

The Conditions of Decision-Making and their Relationship
to Adolescent Sexual Début
Notes on the Boundaries and Scope of Adolescent
Intimacy

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Summary

Intimacy turns away from public life. She clears spontaneity from her visible mask. Spontaneity looks for a shelter in intimacy, while public life is the scenario of an operational trade of interest and proud. Her other border -even more meaningful- links with the visceral experience, which is apart from intimacy's intercourse. The visceral experience takes care of both repression and narcissistic dignity. Pain is in the midst of her defence's aims. The debut produces an ethical change in intimate spontaneity. It installs a new turning point, from which the young man assumes his own life as his own.

Key words

Decision, debut, intimacy, spontaneity, ethics.

Not everything in one's sex life is shared. Within each individual and in each sexual act, a visceral residue separates itself in the exchange, preventing love's mythical androgynous completion. This exclusion is even more evident in the individual, where a part of him or herself resists voluntary access and destroys the illusion of identity. Add to this, the imperative discretion that adult sexuality assumes with respect to child sexuality. This brief observation covers the heterogeneous terrain that ranges from the impossible domain over one's own psychic division to the illusory transgressive act that attempts to gain access to it. If the mainspring of emotional life takes shelter in the inaccessible unconscious, the strategies of abuse and rape

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seek an illusory shortcut to that kept area in order to get into it, through the abuse of an other, to that which resists access in that individual's own ground.

Child abuse establishes a confusion of tongues between two dimensions of sex that respond to different ethical regimes. Adolescent access to sexual know-how establishes radical transformations between the two. This zone has biological defenses, both physical—similar to those of animals—as well as a psychic transformation—where language is the indispensable tie to the emotional and ethical dimension unique to humans that we call *logos*. The difference in sexual know-how between adults and children establishes an ethical and legal boundary that marks the limits of licit sexual activity and of the desecration of a sacred value, attributed to the child psyche. The care taken in childhood slips into adult life inasmuch as the sexual—and human—condition is an inviolable dimension and its desecration leads to an ethical catastrophe and psychic misery that are difficult to heal. In both cases, the human condition deteriorates into an animal nature, which Agamben termed *nuda vita*, or “bare life”. If the body is used as a mere sexual object, *nuda vita* replaces human freedom in deciding for the body and its desires. Given this elemental distinction, uses of the body—one's own and that of others—lead to different types of sexual activity that have their own conditions of decision and conscious and unconscious rules of use. Decision-making is a central component in the constitution of freedom, the loss of which removes a key element of the human condition. Therefore, exploring it can highlight the key human ethical and emotional mainsprings in psychic life.

In the history of the species and in the constitution of an individual, access to language marks a qualitative leap between animal perception, guided by the pleasure-unpleasure series, and the qualitatively sophisticated discrimination constructed in the *logos*. This ability enabled the intellection of distinct states and initiated a social bond that transcends mammalian attachment. Freud noted this in *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, distinguishing pain from displeasure and attributing a psychic quality to words. Through language, humankind inserted itself into a web of communication and meaning, in a semiosis as creative as it is infinite. This production is so intense that it tends to border on the boundary between animal (*zoe*) and human (*bios*). The human community resulting from these linguistic practices and their communicative and semantic interactions gives way to a political order—the sociability originating in the Greek *polis*—where both power and the law are inscribed. Within them or through them, each individual makes a decision, evident through his or her autonomy and, more precisely, his/her sovereign dimension.

The moment of the decision itself marks a changing point between the social dimension and the personal experience of an individual. It is an expression of their desire, but beyond this, also reveals the effectiveness of all the factors of power and the law governing it. Therefore, what is referred to as intimacy depends on the interplay of power between an individual's external and internal factors, which define what, how and why a decision is made, before whom and at what moment in time. The construction of this decision accompanies the move towards autonomy that leads an adolescent to his or her future adult freedom and is closely related to the conditions of his or her sexual activity and the barriers s/he and others construct between their own emotions and family and social life.

The decision involves accepting a standard, explicit or otherwise, that governs the political normalization of the deciding *normotic* individual and those closest to him or her. But it also stems from an ethical desire, shaped by its own references, beyond social morals. The just and the judicial, the ethical and the moral, the appropriate and the normalized are two dimensions in tension, given that the judicial tends to validate unjust acts when they fall outside of explicit stipulations. The decision must respect the political order, but at exceptional moments, breaks with this order and establishes a new ethical order.

If done alone, this new ethical order leaves the individual in a marginal position and if shared by many, it constitutes the beginning of a common proposal, as we tend to see in youth movements. However, the success or failure of this ethics does not reflect its original strength or initial cause, which depend on the perspective of the decision itself.

The distinction between these two perspectives—ethical and moral—represents the deciding factor between what could be referred to as obedience to the social order and the personal and unique reasoning (*rationale*) of each young individual. If this idiosyncratic dimension is subjugated or violated by an external power, the individual loses his human condition to some extent and, in extreme cases, falls into *nuda vita*. Thus, a growing sophistication in handling power and the manipulative use of tools to dominate users' decisions settle the dark and desolate boundaries of its fascinating possibilities.

Along with the user manual comes the moral drive to consume, through tools that surreptitiously install themselves as a new order of behaviors, prestige and even uses of the body. They impel the user to maintain a clandestine *double standard* in order to protect their personal decision from an inviting and suggestive, often mandatory, social power. The strategies of social networks—the use of *likes*, *rolling* and *trolling*, etc.—are the tip of the iceberg of an advance of communications technologies in

social life, increasingly involved in the most intimate aspects of users' lives. This naturalized use of bodies has been transformed into what we call *generalized transparency*.

