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A Review of "The Philosophy of Viagra: Bioethical Responses to the Viagrification of the Modern World"

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The Philosophy of Viagra: Bioethical Responses to the Viagrification of the Modern World, edited by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. New York, NY: Rodopi, 2011. 227 pages, \$69.00 (paperback).

I am a sucker for any book with “Viagra” in the title, especially one in the humanities or social sciences that promises to examine the effect of this sexual game-changer on contemporary culture, so I was excited to see this volume of 15 original essays by European, North American, African, and Asian philosophers.

In fact, and this is probably predictable, this is a wildly eclectic collection, in topics and quality of argument. Although the introduction predicts that all the contributions will approach erotic experience from a phenomenological-existential point of view, I found a mixture of psychoanalysis, history, speculation, theory, and cultural criticism, all with an overlay of philosophical argument. It’s always hard to summarize an eclectic collection, so I focus on four selections, hoping this will whet your curiosity regarding the other 11 chapters. You can see the entire table of contents on the publisher’s website.

Chapter 5 is by Robert Redeker, translated from French to English by the editor, and titled “Viagra and the Utopia of Immortality.” Redeker argues that Viagra represents an “anthropological rupture” and must be understood “in the context of a collective fantasy of a new body and of a new idea of the human being” (p. 71). He awards Viagra tremendous power to reconfigure our collective imagination, allowing the human to become “invincible,” an entity he calls “appliance-man” (p. 71). Nothing too new here, but he goes on to argue that “appliance-man” has no soul, has no self, and has no free will. Whew! Replacing these is a “psyche” that defies mortality. As with feminine cosmetics, Redeker argues that Viagra no longer “masks” time and death, but rather provides the illusion that “it can repair those effects that death, wrinkles, the dryness of cells, etc. have left on the body” (p. 74). Viagra offers a new utopia, “the utopia of immortality” (p. 75). There’s not enough detail in Redeker’s brief chapter, though, for the reader to examine this provocative vision of a new way to be human. Perhaps the author could spell out his utopian/dystopian views a bit better via science fiction.

In Chapter 9, “Erecting New Goals for Medicine: Viagra and Medicalization,” Irish philosopher-bioethicist Dónal O’Mahúna trods some territory familiar to *JSMT* readers, reviewing shifts over the past few decades in how “lifestyle medicine” has “allowed market forces to determine the goals of medicine” (p. 123). This overgeneralization is not without truth, but O’Mahúna doesn’t provide the kind of journalistic or historical detail that would persuade those not already in agreement. He ends with a more traditional philosophical topic—*justice*—in discussing how allocation of medical treatment and research resources should require greater moral justification

than we have at present, and that putting so much effort into Viagra while people around the world still suffer from treatable devastations is immoral.

The editor, Botz-Bornstein, born in Germany, with a doctoral degree from Oxford University, currently works in Paris though he has done research in Japan, China, and the United States. He has written books dealing cross-culturally with films, dreams, and aesthetics. In Chapter 11, Botz-Bornstein gives a fascinating analysis of “cool” versus “machismo” sexualities in an essay titled, “America and Viagra or How the White Negro Became a Little Whiter: Viagra as an Afro-Disiac.” After touching on the White-centric ad history of Viagra, the complex sociology of Black male sexuality, and a bit of Whiteness studies, he argues that “Viagra is a little like gangsta rap, which invites the White audience to participate vicariously in a world that is both alluring and inaccessible” (p. 149). Through Viagra, he proposes, White men could gain access to a “cool” style of sexual virility they normally lack, but that all evidence (and, admittedly, there is pitifully little relevant information) suggests that they practice a more typical competitive or compulsive macho style.

Bassam Romaya, an American philosopher, offers an examination of the relation of Viagra to transsexualism and specifically to “transerections” (p. 194) in Chapter 15, “Erectus Interruptus: All Erections Are Not Equal.” He reviews the landscape of transmen and penises and shows how Viagra seems to conservatively reinforce the centrality of penetration to masculine identity, privilege, and pride. However, after describing how transmen cope with their “deficient” sexual status whether using an “unnatural” phallus or their embodied microphallus, he concludes that “we are living in the fictional future once widely feared . . . inhabited by cyborgs, genderqueers, transpeople, and cisgendered [i.e., born male] impotents” (p. 202). In other words, Viagra, as a paradox, has ended up participating in the queering of sex!

Well, there’s much more, for example, about quality of life measures in Viagra science and how they, perhaps intentionally, created a moral burden on men with erection problems, but you get the point about the variety in this book and the plenitude of the new and the familiar, the well-argued and the weak. It reminded me of an edited collection I read almost 20 years ago, *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism* (Bennett and Rosario, 1995). I don’t think I understood half of what I read in that book, but it helped me understand how humanities professors have an important place in sexuality studies and taught me never to forget there are always multiple meanings, contexts, and ways of looking at sexual topics.

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