Intimacy and Privacy

Author(s): Robert S. Gerstein

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INTIMACY AND PRIVACY*

Robert S. Gerstein
University of California, Los Angeles

Intimacy and privacy seem to go together. The vast majority of us seek isolation from outsiders for our experiences of intimacy and regard it as indecent for others to intrude upon them.

Why should this be so? A number of reasons suggest themselves. For one thing, people may simply not want to be distracted, any more than they do when they are involved in anything that is important and engrossing. For another, there may be things about the way they act in their intimate relationships which they want to hide because these would discredit them in the eyes of others. Then there is the fact that intimate relationships have as an important part of their content the exclusive sharing among the intimates of things about themselves that no one else knows. The nature of the intimate relationship itself would naturally make up an important part of this exclusive stock of information. To allow outsiders to come in and find out about every detail of intimacy would therefore be seriously to impoverish the "moral capital" upon which the relationship can draw for its sustenance.[1]

I shall argue that the relationship between privacy and intimacy runs deeper than this. Specifically, I shall argue that a fuller analysis will show that intimate relationships simply could not exist if we did not continue to insist on privacy for them.[2]

I

An experience of intimacy is first of all an experience of a relationship in which we are deeply engrossed. It is an experience so intense that it

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1. Charles Fried, "Privacy," *Yale Law Journal* 77 (1968): 475–93.

2. The analysis that follows owes much to Max Scheler, "Über Scham und Schamgefuhl," *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, vol. 1 (Bern, 1957).

wholly shapes our consciousness and action. We do not understand ourselves to be choosing to do this or that, or to be looking here or there as we choose. Rather, whatever we do, whatever we see, is a product of the experience in which we are taking part.

The experience in its most striking form is well described in the literature on religious ecstasy.[3] "These powers being united and gathered together and immersed and inflamed in Me, the body loses its feeling, so that the seeing eye sees not, and the hearing ear hears not. . . . [4] The soul neither sees nor distinguishes by seeing. . . .[5] There is no sense of anything: only fruition without understanding what that may be the fruition of which is granted. The senses are all occupied in this fruition in such a way, that not one of them is at liberty so as to be able to attend to anything else, whether outward or inward."[6]

It is not that the person is suddenly blinded or struck deaf, but that "the senses are occupied in this fruition. . . . " Nor is it simply that he suddenly finds himself looking at or hearing something, rather than consciously directing his attention to it. He does not find himself at all, but loses himself in the experience.

The awareness involved in having such an experience is very different from the awareness we gain from observation. When we observe we turn our attention toward things in order to learn about them. We turn them over or walk around them in order to examine their various aspects and find out what we want to know about them. What we mean by "observation" is perceiving things while maintaining our independence of them. We may observe understandingly, even sympathetically, but we must remain somewhat aloof from that which we are observing. If we lose ourselves in the experience, we relinquish our role as observers and become participants. We cease to be free to look around as we like to find out what we want to know; we see what the internal dynamic of the experience directs us to see, and we see it in the context of meaning established by the experience.

On the other hand, we cannot continue to be immersed in the experience of intimacy if we begin to observe ourselves or other things around us. We become aware of ourselves as observers separate from the object of observation. The fragile unity of the experience is broken. The intensity with which such experiences involve us shields us to some extent from such distraction, but once it occurs the experience dissolves. We cannot at the same time be lost in an experience and be observers of it. We can, of course, continue to understand its nature even after we cease to be immersed in it. One who has been lost in the intimate communion of prayer can, when he becomes self-consciously aware of what he is doing,

3. The examples are drawn from Margharita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961).

4. Quoted from Saint Catherine of Siena in ibid., p. 425.

5. Quoted from Plotinus in ibid., p. 426.

6. Quoted from Saint Teresa of Avila in ibid, p. 430.

continue to understand what true prayer is about, just as the outsider could. But now he is observing, considering, and appraising his own actions from the point of view of his understanding of prayer. In this sense even the person who observes himself at prayer is a kind of outsider as compared with the person who loses himself in prayer. The praying man's own appearance and actions have now become objects of observation for him.

For while he was lost in prayer these things were not objects of observation, either for himself or for any other. They were not intended to be seen, interpreted, and appraised. There was no question of whether they appeared to be appropriate expressions of prayer or not. It was not their function to "appear" to be anything to anyone. They were simply the spontaneous manifestations of intimate communion.

