

Enhancing Male Performance

Richard B. Gunderman

How can we enhance male performance? To answer this question, we must clarify some terms. What exactly is a male? How do males perform? And what would enhancing masculine performance entail? Our media are rife with products and services that purport to offer such enhancement. The implication seems to be that many men are not performing as well as they would like. What is the genesis of such views, and what do they reveal about our understanding of human sexuality and what it means to be a man? To answer these questions, we turn to three very different figures: Dmitri Karamazov, Claude Bernard, and Tiger Woods, the first a character drawn from one of the world's greatest novels, the second one of the most important biologists of the 19th century, and the third one of today's greatest athletes

Dmitri Karamazov

We begin in 1880, the year that Fyodor Dostoevsky published his final and greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this work, he tells the story of three brothers, whose father, Fyodor, a lecherous buffoon, has been murdered. His eldest son, Dmitri, sits in jail, awaiting trial for the crime. Dmitri and his father had become rivals for the affections of a young woman, Grushenka, who eventually falls in love with Dmitri. While the incarcerated Dmitri awaits trial, he is visited by his youngest brother Alexei. As Alexei arrives, he passes an acquaintance, Rakitin, a young man who has been trying to convince Dmitri that he could not help murdering his father, because he was corrupted by his environment. Rakitin has just been telling Dmitri about the work of Claude Bernard. As the agitated Dmitri relates it,

"These nerves in the brain . . . (Damn them!) there are sort of little tails, the little tails of those nerves, and as soon as they begin quivering, those little tails. . . . and when they quiver, an image appears. . . . That's why I see and then think, because of those tails, not at all because I have a soul, and that I am some sort of image and likeness. All that is nonsense, and Rakitin explained it to me yesterday, brother, and it simply bowled me over. It's magnificent, this science! A new man is arising – that I understand. . . . And yet I am sorry to lose God!"

Mulling over the implications of this new man, Dmitri asked Rakitin, "What will become of men without God and immortal life? If all things are lawful, then they can do what they like?" To which Rakitin replies, laughing, "A clever man can always do what he likes." It turns out that Rakitin has been writing poetry, which he despises, in order to win the affections of a rich widow. Once he marries her, he will use her 150,000 rubles to start a newspaper. He explains, "When I get hold of this silly woman's fortune, I can be of great social utility." Commenting on Rakitin's ambitions, Dmitri tells his brother, "They have this social justification for every nasty thing they do."

Dmitri then turns to the subject of Grushenka, the young woman who had bewitched both father and son, and for whom his father was eagerly waiting on the night of his murder. During Dmitri's arrest and incarceration, he has developed a new understanding of Grushenka and their relationship. "Initially," he says, "it was only those infernal curves of hers that tortured me." In other words, he was captivated by her body. But now, he says, "I've taken her into my soul and through her I've become a man myself." Dmitri complains that Rakitin is just "another Bernard," and bemoans the fact that "these Bernards – they are all over the place."

Claude Bernard

What did Dmitri mean by calling Rakitin a "Bernard?" To find the answer, we must turn to the mid-19th century, when French biologist Claude Bernard was at the height of his powers. Today Bernard is often called the father of physiology, that branch of biological science that studies the functions of living organisms and their organ systems, organs, and cells. Bernard was born in Saint-Julien in 1813 and died in Paris in 1878. He coined the term *milieu interieur*, or internal environment. Three aspects of Bernard's life and work are particularly relevant. First, Bernard was the world's leading proponent of

vivisection, experimental surgery performed on living animals. He believed that, though regrettable, the suffering of animals, especially dogs, was more than justified by the biological and medical progress it fueled. He wrote,

The physiologist is no ordinary man. He is a learned man, a man possessed and absorbed by a scientific idea. He does not hear the animals' cries of pain. He is blind to the blood that flows. He sees nothing but his idea, and organisms which conceal from him the secrets he is resolved to discover.

Second, Bernard's vivisectionist experiments led to a number of seminal discoveries, one of the most important being the vaso-motor system. In examining the relationship between the temperature of parts of the body and the nerves supplying them, Bernard discovered that by sectioning the nerves he could produce an increase in temperature. Through this work, Bernard showed that the nervous system regulates blood flow, producing both vaso-dilation and vaso-constriction. By changing nervous input, he could change the diameter of blood vessels, increasing or decreasing the flow of blood to a part of the body.

