Book Reviews


Reviewed by Peter W. Barlow, D.Sc.¹

Only astonishment can follow from reading this excellent book on account of the sheer density and variety of facts and commentaries concerning the human orgasm and its relationship to social and religious politics, human conflicts and, of course, to the more personal human pursuits of relationship and happiness. The preface indicates that Sexology Institutes as geographically diverse as those in U.S., Germany, The Netherlands, and Russia all helped in the research for the present book. The way in which the book links the orgasm to the course of human history recalls, in certain respects, the achievement of the late Cyril Darlington (though without that author’s literary panache) who, in his book The Evolution of Man and Society (Darlington, 1969), linked genetics, and in particular the structure and function of our genetic system, to the course of human societal and cultural evolution from prehistoric to present-day times. In fact, there is much in common in the themes of that book and the present one under review. All that Margolis writes is admirably to the point and can hardly be challenged since much of his task has been to collect and collate facts, reported in a variety of sources. Nevertheless, it does seem that some opportunities to explore the full story of the orgasm have been overlooked, even in a compendious book such as this. Therefore, this reviewer hopes that the author will not feel offended if the present generally positive review also offers certain additional opinions and observations relevant to the story of the Orgasm.

The human orgasm may be considered to be the means (and the inducement) by which the genetic endowment of humans is transmitted via the genetic system and then translated into the external societal system. As the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer delicately put it, “The desire for intercourse is the genius of the genus.” Indeed, orgasm is the event which gives dynamism to the genetic system. Interestingly, both the genetic system and the orgasm have become endowed with taboos: the former system has attracted ancient incest taboos which have the effect of minimizing inbreeding, whereas orgasm taboos have been more recently developed in some societies where they feature in the deprecation of, for example, masturbation and oral sex, the latter activity being judged sinful enough to attract a 5-year jail sentence in the U.S. of the 1960s, the former leading to the sale of vibrators for female orgasm being declared illegal in Alabama. Restrictions on the sale of pornography may also be regarded as an expression of the orgasm taboo. Prohibition of sexual activity between adults and minors reflects a taboo with a foot in both camps: on the one hand, the taboo is societal—to avoid births in non-optimum environmental situations, as well as genetic—to minimize the incidence of genetic abnormalities due to the relatively higher frequency of meiotic non-disjunction in young teenage girls than in more mature females; and, on the other hand, it is an orgasm taboo—it limits physical and psychological damage due to the mismatch between adult and juvenile sexualities. In this context, the strength of the orgasm taboo is clearly manifested in the violence offered to pedophilic sex-offenders in prisons. The origins of these taboos are unclear. Evidence for incest taboos can be found in Mosaic Law where they were rational devices deployed for the benefit of the population, as outlined above. Orgasm taboos are aimed at the individual and are at times less rational; the strictness of their application may also vary according to the prevailing mores of society. In contrast to the incest taboo, any negative regulation of orgasm probably has rather little impact on population structure or numbers.

Why is it that organized religions, especially in past epochs, have taken exception to the orgasm and have tried to regulate its frequency, particularly if associated with masturbation? At some stage in the our early history, a connection must have been made between orgasm and subsequent pregnancy and birth. Within an ancient society possessing a religious authority whose purpose, one might imagine, was to question, discover, and even interpret the nature of God and His creation, the human orgasm may have been seen as a reflection of God’s own procreative energy channeled through humankind. In effect, the male orgasm emulated the procreative power of God in His generation of humankind. But the fact that humans were

¹School of Biological Sciences, University of Bristol, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UG, England; e-mail: P.W.Barlow@bristol.ac.uk.
was also able to achieve orgasm of their own free will, in acts of pleasure which had no intention of leading to procreation, was, one might surmise, considered by some to be a misuse of the creative energy and therefore an act of profanity to be condemned—and such a view might linger on even in the present day and thereby color opinions relating to sexual activity. The only being who might definitely be exempt from orgasm disapprobation would be a Man–God, such as the Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, one of whose ritual duties was to masturbate to orgasm at a site on the Nile in order to secure fertility for the land.

