

Introduction

VIAGRA, LIFESTYLE, AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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1. A New Lifestyle Drug

The impotency remedy Viagra is the “fastest selling drug in history” (McGinn, 1998, p. 44). It is no longer a medical phenomenon, but also a cultural icon, appearing in television sitcoms as a pretext for jokes or as a murder weapon, rivaling with “Coca-Cola as one of the most widely known brands in the world” (*New York Times*, 21 August 2003). Viagra (as well as similar products like Levitra and Cialis) has socio-cultural implications not limited to sexuality, but concerns various parts of our cultural landscape. The fact that popular culture embraced Viagra with such an enthusiasm is due to a paradox: though Viagra has been established on the assumption that impotency is a purely medical (and not social or psychological) phenomenon, the drug can also be used for recreational purposes, that is, within socially and psychologically established contexts. The cultural status of Viagra becomes even more complex as the borderlines between recreational and non-recreational sex are blurred.

In spite of, or because of, the narrow humanistic basis offered by its producers, Viagra has attained status as a lifestyle drug and men between the ages of 18 and 45 are the fastest growing consumer group. In principle, the term lifestyle drug encompasses “drugs that fulfill non-medical or non-health-related outcomes” (Rubin & Wylie, 2009, p. 57). However, in the modern world, when something is addressed as a “life-style drug,” the formulation very often includes a self-sufficient moral justification that can be challenged only with much difficulty.

Being relatively convincing in terms of bio-medical efficiency, critical discussions of Viagra have so far mainly been developed by – apart from Christian blogs evaluating the drug’s use for either procreative or recreational purposes – the (often feminist) “Liberal Arts” camp where Pfizer (the maker of Viagra) is reproached for its profit-oriented negation of any psychological, social, emotional, or relational components involved in impotency. Here one addresses the fact that Viagra reduces a holistic

masculine problem “to only six inches (or so) of a man’s body” (Plante, 2006, p. 379). Or one criticizes that Viagra sexuality is construed from a male point of view, which ignores the distinctiveness of female sexuality. Criticism ridicules Viagra’s mechanical imagery of a “techno-fix” (Vares & Braun, 2006), not only intensifying the medicalization of impotency current since the early 1980s, but also making “sex into a medical function like digestion” (Tiefer, 2003, p. 2). Viagra renders masculinity as a mere problem of chemical engineering, plumbing, and hydraulics. A further concern is that through Viagra, the traditional gender role of the “potent man and the happy woman” is restored without any critical revision (Loe, 2004, p. 21).

Ironically, as long as it declares psychological, social, emotional, and relational components to be the monopoly of women, feminist discourse is responsible for a reductionist sexuality. “Woman’s sexual lives are contextualized,” writes Leonore Tiefer because their sexual experiences depend more on “social context (relationship, cultural background, past sexual experiences)” than on genital functioning (Tiefer, 2003, p. 2). It would be better to postulate such standards for sexual behavior in an ungendered fashion.

While Viagra has changed the sex-life in industrialized countries, it is interesting to note that these changes did not come along as waves of a sexual revolution similar to what the industrialized world experienced in the 1970s, telling us that our sexual mores are too narrow, that we should liberate ourselves from taboos and social constraints. Viagra is the drug of a consumer society that has little time to reflect upon fundamental issues. As it stands, Viagra appears as the drug of a capitalist society convinced that any efficient medication approved by the state signifies progress and higher levels of happiness. It is therefore remarkably compatible with bourgeois lifestyle. Strangely, the few items that might strike us as provocative (such as embarrassing television ads) are quickly passed over. Contrary to what was the norm in the provocative 1970s, anything today that is potentially obscene is hastily stifled under a veil of utter normalcy.

I say “strangely” because, paradoxically, the existence of Viagra owes so much to the culture of sexual liberation. Viagra values individualism and self-improvement as well as the eschewal of external authority except for the scientific one. Other preconditions for the successful implementation of Viagra have been established through a more hidden agenda. One of the “side effects” of sexual liberation is that it brought about a sense of competitiveness in the realm of sexuality that would have been unthinkable in earlier decades. These changes seem to have made Viagra more necessary than ever. Allan Bloom speaks out as somebody who knows what sexuality was like in the 1950s:

In the past a man could think he was doing a wonderful thing for a woman, and expect to be admired for what he brought. But that was before he could be pretty sure that he was being compared and judged, which is daunting. (...) It is easier for men to get gratification than it used to be (...). But at least some of these advantages for men are offset by nervousness about their sexual performance. (Bloom, 1987, p. 124)

