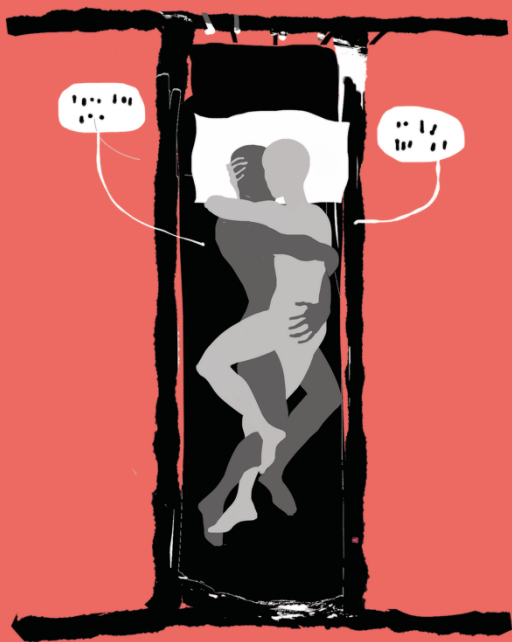


— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



UNSHACKLING INTIMACY

Ralph Leonard

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

UNSHACKLING INTIMACY

Eros is the summit of human freedom. This may initially strike you as a slightly odd statement. Sure, sex is fun and all, but is it so important as to be put on a pedestal? I think few things are more intrinsic to being human than sex. Anyone familiar with Goethe's *Young Werther* will understand how love and desire can simultaneously be intoxicating and dangerous. Yet, it's precisely because of this danger and risk that we are obsessed with it. Just as Freud once claimed that a man's sexual behaviour is often a 'prototype for the whole of his other modes of reaction in life', the question of sex and sexuality is a good litmus test for our attitudes towards human freedom in other spheres of life.

One of the great gains of modern, bourgeois civilisation is the freedom to have a 'sex life' without the interference or molestation of the state, church, family, or what John Stuart Mill called the 'tyranny of custom'. The 'creative destruction' of capitalist society broke apart traditional family and communal structures - and moral structures with it - that opened a space for more individual and thus sexual expression. Throughout epochs, men and women have risked death, torture, incarceration, persecution and ostracisation for the sake of coitus, or even for

the sake of representing it in art. One of my favourite novels, *Bonjour Tristesse* by Françoise Sagan, is a slim document from which what we now call the 'sexual revolution' germinated in the 1950s, and burgeoned in the 1960s. Sagan, at the tender age of 18, penned this wonderfully fun amoral tale of a decadent 17-year-old schoolgirl, Cécile, engaging in her own *dolce vita* full of bohemian delight and hedonism. Naturally, a teenage girl writing without inhibition about a sexual *bildungsroman* would ignite a storm and arouse prurient curiosity. The line that captures the spirit of the book is when Cécile declares: 'My love of pleasure seems to be the only consistent side of my character.'

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

This consistent 'love of pleasure' that sex provides is what many, especially the libertines and epicures among us, cherish - even if we often take it for granted. After all, sex is how we *Homo sapiens* reproduce ourselves to continue the species. We literally couldn't live without it. Nevertheless, dear reader, sex isn't just a mere biological 'impulse', a primal 'urge' or a necessary function. As humans, Eros forms a language, an art, a promise of pleasure and merriment - the glue that seals bonds with potential lovers.

Perhaps it is only through the experience of the pandemic that we have really come to understand how much we take our basic sexual and social freedoms for granted. The doctrine of ‘social distancing’ and isolation caused a dramatic standby in social life.

Lockdowns meant many of the avenues and spaces men and women often use to meet up, date and consort with each other - bars, nightclubs, restaurants, concerts - were closed. Likewise, casual sex and other forms of intimate touching and kissing are portrayed as irresponsible for potentially spreading the dreaded virus. Some, especially the libertines among us, have had to be domesticated because of this. Others, however, seem to relish the forced restraint on sexual freedom. They imagine the pandemic as a reminder to singletons of the importance of ‘commitment’, hoping that it might be the nail in the coffin to ‘soul-eroding’ hook-up culture. Indeed, they argue that covid-19 serves as a reminder that there are dangerous ‘consequences’ to casual sex.