Third, near the outset of his scientific career, in 1845, Bernard married the daughter of a French physician, Marie Francoise Martin. Their union was an arranged marriage. Specifically, it was arranged by one of Bernard's associates to obtain the bride's dowry, which would enable him to finance his studies. The couple had three children, but Mrs. Bernard quickly developed a strong opposition to her husband's vivisectionist research, as did one of their daughters. Despite her strong Catholicism, she separated from him in 1869 and founded an anti-vivisectionist society.

Tiger Woods

Now fast forward to 2009. The highest paid athlete in the world, in fact perhaps the highest paid athlete in the history of the world, is Eldrick Tont "Tiger" Woods. Woods has held the number one position in world rankings for more consecutive weeks than any other golfer in history, and has been awarded the Professional Golfers' Association Player of the Year award a record ten times. Despite his unprecedented success, in December, 2009, Woods announced that he would take an indefinite leave from golf. He only returned to competition four months later, and has not won a tournament in more than two years. Currently Woods is ranked number 23 in the world. What happened?

On November 25, 2009, the *National Enquirer* reported that Woods had carried on an extramarital affair with a New York City night club manager. Two days later, he was involved in a single-car collision at 2:30 am, crashing his automobile into a fire hydrant down the street from his Florida residence. At the time, Woods refused to account for the incident, but two days later he did release a statement on his website accepting blame for the crash and thanking his wife, Elin, the mother of their two children, for helping him extricate himself from the car. Over the following weeks, more than a dozen women came forward, claiming they had had affairs with Woods. In the UK, lawyers acting on his behalf obtained an injunction preventing the publication of any photographs showing Woods naked or engaged in sexual activity.

In February, 2010, Woods delivered a televised address from PGA headquarters admitting that he had been unfaithful to his wife. He said that he formerly believed that his fame and success entitled him to do what he chose, and that normal rules did not apply to him. He expressed regret for his extramarital affairs and apologized to his family, friends, and fans for all the hurt his behavior had caused them. In April, 2010, the *National Enquirer* reported that Woods had confessed to his wife that he had cheated on her with at least 120 women over five years. His wife filed for divorce, which was granted in August, 2010. While the financial details of the settlement are confidential, it is estimated that Woods' former wife received approximately \$110 million, and they now share custody of their two children.

Woods is not alone. In June, 2011, New York congressman Anthony Weiner resigned from office after it was revealed that he had been exchanging sexually explicit texts and photos with six women over a period of three years. His wife, an aide to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, was pregnant with

their first child at the time. In May, 2011, former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife Maria Shriver separated after a 25 year marriage and four children when it was revealed that Schwarzenegger had fathered a 14 year old child with their former housekeeper. On March 10, 2008, *The New York Times* reported that New York governor Eliot Spitzer had been patronizing a high-priced prostitution service, first as the state's attorney general and then as governor. Two days later, Spitzer announced that he would resign the governorship, saying, "I cannot allow my private failings to disrupt the people's work." Spitzer and his wife have three daughters.

Male Enhancement

What do the three seemingly disparate stories of Tiger Woods, Claude Bernard, and Dmitri Karamazov – a professional athlete, a biomedical scientist, and a fictional character – have to do with one another? All three converge on the topic of male sexuality. Consider a number of the commentaries that have appeared in the popular press surrounding the marital infidelities of Woods and other prominent men. Commentators have suggested that the rich, famous, and powerful are merely doing what the rest of us would do in a heartbeat, if only we had the chance. One study indicated that no fewer than 80% of men – and 65% of women – say they would cheat on their spouse, if they knew that they would not get caught. What prevents them from doing so is not any intrinsic sense of faithfulness or commitment, but lack of opportunity and the fear of the adverse consequences that would flow from detection.

Other commentators have pointed to a dramatic shift over the past 50 years in the rules of engagement between the sexes. The development of new birth control technologies and new means of preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases has, it seems, removed many of the most destructive consequences of infidelity. The health risks are even lower with so-called cybersex. If no one gets sick, no unwanted pregnancy results, and no one else's feelings suffer, on what grounds could anyone object to sexual activity between two consenting adults? What could possibly be wrong with seeking a little extra pleasure, sexual expression, excitement, or romance on the side?