While uncritical Viagra discourses seem to flow directly out of a culture that rationalizes and technicizes everything including sexuality, there is a paradox that lets Viagra-enhanced sexuality stand out as a peculiar social phenomenon. While, on the one hand, sexuality is reduced to hydraulics and chemistry, on the other hand, large efforts are made to extend the scope of Viagra beyond the limits of the bedroom, granting male potency a quasi mythical status. For the most part, what is in question is not just sexual pleasure, but also old myths of male dominance applied to fields ranging from professionalism to creativity. Elie Metchnikoff, a forerunner in techno-fix methods, insisted that sexual activity is connected to poetic genius (Marshall & Katz, 2002, p. 51). This means that the recent terminological shift from “impotency” to “erectile dysfunction” is only cosmetic. In reality, the “plumbing problem” is still perceived as a character flaw and “fixing” the problem could transform a man’s life.

2. Viagra and Philosophy

Lafontaine reminds us that not only Viagra, but also impotence is a phenomenon engendered by civilization because, under natural conditions, very few individuals could reach or outlive the age of reproduction (Lafontaine, 2009, p. 61). It seems that, at the culminating point of this development of civilization, Viagra has become the symbol of modernity concentrating in itself a sort of achieved utopia in which everything promptly materializes if we only manage to exclude existential complications from our lives. According to Raymond Aron, the perfect state of modernity is characterized by “the cult of success, individual initiative, violence of competition, optimism about the future and rejection of existential anguish, reducing of every situation to technically soluble problems” (Aron, 2001, p. 297). In the realm of sexuality, our age is not the age of tragic eroticism, but rather that of linear enhancement, as Allan Bloom has noted right after the sexual revolution: “The eroticism of our students is lame. It is not the divine madness Socrates praised; or the enticing awareness of incompleteness and the quest to overcome it” (Bloom 1987, p. 132). Were Bloom living today, he could state how

Viagra has eliminated more thoroughly than ever things like passion, hope, despair, and “a sense of the twinship of love and death” (p. 123).

All this shows that Viagra needs to be examined not only from a sociological, but also from a philosophical point of view. Sociology mainly studies how the social status of the drug interacts with certain situational aspects. A philosophical discussion of Viagra should reach beyond utilitarian considerations, beyond benefits and burdens. With Viagra, we are confronted with a powerful rationalization of sexuality to which philosophy can pose an “erotic rationality” derived from its own tradition. Major philosophers like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard, and, in the twentieth century, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Deleuze, Foucault, Alexandre Kojève, Allan Bloom and Luce Irigaray – to name only some – have been interested in exploring sexuality from points of view uninfluenced by theories constructed by scientists. Since Plato, philosophy has known that scientific explanations, which claim to give an exhaustive account of erotic perception, are misleading. At the earliest stage of Western philosophy love was seen as a paradoxical form of rationality/irrationality. Two thousand years later, philosophy has not entirely forgotten this heritage. The philosopher James Waddell urges us to find “tools that are forged in the heat of erotic passion as it is lived to help us spot nonsense and to make sense of our own experience” (1997, p. 2); and Sophie Bourgault suggests in the present volume that philosophy should be seen as a “Viagra of the soul.” Inspiring is the particularly paradoxical nature of Eros, which represents both a form of Platonic rationality *and* an irrational, irreducible quality that can be used as a critical tool able to debunk various forms of scientific rationalizations of sexuality – one of which is the clinical-sexological discourse on Viagra.

Some hold that philosophy has already lost too much of its erotic heritage and that it is no easy task to reinstall philosophy as a profoundly erotic cure. Jean-Luc Marion deplores the idea that

philosophy has lost even the desire for love; indeed, sometimes one would almost believe that philosophy hates love. Philosophy does not love love, which reminds her of her origin and her dignity, her powerlessness and her divorce. She therefore silently ignores it, when she does not hate it throughout. (Marion, 2007, p. 3)

The present studies on Viagra try to bring philosophy back onto the classical track of eroticism. So far, there are very few serious philosophical attempts at tackling the Viagra phenomenon. Examples are “Deleuze on Viagra” by Annie Potts and Leonore Tiefer’s “Doing the Viagra Tango” published in *Radical Philosophy*. The part of Viagra criticism that turns around technobody and cyborg studies comes probably closest to

philosophical thought. Also worth mentioning is Vincent Del Casino's attempt to develop a "flaccid theory" as a form of weak theory that works against the logics of hardness, which "validates the flaccid, suggesting that we need not be hard to be active sexual (or social scientific) beings: there are multiple ways (for men) to practice sex that need not include an erection" (Del Casino, 2007, p. 911).