Basically, orgasm is a unique pleasure; and pleasure, while possibly serving as an important link between physiology and behavior, negates high levels of rationality (Cabanac, 1992). Humans, because of the duality of their psyche in which everything is seen as having both a positive and a negative aspect, the achievement of pleasure is accompanied by its rejection, often with the invocation of some moral reason or other for doing so. As the present book reveals, the orgasm has attracted its fair share of such negative views from those within society who have, at the same time, been able to infiltrate their ideas concerning personal sexual activity into what, in turn, becomes the “morality of the day” for later generations. The circumcision of both males and females performed by a medical profession, some of whom are ignorant of the function of the tissues they are excising, also comes into the category of a suspect and unworthy practice whose effects may, in the end, be worse than the hypothetical orgasm-related condition from which, it was hoped, the individual would be liberated as a result of this mutilation. This said, however, Margolis adduces evidence that clitoridectomized women of the Sudan are not as unhappy with their lot as some in the West, particularly feminist groups, presume them to be! Thus, not only does orgasm bring ecstasy for sexually attuned partners, but misery potentially also trails in its wake for the unwary. Incalculable harm has been done to individuals in their formative years, and even, it appears, to whole societies, on account of ignorance surrounding the biological/physiological process of the orgasm. After some 2000 years of incomprehension, the time seems to be approaching when the orgasm can take its place as a natural life event. In this respect, the present book is a welcome aid to the normalizing of many areas of interpersonal relationships.

The categories of orgasm that Margolis has considered are those, in both males and females, which result from either penetrative sexual activity or masturbation. Apparently, it was not the author’s intention to provide an account of the physiology of the orgasm and he has been content simply to reproduce personal descriptions of it gleaned from surveys. This lack of an underlying physiology, as we shall see, leads to certain problems in understanding the consequences of the orgasm in human life and, interestingly, in elucidating whether or not multiple orgasm is possible in males.

Generally, orgasm is regarded as the culminating event following a period of genital stimulation. It helps eject gametes from the male and facilitates fertilization of the ovum in the female. In males, unless specifically avoided, it is accompanied by ejaculation of seminal fluid, fabricated, in part, by the prostate gland. In a small percentage of females, there is also significant ejaculation of fluid at orgasm. There is controversy over the source of this ejaculate, though purely from the point of view of male/female symmetry it is tempting to accept the evidence that the female ejaculate is a product of the paraurethral gland (Skene’s gland), a proposed homologue of the male prostate gland. Margolis argues that sexual activity is motivated by recollection of past orgasms, one orgasm begetting the desire for another; but whether it is the anticipation of orgasm or the more immediate pleasure obtained from genital stimulation is debatable. Genital pleasuring, either by masturbation or by penetration, is a classic feed-forward process. Each impulse of pleasure advances, like a ratchetting process, the desire for a further impulse. Logically, such a process can be terminated only by some catastrophic event where the pleasure system, which was hitherto supporting and encouraging the pleasuring activity, suddenly and involuntarily collapses as though some other bodily system has decided that “enough is enough!” The “wisdom of the body” which negates further pleasure suggests, therefore, that the orgasm is a means of terminating an intensely stimulating activity which, from an evolutionary perspective where reproductive fitness is paramount, could prove damaging on account of physical bruising and abrasion of the genital apparatus, male or female, as well as overload to the nervous system together with associated upsets in electrolyte balance (disturbed levels of Ca$^{2+}$, K$^+$, and Na$^+$ due to prolonged nerve depolarization) and prolonged increases in blood pressure and cardiac activity which sexual activity entails. Thus, there is probably some evolutionary logic in there being a threshold of sexual stimulation that will trigger the orgasmic catastrophe.

If there is a central thesis to this book, it lies in the importance given to the ability of females to experience multiple orgasms, often in rapid succession. If this is generally true, then a consequence is that no single male partner in penetrative sex would be able to satisfy completely the sexual desires of a multiorgasmic