

*The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World*  
By Mario Perniola, trans. Massimo Verdicchio  
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From its title, I assumed this book would concern the sexual attractiveness of inanimate objects—that is, I expected to read about our lately increasing tendency through the use of sex toys, fantasy props, and the internet to incorporate objects into our understanding of full sexuality. But Mario Perniola has something more ambitious in mind: the propounding of a new kind of "neutral sexuality" which takes persons as feeling things, takes bodies as clothing, shuns the narrative arc connecting sex to orgasm, distances sex from desire, and has no use for sexual pleasure. In "the sex appeal of the inorganic," we are indifferent to "beauty, age, and form." So it's not about loving objects. It's about *becoming* them.

This is a philosophical work, presented as a series of reflections in twenty-seven short and interrelated chapters; Perniola weaves discussions of historical thinkers, such as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, together with observations about contemporary culture and sex practices such as sado-masochism and fetishism. In Italy, Perniola is Professor of Aesthetics, and he writes in what American philosophers often call (perhaps inappropriately) a "continental" or "literary" style. That is, rather than proceeding from premises to conclusion via arguments, the text engages a variety of interrelated themes.

These themes shy away from the ordinary common-sense questions that come immediately to mind: If you remove orgasm, bodies, desire, pleasure from sex, what is left? How would neutral sexuality work in practice? What steps would a person take to

be more neutrally sexual than he already is, and ought one take those steps in real life? At points, Perniola suggests we are already living in a world of the sexual appeal of the inorganic; but with respect to sex at least, this just seems false: beauty, age, and form are certainly as central to sexuality and sex appeal as ever. If anything, the internet has made this bodily aspect of sex more intense rather than less. So in what sense can we say that "organic sexuality" is being replaced?

The book discusses a wide range of topics, from hardcore music and vampire movies to art installations and Japanese film. But rather than trying to be comprehensive, I'll focus here on the main theme of the book: the giving up of oneself to others as a passive object that feels—not as a body that wants pleasure or orgasm, not as a mind that wants to control, not as a person who negotiates for what he wants, but simply as an experiencing thing.

Perniola cautions us against various misinterpretations of this idea, and in some of the book's most interesting passages, explains clearly what neutral sexuality is *not*. In addition to not being desire-, pleasure-, or orgasm-oriented, neutral sexuality is also not sadism, not masochism, not fetishism, not commodifying, not consistent with either a harmonizing or a dualistic conception of sex difference.

The distinction between neutral sexuality and masochism is particularly important. Neutral sexuality shares with masochism "the will to give oneself as a thing that feels," and also the interest in relations in which "it is always possible to arouse and maintain sexual excitement" (p. 41); but neutral sexuality is crucially different in its refusal to engage in any kind of power grabs or contractual arrangements. A masochist, Perniola says, solves the difficulty of the impermanence of desire by placing himself after

desire has already disappeared, and binding his love to him by becoming the agent of his own dissatisfaction. In this way, the masochist retains control: if his lover is with another man, if she tries to damage him beyond all limits, even if she leaves him forever, he is, in a sense, in control of the scene.

Neutral sexuality also addresses itself to the problem of impermanence and involves a kind of refocus away from the desires and wishes of the person in question. But unlike masochism, it does not attempt this end-run around the problems of desire. It simply ignores them. "It does not originate from the contradiction between excellence and degradation, but from the unconditional approval of the unlimited space opened up by the disappearance of the subject" (p. 44). Neutral sexuality, then, involves a deeper and more complete giving up of one's own subjectivity.

This suggests a new solution to the famous problems of sexual objectification. Perniola agrees with Kant that in sex one cannot help but use another person as a mere means. But he complains (along with others, and correctly, in my opinion) that Kant's proposed solution in terms of a contract in marriage could never solve this difficulty (p. 20), because a contract seems to entail mutual use rather than no use at all. Rather, one would need a more radical kind of reinterpretation of the relations between sexual agents, on which they become one. Neutral sexuality, if I understand correctly, offers this kind of reinterpretation: the neutral sexual agent says to his lover, as in prayer, "*thou* do with me what you wish!" (p. 24).

It may seem that to give up one's subjectivity in such a deep and radical way would entail a loss of dignity or humanity, but Perniola argues that Kantian moral philosophy contains the seeds of a solution to this problem (Chapter 10). For Kant, he

says, the moral agent is part of the noumenal world, is a thing-in-itself; the character of duty derives from consideration only of the agent's impersonal aspects and not from anything to do with his particularity or his emotions. So giving up particularity or emotions, in giving up subjectivity, will not essentially change a person.

This characterization of neutral sexuality raises difficult questions. First, the discussion of dignity in terms of Kantian moral agency seems to confuse giving up subjectivity in the form of desire and giving up subjectivity in the form of autonomy. As neutral sexuality is presented, the giving of oneself can have no limits. But this seems to require relinquishing not only desire, but also self-direction, and thus autonomy. Since respect for autonomy grounds Kantian moral philosophy, and since one needs self-directedness to act morally, it is hard to see how Kantian morality and neutral sexual agency could be consistent. Consider the possibility Perniola never raises, that one's partner does not demand simple acquiescence, but rather obedience, and imagine that what he or she demands is immoral. What is the neutral sexual agent to do?

Furthermore, I wonder how the renouncing of subjectivity is an improvement on Kantian contractualism as a solution to the problem of sexual objectification. If one interprets the giving up of subjectivity as an autonomous act, then this is much like giving a kind of broad consent. But giving consent is much like engaging in a contract; indeed, it has just the spirit of negotiation that neutral sexuality shuns. If one interprets the giving up of subjectivity more radically, as a kind of melding of one person to another, say, this not only raises the problem of moral agency just mentioned, but it also seems to raise the possibility of the neutral sexual agent "falling into the wrong hands," and being used simply as a tool or patsy by a non-neutral sexual agent. In contemporary Western

culture, we tend to think that consent is crucial to a moral sexual act. If we remove consent even as a meaningful category, as this interpretation seems to require us to do, what happens to sexual morality? Isn't the neutral sexual agent ripe for abuse?

One may insist here that neutral sexuality is something we all must reach together. That may ameliorate the moral difficulties. But it is hard to imagine what sexuality would become under such conditions. Picture two partners who have each forsworn desire, pleasure, and orgasm in sex. What activities would they engage in? How would they be moved to engage in such activities?

In my view, these questions are pressing because thinking of sexuality without desire and pleasure challenges our understanding of the nature of sex in ways deeper than Perniola seems to acknowledge. What would make an act a sex act if it had none of these qualities? The mental image of two persons touching one another in intimate ways with no desire and no pleasure is an unhappy one. Perniola seems to acknowledge something like this when he calls pleasure "the saddest topic of this book" (p. 132), but his discussion there just concerns the ancient philosophers and their musings about the dangers of pleasure and the distinctions between false and true pleasures.

This book contains many short discussions on other topics, such as Hegel and Heidegger on thingness, Kant on the morality of the fetish, the interrelationship between philosophy and sexuality, and theories of sex differences. Some of these are thought-provoking; others just seem strange, such as the proposal that we consider euthanasia in the sphere of sadistic sexuality (p. 25) or the claim that the dependence of sexuality on the organic can be blamed in part on feminism and psychoanalysis (p. 48). As I see it,

none of these discussions adds support to the main thesis of this book, that we are becoming, and ought to be become, sexual objects in a new and radical way.