This is not to say that the observer could not come upon someone lost in prayer and see that his gestures and words relate to his own very intense experience of prayer. It is, rather, to make the point that there is a great difference between the way we experience our own actions when we intend them to be observed and understood by others and the way we relate to them when we are immersed in intimacy. When we intend our actions to be observed our sense of them is very much of the same sort as that of the observers. We watch ourselves to see what sort of a point our actions appear to be making, just as they watch us in order to get the point. This is even true of those cases in which we intend to be observed only by ourselves (as where we rehearse in front of a mirror before a public performance). In that case we can protest that our right to privacy is violated if someone breaks in on us, but the injury done is not the same as if we were lost in some form of intimate communion. Even if we meant the performance to be seen by no one else, at least we meant it to be seen. We intended our actions to be objects of observation, to express something to an audience, even though we have limited that audience to ourselves.

II

What are the implications of this distinction between observation and intimate communion for the claim to privacy for intimate relationships?

First of all, it is clear that anyone who intrudes uninvited on the intimacy of another person interferes with his autonomy in a very serious way. It is prima facie wrong to observe a person against his will at any time, because it violates his autonomous right to decide whether he will be observed or not.[7] But the wrong is far greater where the victim of the invasion was submerged in an intimate relationship and therefore did not intend to be observed at all, even by himself. Not only has the enlargement of his audience been forced upon him, but a fundamental change in the nature of his actions as well.

7. See Stanley Benn, "Privacy, Freedom, and Respect for Persons," in *Privacy*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York, 1971).

But this only gives us a strong argument for insisting that people ought to have a right not to be observed in such cases if they choose. The question is, Why would they choose to keep out the observer? I shall argue that they must choose to keep him out because having the experience of intimacy depends on their doing so.

When I have been involved in intimate communion and then am made suddenly aware that I am being observed, I also am suddenly brought to an awareness of my own actions as objects of observation. Where before I had the sense of my actions only as they flowed immediately from the development of the intimate relationship, I am now drawn into seeing them as they represent that relationship to the eye of the observer.

The temptation now to appraise the appearance I make, and to change my actions so that they will reflect to the observer what I would like them to, would certainly be very strong. To do this would obviously be to kill the spontaneity which is essential to intimacy. But even if I resisted this temptation, I would still be pulled out of the experience into the perspective from which meaning is to be read off from appearances. No longer would I experience the relationship from within; I would have become an observer of it. All possibility of spontaneous development would have been swallowed up in this consciousness of myself which has been forced upon me by the intrusion.

But the damage done by breaking in upon intimate communion may go far beyond the immediate disruption. At least in some important cases, the invasion can be deeply destructive of the relationship which underlies the particular moment of intimacy that is broken in upon. These are cases in which there is potentially a serious contradiction between the significance the intimacy has for the relationship out of which it grows and the meaning that the outsider could be expected to read off from it.

I understand intimacy to be characterized not only by its intensity, but also by the significance it has for those caught up in it. We would not call an encounter, no matter how intense, "intimate" if the people involved in it were simply using each other. An intimate relationship is one we value for its own sake. When we are intensely involved in it everything we do flows from it and is shaped by the meaning it has for us. The relationship is not a vehicle to be used for the things we want to do; rather, the things we do within the relationship are vehicles for its spontaneous expression.

In the example of sexual love, then, the love relationship shapes the sexual experience. Sexual pleasure in itself is subordinated to, and given a new significance by, the love relationship. Each caress and response is a spontaneous expression and development of the meaning the relationship has for us.

But genuine intimacy in sexual relationships is a very fragile thing. The problem is that they can so easily degenerate into self-indulgence. There is always the temptation to use the relationship for selfish satisfaction, destroying the context of intimacy. It is this temptation which forms the background against which the problem of the outsider must be seen.

An awareness of the eye of the outsider imposes upon us an awareness of the externally observable, physical side of sexuality in isolation from the context of intimacy within which it could otherwise be a part of the natural growth of the relationship. To tolerate the intrusion is to use the vantage point of the outsider as a means to selfish exploitation and thus to degrade the relationship.[8] Resistance to the invasion of the outsider is therefore an important part of the defense against our own tendency to self-indulgence.