It would be a mistake to see the pandemic as the sole threat to sexual freedom.

Thankfully, science has given us a golden ticket to the return of a diverse, fun and lively social life in the form of vaccinations. But it would be a mistake to see

the pandemic as the sole threat to sexual freedom. If anything, the virus has accelerated and pulled the veil off existing trends: isolation, alienation, atomisation and social authoritarianism.

We live in societies where degraded and anaemic libidos interact with mass-produced porn, often depicting boring, mechanised and deodorised sex.

There is a complacency in thinking that we, in the early twenty-first century, are the truly sexually free and tolerant generation enjoying the gains of our rebellious forefathers. Sure, in a basic and narrow sense, this is correct. Homosexuality and interracial sex are decriminalised and are in fact celebrated in much of pop culture. The power of the church and patriarchal authority to control an individual's sex life is much diminished. The stigma around casual sex, especially for women, has only somewhat lessened, but lessened no doubt. Sex is even seamlessly integrated into the consumer capitalist economy, demonstrated by the growth of the sex-toy industry. Tinder and other dating apps have broadened our access to potential partners in new and exciting ways. The advent of the internet has also made online pornography easily available - to the delight and horror of many.

In defence of sleeping around

However, as a student of Hegel and Marx, it's important for me to make clear that social progress is necessarily paradoxical, or shall we say 'dialectical'. It would be naïve and one-sided to view the progress that has occurred in a linear or panglossian narrative of liberal triumph, instead of grappling with contradiction. Indeed, I think Flaubert was correct in stating that contradiction is the only way to keep sane in this world.

Despite all our social progress, forms of stigma persist, with the construction of social prejudices and customs alongside a hollowing out of sexuality itself.

We live in societies where degraded and anaemic libidos interact with mass-produced porn, often depicting boring, mechanised and deodorised sex. Periodic moral panics over the alleged 'oversexualisation' of young people masks the reality of the 'sex recession' (involuntary for men, voluntary for women). Fraught quarrels around consent have dominated headlines, with #MeToo and even fringe movements like inceldom somehow gaining significance in mainstream political debate.

Despite all our social progress, forms of stigma persist, with the construction of social prejudices and customs alongside a hollowing out of sexuality itself, or what Adorno once called ‘desexualising sex’.

I confess to having this wretched disease called the ‘male gaze’, which amounts to nothing more than the sin of being attracted to beautiful women.

The social stigma and prohibition of casual sex has somewhat dissipated, yet there is still a latent prejudice against promiscuousness. Promiscuous men are portrayed as either selfish narcissists or sinister predators who can manipulate a woman at the click of a finger. While promiscuous women are viewed as naïve, mentally damaged and probably victims of some form of abuse, who attempt to cover up trauma via a ‘mad’ phase of sleeping around in search of validation. Leaving aside the condescension, the premise of this view is built on sexual hierarchy, with the family and couplehood at the top as the unique site of intimacy. One of the virtues of the gay and queer liberation movements of the past was that they called into question this hierarchy, proving that erotic intimacy can take multiple forms.

A major *bête noire*, especially among feminists, is the ‘male gaze’. The common, boring cliché trotted out about it is that it’s objectifying, dehumanising and degrading. The female gaze, in contrast, is portrayed as edenic and spiritually dignified. ‘If male thirst simplifies women to bits of flesh, then female thirst tends to be all about fleshing out the person inside’ as one critic put it.ⁱⁱ

Being in tune with your libido, and being able to freely exercise sexual autonomy according to your inner will without the burden of shame, isn't something to be glib about.

I confess to having this wretched disease called the ‘male gaze’, which amounts to nothing more than the sin of being attracted to beautiful women. When I’m watching a film or a television series, I’ll admit, I fall in lust a lot. I can be captivated by the almost immaculate beauty of Adriana Ugarte, and her ability to grace the screen with classic Hollywood finesse, as well as admire Lily James’s derriere in a nude scene from *The Exception*. It’s a small but significant part of the fun of watching a film. Nevertheless, the vituperations against the male gaze are a small instance in which sexuality and its representation are hollowed out and evacuated of any content.

