Neu

"Freud and Perversion"

Freud's Conceptual Distinction

- "the perversions involve variations along a number of dimensions (source, object, and aim) of a single underlying instinct" (87)
- **source**: erotogenic zones
  - erotogenic zones: areas of the body sensitive to sexual stimulation (e.g., genitals, lips, etc.)
- **object**: the thing of sexual interest (e.g., a member of the opposite sex, animals, etc.)
- **aim**: pleasure, reproduction, bodily contact, love, money, etc.
- **underlying instinct**: sexual satisfaction

Significance of Freud's Classificatory Scheme

- Freud's scheme
  1. questions treating one set of variations as primary
  2. exposes apparently benign activities as fundamentally sexual in nature (e.g., thumb sucking)
- Is one set of variations better or worse than another?
  - "Once one sees sexuality as involving a single underlying instinct, with room for variation along several dimensions, new criteria for pathology are needed." (88)
Homosexuality

- Freud distinguishes inversion from perversion
  - **Inversion**: "involves displacement of the sexual object from members of the opposite sex to members of the same sex." (88)
  - other displacements of sexual objects include: bestiality, necrophilia, etc.
- Is homosexuality a case of perversion and should one disapprove of it?
  - According to Freud, homosexuality is a perversion
  - But, Freud appears ambivalent about moral implications

Criteria of Perversion

1. **Deviation from the norm**
   - Problem with using deviation from the norm to determine what is perverse is that deviations vary from society to society, time to time, and place to place
   - Sociological approaches will not be able to answer the psychological question about the nature of sexual perversion

2. **Content of sexuality**: the "standard" content of sexuality is heterosexual genital intercourse
   - But, if this is the standard, then anything else along the way is perverse
   - But, given Freud's analysis of sexuality as a single instinct varying along multiple dimensions, then it is unclear why heterosexual intercourse is primary

Criteria of Perversion (cont.)

3. **Disgust**: activities which elicit disgust are to be considered perverse
   - But, attitudes of disgust vary individually, culturally, and through time
   - Just as the objects of disgust vary, so too do the objects of sexual desire vary
   - "So if the objects of sexual desire have no fixed or determinate content, neither do the objects of sexual disgust." (91)

Criteria of Perversion (cont.)

4. **Biological Development**: perverse sexuality is infantile sexuality
   - The appeal to infantile sexuality as perverse and mature sexuality as not perverse assumes normalcy in adult sexuality
   - But, Freud places sexuality in the historical development of the individual that is prior to sexual reproduction
   - Maturation as a criteria for perversion also assumes biological reproduction as a standard of normalcy
   - But, detachment from sexual reproduction cannot be sufficient for sexual perversion since sterile and contraceptive-using heterosexuals don't reproduce and are not perverse
Is Homosexuality a Perversion?

- "It remains unclear whether homosexuality should be regarded as a perversion: it depends on which criterion for perversion is adopted...and given certain criteria, on which developmental and aetiological theories are believed. But it does seem clear that even if homosexuality is regarded as a perversion, that in itself gives no ground for condemning it or thinking it worse than heterosexuality; no reason to disapprove it in others or avoid it in itself." (97)

Foot Fetishism

- What about a foot makes it sexually attractive? How can a foot satisfy one's sexual needs?
- What mechanism leads to this choice of object? Why does this object have the meaning it does?
- Neu argues against "stimulus generalization" explanations (behaviorism) as inadequate
- Behaviorist models focus on the behavior and cannot account for the thought and meaning attached to the object
- "sexuality is not purely physical. Indeed, if it were, one might expect the objects and aims of sexual desire to be fixed by biology." (99)
- "Sex is as much a matter of thought as of action."

Mental and Physical Borderland

- Sexual instinct has direction (aim and object) and a bodily source
- The mental representations of the sexual instinct are part of the historical development of the individual
- Neurosis, perversion, or normalcy develop from experiences
- These experiences shape our original sexual instinct also shape our character
- "but it should be clear that our sexual character in large measure determines our character, who we are: whether directly...or indirectly..." (100)

Three Lessons

1. Sexuality is complex, changing, and multi-dimensional (source, object, aim)
2. There are multiple criteria for perversion and no one is satisfactory for understanding human nature
3. "The purposes, functions, and goals of sexuality are multiple" and arise in the borderland of the physical and mental

- "Who we are is revealed in who or what and how we love." (100)