The defensive response to this media pressure split the content and the emotions that are distributed through these social networks. The exchange of media content became trivialized. In losing their emotional value, intimate affectionate exchanges dissolved into sappy or dramatic expressions.

It even distorted the way the body is used, showing off an inexpressive nudity, devoid of emotion, whose exchange leads to sexual prowess or even brazen challenges—where facial expressions lose their expressive spontaneity in favor of melodramatic use.

The decision is defensively split into two concentric planes: one open to the social network while the other, hidden, shelters personal and individual ethics. The mask and the person are split into two divergent ethical planes and a weird clandestinity of the person regarding him/herself takes root through this renewed social hypocrisy. The visible plays a predominant role in the creation of a mask and defines what aspects of content are declared at the "customs house" of transparency. Each time any content is declared and presented to the social gaze, it is stripped off its emotional character. Similar to the Western use of the exposed face, the facial expressions of the mask vary—hypocritical, inexpressive or emotional—according to the use these expressions are given on each occasion by the user. Therefore, despite the major transformations that physical and emotional exchanges have undergone in the present day, they should be evaluated in terms of these expressive variations and the emotional value attributed at each moment to what is being shared. The decision attempts to remain unvarying in its principles and "render to God the things that are God's, and to Caesar the things that are Caesar's".

Clinical practice reveals the distinct varieties of this gradient between social submission to the current dominant ideal and the ethical response hidden behind the social mask. Things do not appear to have changed much with respect to P. Blos's depiction on adolescent sexuality in the age of the pill. At that time there were adolescents who preserved a virginal image despite having frequent sex, in accordance or submission to the sexual ideal of the time. The split between political behavior and private life told the difference between normalized duties of social behavior and the indicated decision of the how and when of ethical behavior. *Normalization* refers to the political norm formulated by the polis, while *indication*

refers to *Dikē* and index, two ways to indicate the right path as the expression of a decision rooted in personal ethics.

These two lines of decision—moral normalization and ethical indication—define two different modes of social participation in the group life of young people. Normalization responds to the aim of belonging and participating in group life, identifying with their symbols, playing by its rules and struggling for prestige. Adherence and narcissism are its main means, on behalf of an ideal of belonging that may ensure exogamous consistency beyond family support. Adherence to the leaders and symbols of this group life is similar to the childhood ideal of sustaining the infantile *self* through the figure of a personalized superego.

In contrast, indication is governed by an anonymous ethical ideal, established in the adolescent as a result of his or her growing personal autonomy and increased capacity to differentiate his or her own vision from the others' opinion, whether parental or social. When the ideal of group belonging does not prevail, the emotional exchange is very intense and the crossed projective identifications enable the unfolding of the various ways to conjugate the sexual conflict of each individual and of everyone in general. This exchange gives a changing perspective to each participant, enabling him/her to take on an active role, then a passive one and then be a mere spectator of a scene, which does not involve him/her to an utmost degree.

This ethical ideal tends to be impersonal, whether or not the adolescent recognizes that it has its roots in the model provided by his or her family or loved one. The ethics of indication lends significant independence and stability to the decision. Given that this type of ethics is not much influenced by social norms, it establishes a growing and vital emotional stability in the adolescent, who then tends to be in a position to carry out long-term projects.

It is therefore not surprising that these two legalities associated with the decision itself correspond to two different moments in a young person's life, marked by the access to (sexual) *début*; this moment in which a young individual becomes his or her own version of him/herself and his/her life. Whether it be because adolescent has experienced an event that has changed his way of seeing the world or because something has led him/her to see him/herself as an autonomous being with a new critical spirit, sexual *début* settles a before and an after and gives the individual a new paradigm to understand his or her own life. That moment coincides with access to a more sophisticated form of intimacy, in which each adolescent reserves an opaque aspect of his or her emotional and sexual life and his/her experience is framed within the possibility of experiencing pain in close relation with his or her sexual life.

Caring for this pain, their own and that of others, strengthens both confidence and trust, two ways of becoming emotionally close to someone else. Adolescents are shaped by a particular model of justice, under the aegis of care for the benefit and the pain of others. This altruistic quality of intimate justice becomes decisive at the moment of creating a work or through any attempt to produce a third that transcends the benefit of those who contribute to this work: whether it be a child or a material or spiritual creation. However, the intention of confidence distinguishes itself from the framework in which it unfolds. Confidence forms part of the belief that something will be maintained through experience, but the experience itself is subject to the freedom of those involved. The distance between confidence and tyrannical subjection signals the boundaries between links sustained through mutual desire and strategies of power associated with omnipotent control. For this reason, emotions that attempt to control and constrain the freedom of desire—both one's own and that of others—are excluded from any concept of intimacy. This condition distinguishes intimacy from the clandestine pact, as well as from agreements supported by loyalty or due obedience.

Intimacy has clear boundaries in public life, from which it takes distance, splitting away from its visible mask. Although there are exceptions, spontaneity generally takes shelter in private life, while the operational exchange of interests and prestige are left for public life. Its other—even more significant—boundary is related to that visceral residue excluded from intimate exchanges to protect the repressive equation and the narcissistic dignity of a person. Taking care of the pain in one's personal life is closely related to these defenses, given that pain is directly linked to them. The temperature and distance of this intimate exchange is in agreement with this type of care. This border determines a new split between what is shared in one's personal life and what retreats into a sacred personal dimension, the violation of which is catastrophic, since this violation transforms the sacred into a painful spectacle. Both in public as in private life, emotional expression is proportionate to the risk of experiencing pain. For this reason, nudity acquires a paradoxical quality given that the more that is revealed, the more inexpressive it is. This proportion runs the risk of suffering the pain of abuse, on the one hand; and, on the other, serves as the wellspring for seduction, offering its suggestive promise precisely where what is promised is more than what is shown.

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