

Onanism

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Theology, Ethics, Sexual Health, History of Sexuality

1. Core Definition

Onanism is a term with a dual historical and conceptual meaning, primarily referring to two distinct sexual acts that share a common underlying principle of non-procreative sexual expression. Initially, and in its most direct biblical interpretation, it refers to coitus interruptus, also known as the withdrawal method of contraception, where ejaculation occurs outside the vagina to prevent conception. This act is directly derived from the biblical narrative of Onan. Over time, particularly from the 18th century onwards, the term expanded its meaning to also encompass masturbation, the self-stimulation of genitals, due to a perceived similarity in the act of "wasting" or "spilling" semen outside the context of procreation.

The unifying characteristic that allows both coitus interruptus and masturbation to be grouped under the umbrella of **Onanism** is the deliberate prevention of fertilization or the purposeful direction of semen away from its perceived natural procreative function. In both instances, the seminal fluid, often referred to as "seed," is expended without the potential for human reproduction. This interpretation has profound theological and ethical implications, particularly within traditions that emphasize procreation as the primary purpose of sexual intercourse, shaping centuries of discourse on sexual morality and reproductive practices.

Historically, this concept has been a cornerstone in various religious and moral doctrines condemning non-procreative sexual acts. The conflation of withdrawal with masturbation under **Onanism** highlights a broader ethical concern about sexual acts that do not align with the perceived natural order of reproduction. Understanding **Onanism** thus requires an appreciation of its deeply rooted biblical origins and its subsequent expansion into a more generalized concept pertaining to non-procreative sexual behaviors that have been historically viewed with moral disapproval.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Onanism** is directly derived from the biblical character Onan, whose story is recounted in the Book of Genesis, specifically Genesis 38:8-10. This narrative forms the foundational etymology for the concept, embedding it within a rich theological and historical context concerning familial duty, procreation, and divine judgment. The story of Onan serves as the primary textual reference point for understanding the initial condemnation associated with the actions later termed **Onanism**.

According to the biblical account, Onan was the second son of Judah. Following the death of his older brother, Er, Onan was obligated by the custom of levirate marriage to marry his brother's

widow, Tamar. The purpose of this ancient custom was to ensure the continuation of the deceased brother's lineage, with the firstborn son of this union being legally considered the heir of the deceased. This tradition underscored the profound societal and religious importance placed on progeny and the preservation of family lines within ancient Israelite culture.

However, Onan deliberately subverted this duty. As detailed in Genesis 38:9, "And Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother." This passage explicitly describes Onan's use of coitus interruptus, or withdrawal, during intercourse with Tamar. His motivation was to avoid fulfilling his obligation to produce an heir for his deceased brother, thus ensuring that any children born would not legally be his and therefore would not inherit his portion of the family estate.

The biblical narrative concludes with divine retribution for Onan's actions: "And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and He put him to death also" (Genesis 38:10). This severe punishment cemented the act of "wasting seed" as a morally condemned behavior within religious thought. Over subsequent centuries, the term **Onanism** evolved beyond its original context of coitus interruptus to also refer to masturbation, reflecting a broader moral opposition to any non-procreative sexual act that involves the expulsion of semen outside of marital intercourse aimed at reproduction. This expansion of meaning particularly gained traction in medical and moral discourses from the 18th century onward, where both acts were often conflated and viewed as harmful.

3. Key Characteristics

Associated with Preventing Conception or Procreation: The fundamental characteristic of **Onanism**, in both its original biblical context of coitus interruptus and its later expanded meaning to include masturbation, is the deliberate avoidance or prevention of conception. This central theme revolves around the idea of sexual activity that, by design, does not lead to pregnancy, thereby diverging from a purely procreative understanding of sexual intercourse. This characteristic highlights a resistance to fulfilling a perceived natural or divine purpose of sexuality, which is to produce offspring.

Historically Linked to Moral and Religious Condemnation: Stemming directly from the divine punishment of Onan in the Book of Genesis, the concept of **Onanism** has been deeply intertwined with moral and religious disapproval. Across various religious traditions, especially Abrahamic faiths, acts deemed "onanistic" have historically been condemned as sinful, unnatural, or a dereliction of duty. This condemnation often extends beyond mere contraception to encompass a broader disapproval of sexual pleasure detached from procreation, shaping centuries of ethical and theological debate on sexuality.

