

What Is Sexual Intimacy?

*Sascha Settegast**

Philosophy Department, Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg

*Corresponding author. Email: sascha.settegast@phil.uni-halle.de

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Abstract

What is the role of intimacy in sex? The two culturally dominant views on this matter both share the implicit assumption that sex is genuinely intimate only when connected to romance, and hence that sex and intimacy stand in a contingent relationship: it is possible to have good sex without it. Liberals embrace this possibility and affirm the value of casual sex, while conservatives attempt to safeguard intimacy by insisting on romantic exclusivity. I reject their shared assumption and argue for a necessary connection between intimacy and sex, in that sexual activity as such aims at a specific form of intimacy, irrespective of whether it takes place in casual encounters or romantic relationships, and the difference between good and bad sex consists in whether this end is attained. To defend this view, I develop a general account of intimacy and apply it to isolate its specifically sexual form.

Two Views of Intimate Sex

Few would deny that sex often is a matter of great intimacy, for it involves a physical intrusion of the other deep into our personal space and the very heart of our privacy. As the opposite of distance, intimacy arises where we allow others to cross our personal boundaries; where we expose and reveal ourselves to them. Since boundaries serve to protect ourselves, any attempt at intimacy leaves us open to rejection or attack, yet whatever value intimacy has is unattainable without such a willingness to be vulnerable. Intimacy is risky and requires mutual trust, which is one reason why sexual intimacy in particular is linked, in the social imagination, with the romantic involvement of two people and often thought to have its natural place in stable and exclusive love relationships.

Yet, our culture nowadays also grants broad acceptance to casual sex, that is, to sex without deep emotional involvement or long-term

commitment, and values it simply as a means to fun, recreation, or self-exploration. Nevertheless, the non-committal nature of sexual relations that characterizes our present 'hook-up culture' often is suspected to render true intimacy impossible. After all, what space is left for genuine care and connection when partners keep constantly rotating? Curiously, the assumption that casual sex tends to dissolve any link between intimacy and sex is shared not only by its critics. Whereas conservatives worry about a climate of superficiality and self-centredness, liberals often perceive an increase in individual freedom and our options for growth.

Unbound from the traditional requirement of romantic commitment, we now are free to explore the full range of our sexual needs and desires and limited only by our partners' voluntary and informed consent. That hook-up culture foregrounds our own self-experience thus is a feature on this view and not a bug.



The plausibility of this shared assumption, however, rests on the picture of sexual intimacy predominant in the social imagination, which conceives of it primarily as an expression of romance and considers sexual union the very culmination of love. It is unsurprising then that sex without love seems a rather impersonal exchange and primarily aimed at one's own satisfaction. While the predominant picture is not entirely unfounded, I want to suggest that taking romantic intimacy as the paradigm case unduly constricts our understanding of intimacy because it obstructs our view of the real and everyday phenomenon. This constriction ultimately underlies the appearance that intimacy and sex stand only in a *contingent* relationship, and hence that it is possible to have good sex without it. Liberals then embrace this possibility and affirm the self-standing value of casual sex, while conservatives attempt to safeguard the importance of intimacy by insisting on romantic exclusivity.

In this article, I try to correct for this constriction in order to reject the shared assumption

underlying both views. Thus, I argue for a *necessary* connection between intimacy and sex. My claim is that sexual activity *as such* aims at a specific form of intimacy, irrespective of whether it takes place in the context of casual encounters or romantic relationships, and that the very difference between good and bad sex consists in whether this end is attained. To defend this view, I will first outline what I take to be a more adequate general account of intimacy, which I will then apply to clarify the relation between sex and intimacy, in order to isolate its specifically sexual form.