Such attitudes are fueled by basic and widely shared assumptions about the nature of sexuality. Since the writings of Sigmund Freud, many have supposed that sexuality represents an essentially irresistible force. Primal drives and impulses build naturally, and if denied some form of release, they threaten to express themselves in the form of anti-social behavior, including frank criminality. Adolescents and young adults in particular need some means of "letting off steam." Yet passions for any particular person tend to fade with time, leading people to seek novel outlets. As one commentator put it, "it is simply unreasonable to expect one person to fulfill your sexual needs through decades of marriage." So long as the sheets are clean, infidelity is a perfectly natural and perhaps even healthful pursuit.

Claude Bernard laid much of the groundwork for understanding sexuality in physiologic terms. In the 20th century, Alfred Kinsey and colleagues at Indiana University launched empirical studies focused primarily on the frequency and type of sexual experiences among various segments of the population. At Washington University St. Louis, William Masters and Virginia Johnson delved more deeply into the underlying biology by observing sexual intercourse in the laboratory. Men and women were arbitrarily assigned to partnerships, and a variety of monitoring devices were used to track the changes taking place in different parts of the bodies during sexual activity.

Consider the physiology and pharmacology underlying male sexual performance. From a physiologic point of view, a penile erection is primarily a matter of hydraulics. Erection is controlled primarily by the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. An erection begins when nerves in sacral plexus send impulses to the arteries supplying the corpora cavernosa and spongiosa, the erectile tissues of the penis. The nerves release acetylcholine, which in turn causes release of nitric oxide from endothelial cells in the arteries. The nitrous oxide then diffuses to the smooth muscle cells in the arterial walls, where it acts as a vasodilator. As the arteries dilate, the corpora cavernosa and spongiosa fill

with blood. In addition, contraction of the ischiocavernosus and bulbospongiosus muscles cause venous compression, reducing the drainage of blood.

The erectile dysfunction drugs we know today – including Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra – were born in the 1970s, when British scientists discovered different forms of an enzyme called phosphodiesterase and correctly predicted that drugs capable of inhibiting such enzymes would have important therapeutic potential. As we have seen, nitrous oxide acts as a vasodilator. Specifically, it increases levels of cyclic guanosine monophosphate (cGMP), which relaxes the smooth muscles restricting the flow of blood into the penis. So-called PDE5 inhibitors such as Viagra work by inhibiting the action of the phosphodiesterase that breaks down cGMP, allowing it to persist longer and augmenting and prolonging the degree of vaso-dilation. Bernard and his heirs spawned a new means of commodifying sexuality. The contemporary market for erectile dysfunction drugs is substantial, accounting for approximately \$5 billion in annual sales.

Are physiology and pharmacology the primary means by which to understand and enhance male performance? Some scientists argue that the most real aspects of human sexuality lie in physiology. We can only know what is happening, they argue, by measuring things – changes in pulse rate and respiration, the concentrations of certain chemicals, and the temperature and size of certain body parts.

Dmitri criticizes Rakitin and the other “Bernards” because they aim to replace human passion, character, and perhaps the soul itself with chemistry. If passion, character, and the soul represent nothing more than ripples on the surface of a chemical ocean, then they are not, in the most profound sense, real. Vasodilation may accompany arousal just as a smile accompanies happiness, but the smile is the sign of something else. Outward signs can be faked. Men and women may pretend to experience something, whether pleasure or love.

Is attraction nothing more than physiology? Those who think that physiology is king may see no problem in using sexuality to cheat or dominate or even do violence to others. Transplanting sexuality from morality to chemistry may serve as a pretext for following the appetites wherever they lead. Masters and Johnson would have been perfectly justified in assigning complete strangers to one another and then measuring the physiological changes that accompanied their encounter. Passion, in the end, seems little more than a moistening and a swelling.

This Dmitri cannot abide. For him, to make of sexuality a matter of humidity or tumescence is to commit a form of sacrilege. He does not see Eros as a god. Instead he senses that the erotic dimension of human life must be a part of something higher and divine. Rakitin urges him to plead guilty and win over his judges by arguing that his was a crime of passion, amplified by a lifetime of neglect and abuse from his father. Yet Dmitri sees that by admitting guilt he would be relinquishing responsibility for his own life. He would pay any price, including a lifetime in prison for a crime he did not commit, rather than relinquish responsibility for the life he has led. Casting his lot with the Bernards, though highly convenient, represents the path to spiritual perdition.