This is by no means to say that every outsider is a voyeur, or that anyone who tolerates an audience for his sexual relations necessarily has base motivations. It is simply to say that, when we feel the eye of the outsider upon us, the physical side of sexuality is transformed into an object of observation and uprooted from the wholeness of intimacy. Instead of being a heightened experience of the love relationship, the sexual encounter then becomes an attack upon it, an indulgence in the selfish satisfactions of using the body of another.

Scheler develops this point in his discussion of the functions of sexual shame. He argues that it is one of the functions of sexual shame to distract the lovers' attention from the sexual organs so that the way will be open for the experience of genuine intimacy. It is precisely our natural desire to indulge ourselves by focusing our attention on our physical sexuality that makes this so necessary. So, too, the natural inclination of the uninvolved observer to focus his attention on the sexual organs, and draw the eyes of the lovers there along with his own, makes it essential that he be excluded. It also makes it essential that these "private parts" in fact be kept private outside of the context of the intimate experience. We clothe ourselves because we must resist the temptation to join with others in the sensual indulgence of focusing our eyes on our physical sexuality. We must resist this, at least some of the time, if we are to develop a sense of ourselves beyond self-indulgence, a sense of ourselves which we can then bring to our intimate relationships with others.[9]

The same sort of thing may occur with religious ceremonies. Prayer, ritual sacrifice, dancing—all of these are physical means for the manifestation of the spiritual relationship experienced by the participant. Seen from outside, these ceremonials may be picturesque, grotesque, or very beautiful. From within, their significance derives purely from their religious meaning. This means that there will always be the threat of the degeneration of the religious act into a mere form, a hollow shell with nothing but its surface attractiveness to give it value. Again, the need to deal with this threat from within makes it necessary to resist observation from without. The presence of the onlooker, if it is not met with resistance, makes those

8. I think this is the point Erving Goffman is making when he writes about "contaminative exposure" of the self and particularly of ". . . the individual's close relationship to significant others" *(Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* [New York, 1961], p. 31).

9. Scheler, 1:134–44.

involved in the ceremony accomplices in a concentration on the surface of things at the expense of inner meaning.[10]

Beyond this there is another sense in which the eye of the observer is destructive of intimacy. The observer is always using the outward appearance of intimacy in one way or another. In the most objectionable case he is exploiting it, disregarding the meaning it has for the participants, and taking voyeuristic pleasure in having others expose themselves before him. On the other hand, the use he makes of it might appear to be more morally neutral or even admirable. He might be watching out of detached and idle curiosity. He might be looking on in an effort to gain a sympathetic understanding of this type of intimate communion.

But in each case he is making use of the outward appearance of those involved in intimacy. Whether it is used as a means to sensual satisfaction or as a means to learn about the experience, it is still being used. And this is an affront to the relationship of which it is an intrinsic part. The physical manifestation of intimacy is consecrated to the relationship of which it is a natural outgrowth, and to turn it into a tool to be used to some end is to demean the relationship. The lovers may well feel that they are being exploited and degraded even if the onlooker has the greatest understanding and sympathy; the religious person may well feel a sense of desecration whenever what was to function purely as part of the expression of a relationship between himself and his God is made use of by others—even as a means of learning about that relationship.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that the connection between privacy and intimacy is a very deep one. For the reasons I have suggested, it seems to me that intimacy simply could not exist unless people had the opportunity for privacy. Excluding outsiders and resenting their uninvited intrusions are essential parts of having an intimate relationship.

Of course, excluding outsiders is not all there is to having an intimate relationship. The presence of outsiders is only one of the things which might make the growth of intimacy impossible; there are many others. We can and do often feel that we are ourselves outsiders observing the relationships in which we are involved, even when we are completely alone.

Most people probably believe, in fact, that it is a good idea for us to look at our relationships from the point of view of the outside observer sometimes. Self-consciousness is not in itself a bad thing, it is simply something we must get rid of for a time if we are to lose ourselves in intimacy, and we cannot do that unless we can have privacy.

10. Margaret Mead writes of the exclusion of outsiders from ceremonial events in Samoa, because their "presence as uninvolved spectators would be indecent. This attitude toward non-participants characterized all emotionally charged events" (*Coming of Age in Samoa* [New York, 1949], p. 85).