The Nature of Intimacy

Generally, intimacy exists on the whole spectrum between proximity and distance and therefore in varied forms and degrees. We experience it not merely in love relationships but also with family, friends, and colleagues, in conversation and other shared activities, and sometimes even with the people working at the cafes we regularly

visit. Intimacy is everywhere we do not experience others as inaccessible and strange, but as comprehensible and similar to ourselves. Thus, in intimate experiences, we at least partially overcome the otherness of the other by recognizing in them something common to us both, which enables us to identify with them. Intimacy is an awareness of the other in which the 'I' does not confront a distinct and unfamiliar 'You' but unites itself with the other in a 'We', and the different sorts of community captured by ordinary 'We' talk represent its various forms.

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Awareness of community with others is crucial to our nature as political animals. While other social animals also live in groups and exhibit cooperative and functionally differentiated behaviour, our group life is special because it is essentially *self-conscious*. We are capable of acting together from a shared idea or representation of an end, and of deliberating with each other about which ends to adopt and how to pursue them. We can coordinate our individual actions with each other and thereby mould them, effectively, into phases or parts of a single collective action, which sometimes reaches far beyond

our own contribution. The agent performing that action is not any one individual but the community of all those participating in it, and whenever we say that *we* are doing this or that, we conceive of ourselves as part of such a collective agent. This ability to act collectively is what makes us *political* animals and informs even our most pedestrian activities. For it makes a difference whether we are out for a walk together, and thus move from a shared idea of where we are going, or whether we are walking next to each other only because each of us separately wants to get from A to B, since in that case it is a mere accident that (and if) we remain in close proximity on the way.

Human sociality thus is mediated by an awareness of community, which issues from our ability to reciprocally identify with each other in the pursuit of shared ends. It essentially consists in experiencing each other as alike, at least to the extent that we thereby value the same things. Choirs, which are collective agents *par excellence*, provide a vivid illustration of this link between human sociality and intimacy. Singers in a choir pursue the very same end. They work on a shared project, such as performing a particular piece of music. To that end, they need to coordinate and match their singing by paying attention to what the others are doing. For it is not sufficient for everyone merely to sing their own part; they also have to integrate it seamlessly into the totality of the piece. Hence, they need to conceive of their singing as a contribution to and phase in a larger process of action that extends beyond the individual singer and is performed, ultimately, by the choir as a whole. As singers, *we* perform this piece together, and this constitutes us *as a choir*. Put differently, our shared end enables us to reciprocally identify with each other as singers, to unify ourselves into one collective agent, and thereby to fuse our different musical *personae* into one.

Joint pursuit of the same end thus tends to *move the boundaries of the self*, extending them such that the selves of all participants come to overlap in a way that constitutes a partial unity and common identity among them. While the singers remain formally distinct individuals,

materially their selves come to be partially the same because all of them have the same, *numerically* identical end as a constitutive part. Awareness of this 'shared matter' allows them to understand the others as a part of themselves, and this ability to expand the very boundaries of the self by including others in our self-understanding is what is special to us as political animals. For it enables us to transform a separate 'I' and 'You' into a 'We' that is not merely a collection or heap of unrelated individuals but integrates them into an *actual, self-conscious community*, which understands itself as such.

Yet, the singers' identification with each other does not merely enable them to unify their actions. It also renders them *visible* to each other in related respects. In pursuing the same end, they experience each other as having something in common, namely a shared love of music, which motivated them to join hands (or voices) in the first place. Love of music can form part of an individual's self or *personality*, which I define as the characteristic manner or style in which a person habitually exercises the capacities constitutive of their personhood in relating to the world. This includes how a person will tend to behave and react, what goals and beliefs they regularly exhibit, and fundamentally what their basic motivations and convictions are. These largely implicit beliefs, which concern what is possible and important in life and what one deserves and can expect of it, represent our personal take on human existence and its conditions. Thus, one's personality colours how one perceives one's place in the world and, consequently, how one is oriented and motivated in action. It is our *characteristic manner of being in the world*, which shapes everything we think, feel, and do.

