

THE SEXUAL ENLIGHTENMENT OF CHILDREN (AN OPEN LETTER TO DR. M. FÜRST) - (1907)

Dear Dr. Fürst,

When you ask me for an expression of opinion on 'the sexual enlightenment of children', I assume that what you want is not a regular, formal treatise on the subject which shall take into account the excessive mass of literature that has grown up around it, but the independent judgement of an individual doctor whose professional activities have offered him special opportunities for concerning himself with sexual problems. I know that you have followed my scientific efforts with interest and that, unlike many of our colleagues, you do not dismiss my ideas without examining them because I regard the psychosexual constitution and certain noxae of sexual life as the most important causes of the neurotic disorders that are so common. My Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, too, where I have described the way in which the sexual instinct is compounded and the disturbances which may occur in its development into the function of sexuality, have recently had a friendly reception in your journal.

I am expected, therefore, to answer questions on the following points: whether children ought to be given any enlightenment at all about the facts of sexual life, at what age this ought to happen and in what manner it should be carried out. Let me admit to you at once that I find a discussion of the second and third points perfectly reasonable, but that to my mind it is quite incomprehensible how there could be a difference of opinion on the first point. What can be the purpose of withholding from children - or, let us say, from young people - enlightenment of this kind about the sexual life of human beings? Is it from a fear of arousing their interest in these matters prematurely, before it awakens in them spontaneously? Is it from a hope that a concealment of this kind may retard the sexual instinct altogether until such time as it can find its way into the only channels open to it in our middle-class social order? Is it supposed that children would show no interest or understanding for the facts and riddles of sexual life if they were not prompted to do so by outside influences? Is it thought possible that the knowledge which is withheld from them will not reach them in other ways? Or is it genuinely and seriously intended that later on they should regard everything to do with sex as something degraded and detestable from which their parents and teachers wished to keep them away as long as possible?

I really do not know in which of these purposes to look for the motive for the concealment of what is sexual from children that is in fact carried out. I only know that they are all equally absurd and that I find it difficult to honour them with a serious refutation. I remember, however, that in the family letters of that great thinker and humanitarian Multatuli, I once found a few lines which are a more than adequate answer:

'To my mind, certain things are in general too much wrapped in a veil. It is right to keep a child's imagination pure, but this purity will not be preserved by ignorance. On the contrary, I think that concealment leads a boy or girl to suspect the truth

more than ever. Curiosity leads us to pry into things which, if they had been told us without any great to do, would have aroused little or no interest in us. If this ignorance could be maintained even, I might become reconciled to it, but that is impossible. The child comes into contact with other children, books come his way which lead him to reflect, and the mystery-making with which his parents treat what he has nevertheless discovered actually increases his desire to know more. This desire, which is only partly satisfied and only in secret, excites his feeling and corrupts his imagination, so that the child already sins while his parents still believe that he does not know what sin is.’¹

I do not know how the case could be better stated, but perhaps I may add a few remarks. It is undoubtedly nothing else but the customary prudishness and their own bad conscience over sexual matters that causes adults to adopt this attitude of ‘mystery-making’ in front of children; but possibly a part is also played by a piece of theoretical ignorance on their part, which we can counteract by giving the adults some enlightenment. It is commonly believed that the sexual instinct is absent in children and only begins to emerge in them at puberty when the sexual organs mature. This is a gross error, equally serious in its effects both on knowledge and on practice; and it is so easily corrected by observation that one wonders how it could ever have been made. As a matter of fact, the new-born baby brings sexuality with it into the world, certain sexual sensations accompany its development as a suckling and during early childhood, and only very few children would seem to escape sexual activities and sensations before puberty. Anyone who would like to find a detailed exposition of these statements can do so in my *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, to which I have referred above. There he will learn that the organs of reproduction proper are not the only parts of the body which provide sexual sensations of pleasure, and that nature has even so ordered matters that actual stimulations of the genitals are unavoidable during early childhood. This period of life, during which a certain quota of what is undoubtedly sexual pleasure is produced by the excitation of various parts of the skin (erotogenic zones), by the activity of certain biological instincts and as an accompanying excitation in many affective states, is called the period of auto-erotism, to use a term introduced by Havelock Ellis. All that puberty does is to give the genitals primacy among all the other zones and sources which produce pleasure, and thus to force erotism into the service of the function of reproduction. This process can naturally undergo certain inhibitions, and in many people (those who later become perverts and neurotics) it is only incompletely accomplished. On the other hand, the child is capable long before puberty of most of the psychical manifestations of love-tenderness, for example, devotion and jealousy. Often enough, too, an irruption of these mental states is associated with the physical sensations of sexual excitation, so that the child cannot remain in doubt as to the connection between the two. In short, except for his reproductive power, a child has a fully-developed capacity for love long before puberty; and it may be asserted that the ‘mystery-making’ merely prevents him from being able to gain an

