sitzende Frau mit gespreizten Schenkeln)* (c.1917)

2 Method

A simple abduction will suffice: 'The surprising fact, C, is observed; But if A were true, C would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.' Provisional evidence of the existence of the hypothetical phenomenon (A) we may find in direct (C1) and indirect observations (C2) in autobiographical, literary, and popular

scientific works.

3 Hypothesis (A)

There are people who, even if they want to, are not able to fantasize about a particular person while masturbating if they are 'in love with' this person. This hypothetical phenomenon may be called the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox (MFP).

4 Direct Observations (C1)

- (1) The multitalented Stephen Fry confessed in his autobiographical *Moab is My Washpot*:

Although I was to develop, like every male, into an enthusiastic, ardent and committed masturbator, *he* was never once, nor ever has been, the subject of a masturbatory fantasy. Many times I tried to cast him in some scene I was directing for the erotic XXX cinema in my head, but it always happened that some part of me banished him from the set, or else the very sight of him on screen in the coarse porn flick running in my mind had the effect of a gallon of cold water. Sex was to enter our lives, but he was never wank fodder, never.[7]

Clearly, Fry's is the most explicit of my testimonials. He is also the one who expresses surprise about his inability to incorporate the 'loved-one' in his masturbation fantasies. Paraphrasing another tragic lover, this paradox could be summarized thus:

Beauty too rich for abuse, as wank fodder too dear!

- (2) In 1930, André Breton, while discussing sexuality in the loosely formed group of surrealists, remarked comparably:

What do you think about when you masturbate?

André Breton: It is accompanied by a series of fleeting images of different women (dream women) I knew or know but never a woman I have loved.[8]

- (3) Dermot Moore wrote in *Diary of a Man* about his experience as a Boy Scout:

I have no racy stories about shady events after lights-out in the tent. In fact, having recently discovered masturbation, I found camp frustrating for the lack of opportunity for relief. The fly-infested latrines were the only possible venues, but, unaccountably, self-abuse lost its allure there. However, I was in love with a boy in my patrol. I never really thought about sex with him, but

we would roll around on the damp grass in mock combat, laughing and shouting "Help! Homo! Rape!" loudly enough, supposedly, to disguise our covert desire from the others. And from each other.[9]

- (4) And, finally, slightly more indirectly, the novelist John Hole lets Norman Ranburn, the protagonist of his novel *The Ultimate Aphrodisiac*, muse :

It didn't matter that he might be in love with her. Love meant nothing at his age. Except, he discovered with some fascination, that he didn't want to besmirch and overlay his vision of her with a dirty wanker's fantasy.[10]

5 Indirect Observations (C2)

Surprisingly few scientific studies have been done on sexual fantasies. On masturbation fantasies, a sub-class of sexual fantasy, even less empirical data exist.

- (1) Starting in 1973, Nancy Friday published a series of books on sexual fantasies; first on female fantasies and later also on male fantasies. Friday solicited written response by advertising for people to report to her their sexual fantasies. This methodology was criticized as being prone to sampling bias. Nonetheless, Friday's reports were the first more or less systematic studies on sexual (masturbation) fantasies. In the first chapter of *My Secret Garden* Friday still expressed the optimistic believe that the sexual fantasist is omnipotent:

They [the fantasies] present the astonished self with the incredible, the opportunity to entertain the impossible.[11]

Friday did, however, mention another phenomenon concerning the relationship between sexual fantasies and secrecy that might inspire doubt about the absolute power of sexual fantasies:

One thing I've learned about fantasies: they're fun to share, but once shared, half their magic, their ineluctable power, is gone.[12]

Friday did not explicitly mention the putative phenomenon of MFP. Sometimes, though, she comes close. For example in the statement by respondent 'Beth Anne':

The funny thing is, when I'm dating someone I really care for, I never fantasize about them. [...] Usually my thoughts center around a man I find fantastically attractive and very nice, i.e., a customer, a stranger on the street, someone I don't know too well.[13]