Contrary to witless sneering from the moral consensus, so-called promiscuity and sexual desire actually requires a high level of self-mastery. Being in tune with your libido, and being able to freely exercise sexual autonomy according to your inner will without the burden of shame, isn't something to be glib about. On a more fundamental level, this speaks to something deep in our culture and its philosophical infrastructure: the mind/body duality.

Dirty minds and heavenly bodies

In 'official' Western culture, the human being has been conceived as divided into two distinct sections - the mind and the body.

The mind is where the Apollonian building blocks of civilisation reside: reason, rationality, logic, morality, religion, discipline, order and industriousness. The body inhabits our base, dirty, animalistic 'appetites': lust, passion, sex, gluttony, ecstasy, intoxication, sensuality, dancing and fun. Not only are the mind and body viewed as distinct and different, they are fundamentally antagonistic to each other. The body is inferior to the mind, where the idealised intellectual and spiritual essence in which all hope of human accomplishment, dignity and *amour propre* lies.

So the mind (or the soul, as Christians would put it) has to discipline the body in order to resist becoming degraded by its vices. ‘I discipline my body and make it my slave’ declared Saul of Tarsus in the book *Corinthians* in the *New Testament*. In Christianity, particularly in the Pauline canon, the soul, or the conscious mind, is the only ‘real’ self. It’s the sinful flesh that is the false self.

Sexual freedom is important precisely because it is reflective of a more general individual and social freedom.

All of the neurosis about sexuality that still exists in our culture (objections to prostitution, pornography, casual sex, homosexuality, nudity etc) are fundamentally rooted in the ‘mind/body’ duality - which, as the German poet Heinrich Heine once argued, originates from humanity’s alienation from nature. It’s why traditional Western morality has viewed sex for pleasure and fun as fundamentally immoral, and why the ‘ideal’ has been posited as a corporeal union of souls within the context of a monogamous marriage.

In contrast, I prefer Salwa Al-Neimi in her seminal work, *The Proof of Honey*:

'Some people conjure spirits. I conjure bodies. I have no knowledge of my soul or of the souls of others. I know only my body and theirs.' ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, of course, humans can't choose to be totally on the side of 'mind' or 'body' - it would be impossible and undesirable. Instead, the ideal should be a disalienation between the two to make a whole. But our culture is still so anti-body that we must balance the scales out by defending the philosophy of the body. We still don't understand that our bodies are as intrinsic to our humanity as our minds - we're not simply souls that inhabit these disgusting vessels called 'bodies'.

Unshackling intimacy

In *The New Amorous World*, the utopian socialist thinker Charles Fourier envisioned the transformation of sexuality and romance into 'instruments of human freedom' through the erasure of 'every trace of coercion and constraint'. Fourier's utopia imagined the blossoming of new forms of love, erotic and platonic, bodily and spiritual, in which the 'fear of sexual

deprivation' would dissipate and no longer disfigure romantic relations.

There is still a struggle to be had to realise a world in which Eros and sexual expression transcends its current fetters. The scope of history gives us enough material to break the dialectic between dawns of liberation and the dusk of reaction. 'In an unfree society', Adorno once wrote, 'sexual freedom is hardly any more conceivable than any other form of freedom'.^{iv} Sexual freedom is important precisely because it is reflective of a more general individual and social freedom. Any so-called progressive or pro-freedom platform would do well to remember the importance of unshackling intimacy.

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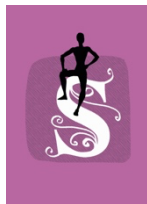


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Ralph Leonard is a writer and commentator on international politics, culture and sex. He writes for *Unherd*, *Arco Magazine* and the *Telegraph*, and appears as a regular guest on the Zero Books podcast. As an ardent secularist and leftist, Ralph is critical of certain failings of many sections of the existing Left, including its submission to conservative thinking and embrace of isolationism against international solidarity and neo-puritanism over sexual liberation. He believes it is crucial to uphold the legacy of the Enlightenment, and the project for the universal emancipation of humanity.



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