In Masters and Johnsons’ laboratory experiments, four out of five subjects who failed – that is, those incapable of sexual performance – were males. As biographer Thomas Maier puts it, “Minute attention to clinical performance and results could turn a relaxed Saturday-night endeavor into Monday morning at work.” Hooked up to electrodes and the like, many subjects found that sexual intercourse lost all trace of passion and human connection. Where physiologic performance was concerned, this presented a bigger problem for men than women. Sex became a “humdrum, loveless matter,” a perspective also curiously reflected in the relationship between Masters and Johnson themselves.

When William Masters first hired Virginia Johnson as a research assistant, he was married and the father of two children, and she was a twice-divorced mother of two. Over the course of their collaboration, spending countless hours observing, measuring, talking, and writing about sex, Masters shared with Johnson his growing suspicion that their work posed a danger. They might be tempted to enter into inappropriate relationships with patients. To avoid such impropriety, he proposed that their

revved up appetites should be directed toward each other. As biographer Maier tells it, "He made it sound like a release valve on a runaway locomotive, a way of diverting a major explosion down the track. Better to get it out of their systems discretely and with no detection." Besides, Masters argued, by engaging in sex themselves, they could help to discover and test out the most effective sexual techniques. Masters instructed his partner that their encounters should remain "as professional as possible" and "not venture beyond the scope of scientific inquiry." This attitude represented the entirely natural outgrowth of years of their laboratory work, a form of sexual vivisection.

The celebrated marriage of Masters and Johnson, after 13 years of nearly nightly sexual exercise, was precipitated when Johnson met a millionaire who proposed. Recognizing that this threatened their highly successful scientific and commercial collaboration, Masters promptly obtained a divorce and married Johnson. Over 21 years of marriage, during which their sex life promptly declined, they never used the word love, which Masters regarded as imprecise and inappropriate. Yet ironically, their union ended when Masters fell in love. He reconnected with a high school flame to whom, as a young man, he had once delivered a love note and two dozen roses. Learning after decades that she never received them, he proposed. Of life with his third wife, he later said that he most enjoyed gazing at her across the breakfast table.

Dmitri Karamazov admits that he was initially attracted to Grushenka by her curves. Perhaps curves are all that some men have managed to find in a woman, which may explain why their search never ends. But Dmitri says more, and in so doing illuminates another possibility. "I've taken her into my soul," he says, "and through her I've become a new man myself." This is the possibility, that of becoming a new man, that the Bernards and the Masters and Johnsons and perhaps even the Tiger Woods of the world have overlooked. Dmitri has not been using Grushenka for pleasure or money or power. She is not a mere one-night conquest. Instead she is the person with whom he wishes to share every day, to whom he hopes to devote the rest of his life. He has learned that what matters most is not the curve of a body but the beauty of a soul.

There are at least two possibilities for human longing. One is focused on curves. It seeks new adventures and attempts to spread itself widely. It is superficial, sometimes to the point of anonymity. It resembles Masters and Johnson's laboratory, where subjects stripped to the skin and encountered one another wearing paper bags over their heads. This possibility Dmitri rejects. He cannot abide its inherent dehumanization. He yearns instead for engagement with the whole person, including the part he calls "an image and a likeness." He is referring, of course, to the divine image and likeness, the Biblical notion that every human being is made in the image of God. A relationship that touches this divine element involves everything we can know with the senses, but goes far beyond. It ends not with the body but with the soul, the aspect by which we most resemble the divine. Longing not embedded in the quest to know another's soul is a sham. It is not real love.

Dmitri has realized that keeping to one woman is an incredibly small price to pay for truly knowing so much as one woman. The problem with licentiousness in its various forms, including pornography and prostitution, is not so much that it is morally wrong, but that it is humanly deadening. Marriage, Dmitri has discovered, is not a ball and chain. It is a gateway to liberation. It is only through unlimited dedication that the human soul can really take flight. Knowing one woman, like knowing God, requires discipline and commitment. The key to enhancing male performance lies in recognizing one powerful truth, a truth that has nothing to do with physiology or pharmacology. What a man cannot find with one woman he cannot find with two, ten, or one hundred. Seeking it among those two, ten, or one hundred does not bring him any closer. Far from multiplying love, it divides it.

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