¹ Multatuli, 1906, 1, 26.4

intellectual grasp of activities for which he is psychically prepared and physically adjusted.

A child's intellectual interest in the riddles of sex, his desire for sexual knowledge, shows itself accordingly at an unexpectedly early age. If it has not been possible to make observations such as I am now going to put before you more frequently, that can only be because parents are either afflicted with blindness in regard to this interest on the part of their children, or, because, if they cannot overlook it, they at once take steps to stifle it. I know a delightful little boy, now four years old, whose understanding parents abstain from forcibly suppressing one part of the child's development. Little Hans has certainly not been exposed to anything in the nature of seduction by a nurse, yet he has already for some time shown the liveliest interest in the part of the body which he calls his 'widdler'. When he was only three he asked his mother: 'Mummy, have you got a widdler too?' His mother answered: 'Of course. What did you think?' He also asked his father the same question repeatedly. At the same age he was taken to a cow-shed for the first time and saw a cow being milked. 'Oh look!' he said, in surprise, 'there's milk coming out of its widdler!' At the age of three and three quarters he was on the way to making an independent discovery of correct categories by means of his observations. He saw some water being let out of an engine and said, 'Oh, look, the engine's widdling. Where's it got its widdler?' He added afterwards in reflective tones: 'A dog and a horse have widdlers; a table and a chair haven't.' Recently he was watching his seven-day-old little sister being given a bath. 'But her widdler's still quite small', he remarked; 'when she grows up it'll get bigger all right.' (I have been told of this same attitude towards the problem of sex distinction in other boys of similar age.) I should like to say explicitly that little Hans is not a sensual child or at all pathologically disposed. The fact is simply, I think, that, not having been intimidated or oppressed with a sense of guilt, he gives expression quite ingenuously to what he thinks.¹

The second great problem which exercises a child's mind - only at a somewhat later age, no doubt - is the question of the origin of babies. This is usually started by the unwelcome arrival of a small brother or sister. It is the oldest and most burning question that confronts immature humanity. Those who understand how to interpret myths and legends can detect it in the riddle which the Theban Sphinx set to Oedipus. The customary answers given to the child in the nursery damage his genuine instinct of research and as a rule deal the first blow, too, at his confidence in his parents. From that time on he usually begins to mistrust grown-up people, and to keep his most intimate interests secret from them. The following little document shows how tormenting this curiosity can become in older children. It is a letter written by a motherless girl of eleven and a half who had been speculating on the problem with her younger sister.

'Dear Aunt Mali,

¹ [Footnote added 1924:] The history of little Hans's later illness and recovery is described in my 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy' (1909b).⁶

'Will you please be so kind as to tell me how you got Christel and Paul. You must know because you are married. We were arguing about it yesterday evening and we want to know the truth. We have nobody else to ask. When are you coming to Salzburg? You know, Aunt Mali, we simply can't understand how the stork brings babies. Trudel thought the stork brings them in a shirt. Then we want to know as well if the stork gets them out of the pond and why one never sees babies in ponds. And will you please tell me, too, how one knows beforehand when one is going to have one. Write and tell me everything about it.

'With thousands of greetings and kisses from us all,

'Your inquisitive niece, Lili.'