Friday generalized this experience as follows, giving it a particularly positive twist:

One of the ironies of fantasy is that the hero of our erotic reveries is rarely the man we love. Perhaps it is the very fulfillment and satisfaction we get from him that leaves nothing to the imagination, and so we need these strangers in the night to people our imaginary sexual worlds. They bring us the excitement of the unknown.[14]

In some men, too, Friday found implicit MFP. For example respondent 'Don' stated:

By age twenty, still a virgin, I had had a succession of enchanting teen-age affairs—but since nice girls didn't have sexual organs and certainly didn't fuck, I didn't even attempt to fondle a breast or introduce "French" kissing. I didn't even feel free to fantasize my latest love for masturbation purposes, usually resorting to her sister or one of her less attractive girl friends instead. One's love had to be kept on a special pedestal.[15]

- (2) In 2007 Brett Kahr published a monography based on a comprehensive study: the British Sexual Fantasy Research Project. This investigation consisted of (a) an Internet survey (n = 13,553) and (b) 'intensive qualitative, face-to-face, clinical psychodiagnostic interview' (n = 122). In the published results Kahr did not explicitly report MFP. He did, however, write:

Many of the people whom I interviewed told me that they did not want to fantasize about the partner with whom they had had a row only hours before, the same partner who had spent all their money and had bored them with endless stories about their tedious work colleagues.[16]

So, if Kahr stated that and explained why many masturbators do not fantasize about their regular partners (possibility of negative choice), he did not mention the putative phenomenon of not being able to fantasize about the person one is 'in love with' while masturbating (impossibility of positive choice). Thus, Kahr did not include 'Possibility – Impossibility' in 'The Ten Key Dimensions of Sexual Fantasy'.[17] This dimension may have been so elementary that he overlooked it.

Both Nancy Friday and Brett Kahr use a more (Kahr) or less (Friday) classical psychoanalytic framework to interpret masturbation fantasies. Needless to say that we do not have to accept their frameworks of interpretation in order to appreciate some of the cases they presented.

6 Discussion

Brett Kahr justly remarked:

When one attempts to analyse a sexual fantasy, one needs to become a detective, and use

not only the psychoanalytical skills bequeathed to us by Sigmund Freud, but also the forensic skills of a Sherlock Holmes.[18]

Sherlock Holmes already noticed that it is not always the presence of a clue that is essential for solving a riddle but that it is sometimes the absence of a clue that is crucial.

"Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.[19]

It is the impossibility, the absence, so to speak, of fantasizing about the 'loved one' while masturbating that is the vital clue here. Expanding the psychoanalytic term 'central masturbation fantasy' we could call the object of MFP the 'central impossible masturbation fantasy'.

Sigmund Freud – and before him Stendhal, Catullus, and others – formulated wonder over the paradoxes of love and desire.[20] In his 1912 article 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love' Freud wrote the famous sentence:

Where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love.[21]

Again; we do not have to accept psychoanalysis wholesale for us to see the relevance of this Freud's observation.[22] If Freud intended the paradox primarily for the physical act of sex, the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox describes the phenomenon for the mental process of fantasizing.[23] The Masturbation Fantasy Paradox, if it is a genuine phenomenon, may prove to be a special case of the more general paradox of love and desire so pointedly expressed in Freud's dictum.

7 Question(s)

The above testimonials and opinions raise some very Open Questions. Prominent among these questions are:

- (1) Is the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox a spurious or a genuine phenomenon? In other words, was it overlooked with good reason or unjustifiably?
- (2) Are all masturbators – men, women, young, old, heterosexual, homosexual, etcetera – equally subject to the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox?

After these relevant facts are established, another question, which opens a pleasing field for intelligent speculation, may be addressed:

- (3) Can the presence or absence of the Masturbation Fantasy Paradox be a diagnostic and prognostic symptom in abnormal and clinical psychology? More specifically, can it be a part of the Madonna-whore complex?

8 Prediction

I predict that a focussed scientific investigation (pen-and-paper survey; anonymous interviews; etcetera?) will yield a statistically significant proportion of the population presenting MFP.