Encompasses Both Coitus Interruptus and Masturbation: While the biblical story specifically

describes coitus interruptus, the term **Onanism** has become a broader label encompassing both withdrawal and masturbation. This conceptual expansion is based on the shared perceived characteristic of "wasting seed" or expelling semen outside of vaginal intercourse intended for procreation. This dual application reflects a historical tendency to group various non-procreative sexual acts under a single morally charged umbrella, emphasizing the perceived misuse of reproductive potential rather than the specific mechanics of the sexual act itself.

4. Significance and Impact

The concept of **Onanism** has had a profound and enduring impact on Western religious, ethical, and societal thought concerning sexuality, procreation, and contraception. The biblical narrative of Onan provided a foundational text for theological arguments against forms of birth control and non-procreative sexual acts for centuries. This influence is particularly evident in the doctrines of major Christian denominations, which historically have viewed contraception and masturbation as morally illicit, partly drawing on the interpretation of Genesis 38:9. The severity of Onan's punishment underscored the gravity of his perceived sin, lending powerful moral weight to condemnations of acts associated with "wasting seed."

Beyond direct religious condemnation, the term **Onanism** gained significant traction in medical and moral discourses during the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in Europe and North America. It became a pervasive concept used to pathologize masturbation, which was then widely believed to cause a myriad of physical and mental illnesses, ranging from blindness and epilepsy to insanity. Tracts like the anonymous 1716 publication "Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution" fueled this moral panic, portraying masturbation as a debilitating vice. This era saw extensive medicalization of sexual behavior, with "**Onanism**" serving as a catch-all term for what was considered deviant and destructive sexual self-expression.

The legacy of **Onanism** continues to shape contemporary discussions on sexual ethics, familial responsibilities, and reproductive rights. While modern medical science and evolving social norms have largely rejected the pathological views of masturbation and embrace various forms of contraception, the historical shadow of **Onanism** persists in certain theological circles and cultural anxieties surrounding non-procreative sexual acts. It highlights the enduring tension between biological imperatives for reproduction, individual sexual autonomy, and the moral frameworks that societies construct around these fundamental aspects of human experience. The concept has thus played a crucial role in the historical development of sexual morality and continues to be a point of reference in debates about the purpose and limits of sexual activity.

5. Debates and Criticisms

The interpretation of the biblical narrative of Onan and the subsequent concept of **Onanism** has

been a subject of extensive debate and criticism throughout history. A primary point of contention revolves around the exact nature of Onan's sin. While traditional interpretations, particularly within certain religious doctrines, have focused on the "wasting of seed" as the core offense, many biblical scholars and theologians argue that Onan's primary transgression was his deliberate refusal to fulfill his familial and social duty under levirate marriage. His act of coitus interruptus was merely the means by which he evaded this obligation to provide an heir for his deceased brother, thus depriving Tamar of a rightful lineage and inheritance. This reinterpretation shifts the focus from the sexual act itself to the moral failure of neglecting a solemn social responsibility.

Furthermore, the historical expansion of **Onanism** to include masturbation has faced significant criticism, particularly from psychological, medical, and secular perspectives. The 18th and 19th-century medicalization of masturbation as a disease or a cause of various ailments has been thoroughly debunked by modern science. Contemporary medical and psychological consensus views masturbation as a normal, healthy aspect of human sexuality, often associated with stress relief and self-exploration, rather than a pathological condition. Critics highlight how the historical condemnation of masturbation under the banner of **Onanism** contributed to unnecessary guilt, shame, and sexual repression for countless individuals.

Modern debates also scrutinize the broader ethical implications of **Onanism** in the context of reproductive rights and personal autonomy. The historical opposition to contraception, often rooted in interpretations of Onan's story, conflicts with contemporary understandings of family planning, women's health, and individual choice. Critics argue that rigid interpretations of **Onanism** impose an outdated and often harmful moral framework on diverse sexual practices and reproductive decisions, failing to account for the complexities of modern relationships, personal well-being, and global population dynamics. The concept thus remains a potent symbol in the ongoing dialogue between religious tradition, scientific understanding, and evolving societal values concerning human sexuality.

Further Reading

[Onanism - Wikipedia](#)

[Onan - Wikipedia](#)

[Genesis 38:9 - BibleGateway](#)

[Coitus interruptus - Wikipedia](#)

[Masturbation - Wikipedia](#)

[Levirate marriage - Wikipedia](#)

[Tamar \(Genesis\) - Wikipedia](#)