

Sexuality As Dialogue: The Three Levels of Intimacy

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The basic elements of the most wild, passionate sexuality imaginable exist in any interaction, even between friends discussing philosophy at Malbec's. The friends must be capable of dialogue and negotiation, whether intimacy occurs in a restaurant or a bedroom. Three basic levels of inter-personal relatedness exist – the actualized, the immature, and the perverse. These different levels of closeness can perhaps be most viscerally demonstrated by using graphic sexual imagery as a vehicle.

Beginning with the most inter-subjective, sexuality between consenting adults reaches limits only at the end of human imagination. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau pointed out in the 1800s, and Jacques Lacan reminded us in the 1900s, humans appear to be the only animals who “play” with their instinctual drives. Rather than eat fresh-killed deer outside our offices, we dine in restaurants with white linen table clothes and fine flatware. In the bedroom, living room floor, or the Langham Hotel parking lot, humans capable of authentically identifying their needs and speaking them, in a true I-Thou fashion, may enjoy whatever sexual activities they desire. Beyond sexual positions culled from the Kama Sutra, common variations include oral sex, anal sex, ejaculating on body parts, sadomasochistic enactments, and using sex toys. Actualized participation in these forms of physical intimacy requires two or more mature adults, fully capable of identifying their wishes and desires, and also fully capable of asking for more, less, alteration, or cessation.

Descending now from that ideal level of inter-subjectivity to the immature level, humans commonly stray into any number of sadomasochistic interpersonal contracts. As Lewis Aron emphasized in his book, *Meeting of Minds*, most couples fall into patterns of submission-dominance as a defense against interpersonal intimacy. These roles are safer. Negotiation becomes simpler because mature mutual consent vanishes. Consider, for example, a situation in which a man, who consciously consented to being hog-tied and horsewhipped, fails to speak his wish to stop because he fears disappointing his partner. At this immature level, authenticity is sacrificed.

The immature level is evident in soft-pornography. Playboy and Playmate magazines, for example, provide alleged personal information, thereby flexing the wall between viewer and object. As you gaze upon the mostly-full-nude pictures of a woman on the pages, you read that she attends graduate school at The Chicago School, studies clinical psychology, and wants to help emotionally troubled children. The text beneath the photos advises you that she grew up on the Jersey shore, feels close to her grandmother, and dates a USC Medical student. The photo, thus, seems to offer up something true about what looks like a real person, a real subjectivity. But of course this is a one-way relationship, with one party appearing in only two dimensions.

If you venture even deeper into the perverse level of interpersonal relating, one party in the relationship treats another party as an object or thing, rather than as a human subjectivity. In this literal example, a woman on a first date with a man she met through Match.com was driven by him to a Home Depot. He asked her to wait in the car while he purchased a set of chains and power tools with which to enact his

internal, fantasied sexual drama. Fortunately the woman learned of her date's actual intentions, and fled from the car to safety. She evaded the perverse encounter by asserting her subjectivity.

Perverse individuals cannot relate in a "whole-object" sense. They are incapable of empathy. They relate to a *thing*, not a *person*. The perverse level, usually inhabited by malignant narcissists or psychopaths, is the perfect opposite of inter-subjective relating. It is in this realm that one finds what psychoanalysis means by the concept of "part-objects." The most primitive levels of pornography, namely the most perverse, depict erotogenic *parts* of persons, like a nipple, labia, or clitoris, or glans penis.

Often immature and perverse interpersonal relating results from trauma, and this can usually be helped by psychotherapy. One hopes that all persons, wounded or not, would aspire to the highest level of authentic inter-subjectivity. They can then enjoy mature interpersonal and adventurous encounters in restaurants, bedrooms, or parking lots. Everyone deserves passionate, intense sexual engagements. And, after both parties feel satisfied, one might say, "Whoa, how totally amazing! Shall we go for dessert and espressos at Starbucks now?" And the other party would respond authentically and, if agreeable, they would proceed there arm in arm, full of love for one another.

(Bolstered by Soren Kirkegaard's lament that "ours is a paltry age because it lacks passion," Dr. Alan Karbelnig writes this column to provoke thoughtful reaction from his SGVPA colleagues. He practices psychoanalytic psychotherapy and forensic psychology in South Pasadena.)