

Part 3: Civilizing Sexuality

Chapter 10 Desires and Boundaries: Principles of a New Sexual Ethic (synopsis)

Part 3 suggests ways in which we can civilize our sexual behavior and allow sexual intimacy to civilize us. Chapter 10 proposes a new sexual ethic based on autonomy, responsibility, and respect for both desires and boundaries. It considers the positive emotions of pride (self-esteem) and pleasure to be as important to morality as the negative emotions of shame and guilt.

Traditional sexual morality enforces certain social boundaries, but it violates people's personal boundaries in two ways. First, by imposing rigid external controls on the most intimate and personal aspects of people's lives, the traditional ethic violates people's privacy and autonomy. Second, by failing to respect people's individuality, feelings, and desires, the traditional ethic humiliates people and violates their dignity, often making them feel defective, worthless, and ashamed. We don't need to relax the standards of traditional morality—we need higher standards.

The “new morality” ignores boundaries by basing all decisions on love. Love in all its forms is a way of making connection across boundaries, but the danger inherent in love is that it can easily ignore boundaries. The passion of erotic love tends to obliterate boundaries. But even spiritual love, the selfless desire for another person's well-being, can lead you to ignore your own boundaries. If the other person's well-being were the only issue in sexual ethics, and that other person was convinced that having sex with you would promote his or her well-being, how could you ever justify saying no? A survey of teenagers shows that most think love means allowing the other person to force his will on you. In the era of the new morality, people feel ashamed for saying no, but they also feel ashamed for saying yes and letting themselves be used.

Love for the other has to be balanced by self-love, and self-love includes a healthy sense of your own boundaries. Healthy shame is what teaches you where your boundaries are. Healthy shame gives you a realistic sense of who you are, and it enables you to allow other people to be who they are. Healthy shame makes intimacy possible. Intimacy is impossible if boundaries are too rigid or too weak. If boundaries are too rigid, people can't make a deep connection; if boundaries are too weak, there is no well-defined self to connect with. Healthy shame promotes strong and flexible boundaries, mutual respect, and dignity.

An ethic based on healthy shame and boundaries can be expressed very simply: Respect your own and other people's desires and boundaries. It can be elaborated with the following principles:

1. **Everyone has a right to enjoy physical and emotional intimacy and sexual pleasure.** We are born with capacities and desires for intimacy and sexual pleasure. It is our birthright to develop those capacities and fulfill those desires.

2. **Everyone has a right to have their feelings, desires, and physical and emotional boundaries respected.** We have a right to live free of overt or covert sexual abuse. We have a right to privacy. We have a right to make our own choices and to have our choices respected.
3. **Everyone has an obligation to respect their own and other people's feelings, desires, and physical and emotional boundaries.** When desires and boundaries are in conflict, boundaries take precedence. The goal of sexual relationships should be mutual pleasure and empowerment, not power of one party over the other. Self-love involves asserting our desires as well as protecting our boundaries. Loving others involves respecting the desires and boundaries of our sexual partners, and respecting everyone's privacy and right to make their own decisions.
4. **In sexual relationships, we have an obligation to be honest with ourselves and to communicate honestly with our partners about our desires, boundaries, and intentions.** We can't have a mutually fulfilling relationship unless we agree on what we want that relationship to be. And we can't be honest with our partners if we're not being honest with ourselves.
5. **In sexual relationships, we have an obligation to plan ahead and act responsibly with regard to health, conception, and parenthood.** We have an obligation to communicate with our partners about our sexual histories and any communicable diseases we may have. We have an obligation to protect our own and each other's health, and to agree on what, if any, risks we are willing to take. We have an obligation to support and care for any children we conceive, and we should prevent conception if we are not ready, willing, and able to care for children.
6. **Children have a right to emotional support, education in sexuality and intimacy, healthy role models, and protection from abuse.** Children have a right to enjoy their bodies and intimacy with other children in ways that are appropriate to their age. They need to be taught that physical and emotional intimacy are good; that they should ask for what they want; that no one is allowed to touch anyone intimately without the other person's permission. They need to experience acceptance and respect for their bodies and feelings, and they need to be taught acceptance and respect for other people's bodies and feelings.
7. **The primary role of social institutions (government, schools, religious institutions) in sexual morality is to protect people, especially children, from sexual abuse, both overt and covert.** Their role is not to enforce uniformity in sexual behavior, but to promote healthy shame, personal responsibility, and respect for diversity. The diversity of human sexuality is kaleidoscopic. In a pluralistic society, social order does not come from squeezing everyone into the same mold, but from encouraging responsible self-expression and mutual respect.