Thus, in becoming visible to each other in their love of music, the singers also recognize each other as essentially *alike* in this aspect of their personalities. Since each of them contributes to the same end as the others, this includes a perception of each other as *constructive and benevolent*, rather than indifferent or inimical, and this positive mutual perception grounds a friendship among the choir that centres on their joint

music-making. Put differently, by valuing the same things and working together on shared projects, the singers also come to value *each other*, that is, to acknowledge relevant aspects of each other's personalities as good. For each individual, this entails an experience of affirmation within the community. To the extent that its members express the same values in their shared pursuits, they effectively act as mirrors for each other, in which the individual can perceive the community's endorsement of its own values and thereby experience *its very own personality as good*. Understanding oneself as part of a 'We' consequently neither entails nor necessitates a loss of individuality. For we do not negate our own self in favour of a 'We' that is separate from or 'superior' to it when we extend its boundaries to include others who embrace the same values and ends. Rather, we then identify with them *as equals sharing in a common manner of being in the world*, and this empowers us, ideally and in its most extensive form, to experience a fundamental affirmation of our own individual self in its community with other selves just like it.

As an everyday phenomenon, intimacy essentially consists in this reciprocal visibility and affirmation of our individual personalities within a community experience mediated by joint action and shared ends. Such experiences can vary in intensity depending on the extent to which one's personality finds positive resonance with another, from a fleeting sense of sympathy to the fundamental affirmation that is love. In all these cases, the other's acknowledgement allows us to experience that what we, subjectively, value and deem important also has reality beyond our own perspective; that for others the world is, at least partially, just like it is for us. Intimacy thereby gives us a *sense of being at home* in the world, with ourselves, and within our communities, for which Simon May has coined the felicitous expression *ontological rootedness*. All experiences of meaning in human life are thus rooted in our participation in communities, as only working with others towards realizing genuine human goods enables us to experience the possibility, and the actuality, of goodness in the world.

‘... even the framework of a stable and exclusive partnership cannot in itself offer genuine intimacy, if it is not animated by these virtues of character.’

Sexual Intimacy as the Defining End of Sex

What does this imply for the relation between intimacy and sex? In contrast to other joint activities, it is crucial that intimacy in sex is *not merely a by-product* of pursuing some other shared end. For what could that end be? While orgasm may come to mind, it is more of an individual than a shared experience; nor is this remedied by the thought that, perhaps, we should aim at simultaneous orgasm, as that is an absurd notion of what constitutes good sex. Likewise, few people go in for sex with the explicit aim of procreation. Hence, it seems that sexual intimacy, as a distinctive experience of community, is itself the *defining end of sex*. Consequently, sex is not a cooperative exchange among the partners subserving their own physical satisfaction, as if the other were merely a particularly enticing toy for masturbation, the use of which requires letting oneself be used in the same way. Rather, sex is joint action in pursuit of a community experience that satisfies a deeper, psychological need.

After all, even our experiences of sexual attraction, arousal, and desire are not purely physical but already have a psychological dimension. They are not mere sensations, such as hunger pangs or itches, but *emotional states* directed at objects beyond themselves, which they present in a distinctive way. Fear, for instance, presents its objects as threatening, and our emotional relation to such objects is mediated implicitly by thoughts about

them, in light of which they appear so. Thus, we may fear dogs because we believe they will bite, or great heights because it seems we could fall down. Sexual experiences are also structured like this, in that we are attracted *to* particular people, aroused *by* certain situations, or desire engaging *with* someone in a specific practice; and our emotional relation to such objects of attraction, arousal, and desire likewise is mediated implicitly by thoughts about them, in light of which they attain a *sexual meaning or significance* to us.

In many cases we can articulate the thoughts that inform our emotions more or less on request. In the sexual sphere, however, it is notoriously difficult to put one's finger on why exactly this particular person, situation, or practice arouses us, and not another. This indicates that the thoughts that shape sexual desire are of a special sort. What makes them hard to articulate is that they are not everyday thoughts about some thing or other in the world but form part of the *very framework that is our personality*. What we find attractive in another reflects our own personality, in that their features are sexually significant to the extent that they resonate with our basic self-conception, that is, act as a *tangible symbol of what matters* to us in life. In desiring them, we ultimately desire to possess the physical reality of our basic values; and in desiring us back, they confirm both that what matters is in fact attainable for us and that we are worthy of it. This is why rejection can cut deep.

