

How Curious Are We About Desire?

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In the *Symposium*, during the middle section of Diotima's teaching on *eros*, Socrates disobeys Diotima's injunction not to wonder.¹ Cris Mayo likewise defies the injunction not to wonder about erotic desire; she also rejects the closure offered in the final section of Diotima's teaching. In this essay I continue Mayo's trajectory and propose that we become even more curious about desire.

Mayo's central thesis seems clear: she desires an "energetic and educative political life" and suggests that we can get there by reconceptualizing desire, embracing its energies, and celebrating its disruptive possibilities. In fact, Mayo wants us to recognize sexual desire as the best, or at least a preferred, route to disruption and to reorganization of political life because (a) sexual desire has energy in it; (b) sexual desire, particularly that of the genderqueer variety, has potential to disrupt the social order, because as a "form of anticipation" it is an unsatisfied "presence of an absence," that thus (c) guarantees embodied movement toward the future.

There is a *prima facie* appeal to Mayo's argument, but I wonder about some of its underlying assumptions. In particular, I worry about an idea that seems central to Mayo's enthusiastic case for disruptive sexual desire, namely her assumption that we should encourage preoccupation with futurity and foster the human tendency to occupy ourselves with the future.

Mayo draws upon Judith Butler's descriptions to emphasize this connection "between desire and futurity" where we find "the negation of the present, the desire for the not-yet...[that] reveals the ambiguous 'place' of subjectivity, as neither here nor there."² Given our immersion in desire, Butler's description describes most human beings much, if not most, of the time. An accurate account, I agree, yet I am reluctant to follow Mayo's normative path when she takes a stand in favor of this futuristic orientation. To recognize our "subjectivity, as neither here nor there" also obviously reveals a subject as not wholly present, as not wholly here; and thus, might I suggest, a subject out of touch with present reality, with the details and possibilities inherent in the present circumstances of one's life, one's immediate here-now situation.

A strange irony, or troubling inconsistency, lurks here. Why would one work to ground inquiry in an avowed conscious focus on bodies and then revel in a description of being "neither here nor there"? Yes, thoughts, fantasies, dreams about our objects of desires can all float about in an ethereal "neither here nor there" space. But what about bodies? This characterization does not fit bodies very well. Except for rare out-of-body occurrences such as near-death experiences or traumatic moments when one dissociates, our bodies tend to be very much right here now. Whether in pleasure, in pain, in frantic movement, in repose, or heavy with sloth and torpor, we find ourselves still here embodied, or perhaps "more accurately, reembodyed

moment after moment.”³ Does this apparent embracing of a subjectivity constituted primarily by desire and projecting itself into the future signal some deeper ambivalence about inhabiting these earthly, earthy bodies? Has Mayo switched here to a more contemporary destabilized form of transcendence?

There are other features of embodiment that Mayo neglects. Political possibilities do not lay in unalloyed sexual desire apart from their earthly embodiment in particular historical contexts with specific social and cultural variables. Whether there are possibilities and what these can be will depend upon (1) in whose bodies the desires arise; (2) how the desires have already been shaped or configured by social forces; (3) the social contexts in which desires occur; and (4) the virtues, plus other propensities, of those in whom they are embodied. Because these are situation-specific variables that can shift and change, it is crucial to give alert, open-minded attention to the actual details of what’s happening in the immediate situation, including its current ever-changing possibilities. Such a present moment focus can balance being overly preoccupied with future possibilities or enthralled by desire, in the abstract.

Mayo reminds us of how the Androgynes can be undone by, can die from, nostalgia for the past. Could they not also be undone by too much focus on the future? What if they were ignoring the effulgence of possibilities constantly manifesting in their present world? Who knows, they might have missed a new possibility to challenge the gods, this time successfully!

The Androgynes present another salient question. Mayo celebrates the possibilities generated out of male/male couples after the split — their aliveness to this world and their attempts to improve earthly existence. Their earthy, sexual desire, plus an acceptance of mortality, moves the Androgynes to make life in the polis better for people like them. But remember, they are male. One can doubt whether they will be thinking about how to improve life for females. From a female perspective, first the male gods dominate and organize, then the male/male couples dominate and organize. So, the question arises: if we want to improve life in the polis for everyone, what else is needed besides the momentum generated by sexual desire?

In the final section of her essay, Mayo gives us a lovely telling description of her conversations with one group of sexual minority public school students. On my reading, Mayo’s observations of these students *both illustrates more and proves less* than her claims about desire might lead us to believe. I doubt whether these students would be generating live ethical and political possibilities simply as a result of their sexual desires without the presence of other necessary factors, including a concern for social justice and a commitment to their own integrity.

The students’ concern for social justice seems clear from Mayo’s account. For example, she describes the students as “deeply committed to improving their school communities” and “concerned with the exclusions they may themselves produce.” Here is one of the places where my reading diverges if, as I take it, Mayo wants to imply that the clear concern for social justice automatically arises out of or flows from sexual desire, rather than accompanying it as a concomitant ingredient.

I also want to propose an alternative interpretation of the students' insistence that they not change the name of their gay-straight alliance to something "less obvious." I read this refusal as not only an insistence on publicity (and possibly a desire for disruption) but also, perhaps on a deeper level, an indication of commitment to their own integrity. Even when Mayo appears to note such factors as the students' integrity, its centrality for their political actions remains unacknowledged in comparison with the compelling energies of desire.

There is yet another dimension that I find central to these explorations: that of being consciously curious about desire, making it an explicit object of direct study. It is true that Mayo's students are "deeply committed to...educating themselves about the complications of desire." It is obvious Mayo herself wants to educate the rest of us about the "complications of desire." But does Mayo's primary thesis of embracing desire for its own sake get in the way? What if we move away from this as our primary focus and shift our emphasis in favor of curiosity?

It is very unlikely that any of us will stop desiring, and we will probably continue to believe in most of our desires. But we can also be curious about our movements of desiring, and watch them, rather than simply be moved by desire. What difference might this make? In contrast to desire, curiosity (at least in its purer forms) is not trying to attain anything in particular; curiosity is not going after a predetermined object. It can thus be more unfettered than desire. Curiosity opens us to seeing unexpected possibilities arising right now, in each present moment of investigation. Indeed, curiosity is the one thing that can keep us alive to the complex flux of our desires and awake to their far-reaching ramifications.

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1. Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. Stanley Rosen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 205b3–208b9.
 2. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 73.
 3. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 251.