The present volume fills in a gap that has, so far, been yawning in the academic landscape. All contributors to this book are academic philosophers. Though all authors also use the most recent *scientific* literature on the subject, their philosophical interpretations of the Viagra phenomenon attempt to contradict and deconstruct a scientific vision of Viagra as the enhancer of self-esteem and sexual confidence based on the "hard facts" of scientific findings. Like other academic disciplines (sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) philosophers oppose narrow biologicistic principles. However, the alternative they propose is a phenomenological, existentialist vision of erotic experience, sometimes connected to a criticism of modern society or simply of modernity as such.

Addressing Viagra from a philosophical angle is like viewing a phenomenon that has become very much embedded in our culture from a completely different perspective. The approach functions much like that of intercultural philosophy. What would the ancient Greeks or any thinker from another époque have said about Viagra? The results of many of the articles contained in the present volume come amazingly close to cross-cultural examinations of Viagra.

It is worth mentioning one of the few existing cross-cultural analyses of Viagra undertaken by Everett Yuehong Zhang in 2007. Zhang's work was sparked by the fact that the sales of Viagra in China were in sharp contrast to the high expectations of Pfizer. Zhang states that in China, the readiness to use the drug has clearly been compromised by Daoist principles internalized by Chinese consumers. Chinese medical classics as well as Daoist scriptures see

impotence as a result of the loss of the *yin-yang* balance of *qi* in different locations, of an excessive loss of *jing*, or of the clogging of *qi*, and so on. These symptoms are all signs of a decline of vitality. This stands in stark contrast to the etiology of impotence as set out in biomedicine. (Zhang, 2007, p. 86 note 8).

The Chinese patient, an apparently simple peasant, was not convinced when his doctor explained to him a basic principle of Western biomedicine: "What does it mean to be potent? So long as you can do it each time with the help of Viagra, you are not impotent. You are potent" (p. 62). Zhang explains that traditional Chinese ethics of sexuality is "more

concerned with the cultivation of life, or *overall* potency, and, as such, is in conflict with a globalized sexual ethics that focuses solely on reproduction and sexual pleasure” (p. 63). Chinese patients are most concerned with the threat that in the future they will be dependent on Viagra. This possibility is not sufficiently discussed in Western literature, in spite of findings highlighting the fact that “normal adults and adolescents taking Viagra regularly have problems with sexual relationships if they stop taking the drug” (Morales et al, 2005, quoted from Rubin 2009, p. 58). Similar observations have been made in Japan by Genaro Castro-Vázquez: a young man used to be happy with his initial Viagra prescriptions, but would become anxious later, believing that he had to take Viagra forever. The doctor explained to him that “if you are able to develop self-confidence you should be able to stop using Viagra,” which resulted in the patient wearing a Viagra pill as an amulet (Castro-Vázquez, 2006, p. 123).

Many classical Greek philosophers have taken a view of sexuality similar to the aforementioned Chinese, presenting challenges to the narrow hedonism of Western societies. Stoicism for example, suggested that we simply disregard all those things that are not within our power. And Epicurus, in his Letter to Menoeceus, urges us to adopt a “sober reasoning” and to understand “that death is nothing to us but makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality” (Epicurus, 1966, p. 98).

Consequently, many of the chapters in the present volume revolve around the classical themes of immortality and hedonism. The first four chapters represent attempts to view Viagra through the lenses of classical philosophy. Sophie Bourgault discusses Plato’s Cephalus, who boasts about his erectile difficulties because he believes that “thanks to the death of his sex drive, he has grown increasingly appreciative of the pleasures of philosophy.” Though this must seem strange for us today, Plato holds that too much physical health is not desirable and that disproportionate care for the body can be detrimental to the cultivation of virtue. Robert Vuckovich examines how Diogenes of Sinope, who lived with the fewest possessions and desires, would have responded to Viagra. Would he have found it unnatural if men want to do what comes naturally? Or would he have found men’s dependency on this need for sexual satisfaction a form of enslavement to their passions? Would a cynic not hold, as Thomas Kapper contends, that men conspire through Viagra to prolong adolescence to the point of absolute absurdity? Kapper interprets Viagra in the light of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* as well as in the context of Stoic philosophy, which holds that the best-lived life is one that is in harmony with what occurs by nature. Kevin Guilfooy sees Viagra as an inverted value system of everything an older and wiser, but less virile St. Augustine would have