Yet, in the sexual act, it drives a spiralling process of reciprocal arousal, desire, and affirmation, in which the partners successively cross each other's boundaries and, in the best case, lose any sense of distinction between them. They thereby develop a tacit, sensually mediated awareness of each other that renders them fully visible and at home. This is possible because the sexual act itself, as joint action, essentially aims at this most comprehensive form of intimacy. While not always fully realized, its end thus consists in the partners' complete identification within a community experience that affirms their whole personalities; their shared manner of being in the world.

When successful, such experiences involve a particularly pronounced sense of ontological rootedness that exemplifies a general phenomenon.

For at times, perceived objects in the world happen to resonate strongly with the largely tacit background beliefs that constitute our personality and thereby pull them into the foreground of attention, affording us an intense emotional experience otherwise known as *catharsis*. Its intensity issues from the fact that, in the perceived object, the world and our fundamental outlook on it come to a perfect match, and life suddenly is as it ought to be. Cathartic experiences, then, cleanse us momentarily of all everyday irrelevancies, suspend our usual sense of time, and reduce us emotionally to our very core. In this, they give us a sense of the ideal and eternal. Art and natural beauty can have this effect; and sex, when particularly intimate, can have it too.

In principle, such an experience of intimacy is also possible in casual sex, despite its reputation to the contrary. To see this, we need to differentiate sexual from romantic intimacy. While the latter consists in a comparably extensive experience of community, it is usually based on a longer-term project of systematically integrating the lovers' lives and involves a deeper, more explicit understanding of their personalities. Hence, their awareness of community has greater complexity, duration, and stability, but is normally less immediate and less intense than in sex. What distinguishes sexual intimacy, and accounts for its greater momentary intensity, is the sheer physicality of the partners' mutual awareness, in that they perceive each other's sexual significance *immediately in their bodies*. Thus, when we feel sexually attracted to another, it is not just to their physical features as such but to their personality, as *embodied* in their facial expressions, gestures, and posture, in the way they move, laugh, talk, dress, and style themselves. Even spontaneous attraction among strangers therefore still reflects

a resonance between their personalities, which enables them to undergo an experience of mutual visibility and affirmation, and thus of genuine intimacy, even in a casual encounter.

Consequently, we should reject the common assumption that casual sex necessarily dissolves any link between intimacy and sex. For it does carry an *inherent potential* for it. Whether any given encounter actualizes this potential depends both on the presence of genuine attraction and on the sexual partners' attitude towards each other, namely, on whether they treat each other with benevolence, sincerity, and respect despite the otherwise non-committal nature of their relationship. Without such an attitude of mutuality, one cannot attain reciprocal visibility and affirmation in the sexual act.

This should caution us against liberal views that celebrate casual sex primarily as a means towards our own fun and satisfaction. Paradoxically, such views are actually *anti-sex* because they project a picture of it on which satisfying one's partner easily looks like an effort undertaken mostly for *their* benefit, and thus like a burden one may feel tempted to minimize. Sex then threatens to degenerate into a mere act of exchange, in which everyone places their own satisfaction first and a genuine experience of community is simply lost. This, however, is no reason to embrace conservative views either that restrict genuine intimacy to committed relationships and completely deny it to casual encounters. For that is merely the other side of the coin. Ultimately, attaining genuine intimacy in sex requires benevolence, sincerity, and respect from the partners *regardless of the circumstances* under which their encounter takes place. Thus, even the framework of a stable and exclusive partnership cannot in itself offer genuine intimacy, if it is not animated by these virtues of character.

Sascha Settegast

Sascha Settegast is Research Fellow in Philosophy at Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg.

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