I do not believe that this touching letter brought the two sisters the enlightenment they wanted. Later on the writer of it fell ill of the neurosis that arises from unanswered unconscious questions - of obsessional brooding.¹

¹ [Footnote added 1924:] After some years, however, her obsessional brooding gave way to a dementia praecox.

There does not seem to me to be a single good reason for denying children the enlightenment which their thirst for knowledge demands. To be sure, if it is the purpose of educators to stifle the child's power of independent thought as early as possible, in favour of the 'goodness' which they think so much of, they cannot set about this better than by deceiving him in sexual matters and intimidating him in matters of religion. The stronger natures will, it is true, withstand these influences and become rebels against the authority of their parents and later against every other authority. If children are not given the explanations for which they turn to their elders, they go on tormenting themselves with the problem in secret and produce attempts at solution in which the truth they have guessed is mingled in the most extraordinary way with grotesque untruths; or they whisper information to one another in which, because of the young enquirers' sense of guilt, everything sexual is stamped as being horrible and disgusting. These infantile sexual theories would be well worth collecting and examining. From this time on, children usually lose the only proper attitude to sexual questions, and many of them never regain it.

It seems that the large majority of authors, both men and women, who have written about the sexual enlightenment of youth have concluded in favour of it. But the clumsiness of most of their proposals as to when and how this enlightenment is to take place tempts one to think that they have not found it easy to arrive at this conclusion. So far as my knowledge of the literature goes, a single outstanding exception is provided by the charming letter of explanation which a certain Frau Emma Eckstein quotes as having been written by her to her son when he was about ten years old.¹ The customary method is obviously not quite the right one: all sexual knowledge is kept from children as long as possible, and then on one single occasion a disclosure is made to them in solemn and turgid language, and even so is only half the truth and generally comes too late. Most of the answers to the question 'How am I to tell my children?' make such a miserable impression, on me at least, that I should prefer parents not to embark on the business of

enlightenment at all. What is really important is that children should never get the idea that one wants to make more of a secret of the facts of sexual life than of any other matter which is not yet accessible to their understanding; and to ensure this it is necessary that from the very first what has to do with sexuality should be treated like anything else that is worth knowing about. Above all, it is the duty of schools not to evade the mention of sexual matters. The main facts of reproduction and their significance should be included in lessons about the animal kingdom, and at the same time stress should be laid on the fact that man shares every essential in his organization with the higher animals. Then, provided that the child's home environment does not aim directly at frightening him off thinking, something that I once overheard in a nursery will probably happen more often. I heard a boy saying to his little sister: 'How can you think babies are brought by the stork! You know man's a mammal; d'you think storks bring other mammals their babies too?'

¹ Emma Eckstein, 1904.8

The child's curiosity will never reach a very high degree of intensity provided it finds appropriate satisfaction at each stage of his learning. Enlightenment about the specific facts of human sexuality and an indication of its social significance should, therefore, be given to the child at the end of his time at his elementary school [Volksschule] and before he enters his intermediate school [Mittelschule] - that is to say, before he is ten years old. The period of confirmation would be a more suitable time than any other at which to instruct the child, who will by that time have a full knowledge of all the physical facts, in the moral obligations which are attached to the actual satisfaction of the instinct. Enlightenment about sexual life carried out along such lines as this, proceeding step by step and without any real interruption, and in which the school takes the initiative, seems to me to be the only kind which takes into account the child's development and thus successfully avoids the dangers involved.

I consider it the most significant advance in child education that in France the State should have introduced, in place of the catechism, a primer which gives the child his first instruction in his position as a citizen and in the ethical duties which will later devolve on him. But such elementary instruction is seriously deficient, so long as it does not include the field of sexuality. Here is the gap which educators and reformers should set about filling. In countries which have placed the education of children wholly or in part in the hands of the clergy, it will, of course, be impossible to ask for this. A priest will never admit that men and animals have the same nature, since he cannot do without the immortality of the soul, which he requires as the basis for moral precepts. Here, once again, we see the unwisdom of sewing a single silk patch on to a tattered coat - the impossibility of carrying out an isolated reform without altering the foundations of the whole system.