appreciated. Similar to Diogenes, St. Augustine held that low libido or diminished sex drive leaves him at liberty to pursue knowledge and spiritual development. St. Augustine seems to be of particular interest for Viagra studies. Slavoj Žižek, in *The Ticklish Subject*, points to St. Augustine's interpretation of erectile difficulties as the Divine punishment for man's desire to become master of the universe (Žižek, 1999, p. 384). St. Augustine's philosophy is also of interest to Robert Redeker, who, in the present volume, contrasts the utopia created by Viagra with Augustine's transcendental utopia described in *The City of God*. Redeker shows that Campanella's utopia required love to become automatized and mechanized and that sex must be carried out at certain hours that were decided by the authorities beforehand. For Redeker this anticipates a major trait of Viagra in political philosophy.

Connie Price offers a critical survey of the academic and industrial machine known as the biosciences and discovers that "an ethical encounter with the issues of Viagra demonstrates the conservatism of bioethics as it has been defined for some forty years." In my own article on Viagra and Virtual Reality I show that, while Freud materialized desire and turned it into a sexual drive, Viagra dematerializes desire and turns it into a virtual quality. Anthony Okeregbe reflects Viagra against the Africanist perspective which views sexual virility primarily as the means of transmitting life. Okeregbe points out that the traditional African considers sex a sacred activity: "The sexual act, tied to the totality of human sexuality, is viewed as sacred because its value does not lie in the act itself." Interestingly, the popularity accorded Viagra in the West has rekindled confidence in herbal and traditional medicine in Africa and an herbal remedy known as the 'African Viagra' can now be bought online. Okeregbe is also intrigued by the fact that the Church has not condemned the use of Viagra. Dónal O'Mathúna questions the fact that "where human trials and tribulations have failed to succumb to religion, superstition, social engineering, (...) biomedical and pharmaceutical progress has won the day." He explains why solutions can still be found in "religious, philosophical and personal discussions that have characterized how people deal with suffering, illness, and death."

Claude-Raphaël Samama provides important psychoanalytical input, attacking clinical sexology in the most explicit fashion by confronting it with psycho-philosophical realities. Samama draws special attention to Lacan who, for the first time, put the decisive distinction between penis and phallus in a philosophical context. Samama is eager to establish desire as a *spiritual* process and shows that human sexuality cannot be linked to a periodical or instinctual physical "mechanics." This adds to the view developed by Okeregbe – though in a completely different context – that sex should always be seen as a vitalistic activity in the sense of a union of

life-forms “requiring animalist capacity or what Aristotle calls soul-function.”

In my own chapter on Viagra and American culture, I examine relationships between sexuality and race, echoing Okeregbe’s statement that “nowhere is this valorization of the penis more evident than in the racialized black male sexuality portended by ancient texts, Victorian literatures, historical and autobiographical works as well as experiences from the slave trade.” Through Viagra, sexual virility is put at the center of sexual culture, but it resides there not as a real quality but as a possibility, a purely potential quality or a sexual one-drop rule. The “one drop” can be considered a “racial Viagra.”

Towards the end of the book, Herb Roseman approaches Viagra from a different angle and summarizes the history of the science of impotence in the light of T.S. Kuhn’s model of scientific paradigms. He explains the particular position of Viagra within this development. Roseman also evaluates the utilitarian perspective provided by Mill and other philosophers and tries to understand how they would have reacted to the phenomenon of Viagra.

Roman Meinhold draws our attention to another paradigm, that of Arnold Gehlen’s development of culture through the deficient nature of humanity. Meinhold attempts to view Viagra through this pattern, comparing it with the telescope or the night-vision apparatus. Meinhold investigates how Viagra marketing utilizes the drive of humans to improve themselves and their environment by at the same time comparing their own condition or status quo with those of others or with potential conditions. In a brief note, Roseman picks up the theme of natural selection and discusses Viagra in the context of Darwinism.

Finally, Bassam Romaya examines a series of interrelated social and cultural factors in the context of multifaceted, nationalist expectations of group productivity and the likelihood for reproduction, which ultimately privileges the lives of male-born erections over a subpopulation with alternative erections, or transerections.