

Giles, J. (2008). *The nature of sexual desire*. New York: University Press of America, 188 p.p., \$31.95.

Dr. James Giles was born in Vancouver, Canada and studied at the University of British Columbia and the University of Edinburgh, where he received his Ph.D. Currently, he is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guam and tutor at Madingley Hall, University of Cambridge. Among his books are *A Study in Phenomenalism* and *No Self to be Found: The Search for Personal Identity*. He has taught and traveled widely through India, China, South-East Asia, and the Pacific. As is observed on his Web page:

The overarching purpose of Giles' work is to create a philosophical psychology which explains the core features of the human condition. The unifying theme in his work is the fundamental role that human awareness, in its diverse modes, plays in that condition.

This book attempts to provide an understanding of the nature of sexual desire. Giles takes an intercultural and interdisciplinary approach—drawing on theory and research from such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, history, and biology. In his enquiries, he employs a blend of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, early Greek thought, psychoanalytic enquiry, and existentialism, in crafting his phenomenological descriptions. He concludes with an exploration of the impact of gender and romantic love on sexual desire.

Giles is a fine writer. He has an ability to present diverse perspectives in a clear way and to illustrate them with charming and apt metaphors. In making his points, he is as likely to cite lines from the Indian erotic poem *Smaradipika* (Light of Love) as to quote Spinoza, Descartes, Hobbes, or the Rolling Stones. Basically, he takes a phenomenological approach, which was initially expounded by such early

philosophers as Dogen (the medieval Japanese Zen master who argued that only through the observation of the “flow of life” can we come to know the nature of reality) and the 19th-20th century German philosopher Edmund Husserl.

I suspect Giles’ text is the opening salvo in a barrage of books taking a “positive psychology” or sex positive approach to sexuality. In the past, many marriage and family texts focused on sexual problems, the dangers of casual sex, STIs, AIDs, sexual dysfunction, and the like. Giles is instinctively optimistic and thus gives a balanced review of the nature of sexual desire—the joys as well as the pitfalls of passionate love and sexual desire. He is never judgmental and allows for the variability of human desire. He points out, for example, that sexual desire is a decisive feature of human existence. The essence of sexual desire, he argues, is a desire for mutual vulnerability and the care of gendered bodies.

My one quibble is I wish he had stated his own opinion (in the introductory chapters) a bit more forcefully on some of these thorny issues: What is desire? How tightly linked are love and sexual desire? I needed a bit of guidance as to where the text was going. Nonetheless, this remains a provocative and thought-provoking book. It is relevant to the work of Marital and Family therapists in two important ways: it provides a broad philosophical perspective when confronting issues of human sexuality. It also provides a comprehensive (and quick) history of previous theoretical approaches to the nature of sexual desire. (There are chapters devoted to the theorizing of Ellis, Freud, Reich, Masters and Johnson, as well as more recent theorists.

All and all it is a pleasure to read.

References

Giles, J. (2011). Biography – James Giles. Web page: <http://www.james-giles.com/bio.html> Retrieved February 1, 2011.