[1] Ildikó von Kürthy, *Herzprung*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001, pp. 190-91.

[2] The distinction between 'imagination' and 'fantasy' is dubious. Therefore, in this case, both terms will be understood as synonyms. The differentiation between 'fantasy' (the conscious variety) and 'phantasy' (the unconscious variety) is fare for the even more rarefied psychoanalytic palate.

[3] Emily Brönte, 'To Imagination' [1846] in *The Poems of Emily Brönte* (ed. Barbara Lloyd-Evans), London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1992, p. 54.

[4] 'Counterintuitive' and 'paradoxical' are, in this case, understood as synonyms. Perhaps the best example of an impossible imagination was delineated by Sigmund Freud: 'It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.' ('Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' [1915], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV, London: Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 289). 'Der eigene Tod ist ja auch unvorstellbar, und sooft wir den Versuch dazu machen, können wir bemerken, daß wir eigentlich als Zuschauer weiter dabei bleiben.' ('Unser Verhältnis zum Tode' [1915], 'Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod', Band IX 'Fragen der Gesellschaft – Ursprünge der Religion', *Studienausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982, p. 49).

[5] Samuel Butler, *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*. Vol. 20 of *The Works of Samuel Butler* (The Shrewsbury Edition) London: Jonathan Cape, 1926, p. 317.

[6] Interestingly, 'fancy' comes from 'fantasy' (*The Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol. 5, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, Vol. 5, p. 714). Therefore, someone who 'takes a fancy to' some other person, allegedly fantasizes about this other person. The question is whether this is a masturbation fantasy.

[7] Stephen Fry, *Moab is My Washpot*. London: Hutchinson, 1997, p. 272.

[8] José Pierre (ed.), *Investigating Sex – Surrealist Discussions 1928-1932*. (trans. Malcom Imrie), London / New York: Verso,

1992, p. 128 (Ninth Session – 24 November 1930). The French original reads: 'Elle s'accompagne d'une série de représentations fugitives de femmes différentes (rêve, femmes que j'ai connues ou que je connais mais n'étant jamais la femme que j'ai aimée).'

[9] Dermot Moore, *Diary of a Man*. Dublin: Hot Press Books, 2005, p. 178.

[10] John Hole, *The Ultimate Aphrodisiac*. London: Coronet Books (Hodder and Stoughton), 1996, p. 181.

[11] Nancy Friday, *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*. New York: Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster), 2008 [1973], p. 4.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[13] Nancy Friday, *Forbidden Flowers: More Women's Sexual Fantasies*. London: Arrow Books, 2003 [1975], pp. 72-73.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 134-35.

[15] Nancy Friday, *Men in Love, Men's Sexual Fantasies: The Triumph of Love Over Rage*. London: Arrow Books, 2003 [1980], p. 36.

[16] Brett Kahr, *Sex and the Psyche*. London: Allen Lane (Penguin Books), 2007, p. 140.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 557-59.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 431.

[19] A. Conan Doyle, 'Silver Blaze' [1893] in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*. London: Penguin, 1981, p. 347.

[20] Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986.

[21] Sigmund Freud, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love' [1912], 'Contributions to the Psychology of Love II' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XI, London: Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 177-90.

'Wo sie lieben, begehren sie nicht, und wo sie begehren, können sie nicht lieben.' ('Über die allgemeinste Erniedrigung des Liebeslebens' [1912], 'Beiträge zur Psychologie des Liebeslebens II', Band V 'Sexualleben', *Studienausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982, p. 202).

[22] The medical doctor, writer and poet Gottfried Benn formulated a similar insight: "[...] this marital impotence is a standing ovation for the wife as a human being." ("[...] diese Impotenz in der Ehe ist eine Ovation für die Ehepartnerin als Mensch." Gottfried Benn, *Ausgewählte Briefe*. Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1957, p. 138).

[23] Slightly stretching the original meaning of Stendhal's term, we could say that MFP constitutes a fiasco d'imagination.