

**Concealment and  
Exposure:  
And Other Essays**

*Thomas Nagel*

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# Concealment and Exposure

By the Same Author

*The Possibility of Altruism*

*Mortal Questions*

*The View from Nowhere*

*What Does It All Mean?*

*Equality and Partiality*

*Other Minds*

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To Bernard and Patricia Williams

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# Preface

These essays, written over the past few years, do not form a natural unity, but they do form three groups, corresponding to my main philosophical concerns during the period: (1) the relations between private and public life, especially with regard to sexual privacy; (2) the right form of a liberal outlook in moral and political theory; (3) the understanding of objective reality in the face of various forms of subjectivism. Those concerns found expression equally in independent essays and in book reviews, so I have included both. The long final essay on the mind-body problem stands a bit apart, but as a flagrant example of metaphysical realism, I include it in the third category.

I have revised nearly all the essays to some extent.

*New York*  
*March 2002*

T. N.



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5. *The New Republic*, March 8, 1999.
6. *The New Republic*, May 7, 2001.
7. *The New Republic*, October 25, 1999.
8. Samuel Freeman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
9. *Times Literary Supplement*, June 23, 2000.
10. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1997).
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15. *The New Republic*, October 12, 1998.
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## PART I

# Public and Private

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# Concealment and Exposure

## I

Everyone knows that something has gone wrong in the United States with the conventions of privacy. Increased tolerance for variation in sexual life seems to have brought with it a sharp increase in prurient and censorious attention to the sexual lives of public figures and famous persons, past and present. The culture seems to be growing more tolerant and more intolerant at the same time.

Sexual taboos a generation ago were also taboos against saying much about sex in public, and this had the salutary side effect of protecting persons in the public eye from invasions of privacy by the mainstream media. It meant that the sex lives of politicians were rightly treated as irrelevant to the assessment of their qualifications and that one learned only in rough outline, if at all, about the sexual conduct of prominent creative thinkers and artists of the past. Now, instead, there is open season on all this material. The public, followed sanctimoniously by the media, feels entitled to know the most intimate details of the life of any public figure, as if it were part of the price of fame that you exposed everything about yourself to view and not just the achievement or performance that has brought you to public attention. Because of the way life is, this results in real damage to the condition of the public sphere: Many people cannot take that kind of exposure, and many are discredited or tarnished in ways that have nothing to do with their real qualifications or achievements.

One might think, in a utopian vein, that we could carry our toleration a bit further and, instead of trying to reinstitute the protection of privacy, cease to regard all this personal information as important. Then



pornographic films of presidential candidates could be available in video stores and it wouldn't matter. But it isn't as simple as that. Boundaries between what is publicly exposed and what is not exist for a reason. We will never reach a point at which nothing that anyone does disgusts anyone else. We can expect to remain in a sexual world deeply divided by various lines of imaginative incomprehension and disapproval. So conventions of reticence and privacy serve a valuable function in keeping us out of each other's faces. But they also serve to give each of us some control over the face we present to the world. We don't want to expose ourselves completely to strangers even if we don't fear their disapproval, hostility, or disgust. Naked exposure itself, whether or not it arouses disapproval, is disqualifying. The boundary between what we reveal and what we do not, and some control over that boundary, is among the most important attributes of our humanity. Someone who for special reasons becomes a public or famous figure should not have to give it up.

This particular problem is part of a larger topic, namely, the importance of concealment as a condition of civilization. Concealment includes not only secrecy and deception but also reticence and non-acknowledgment. There is much more going on inside us all the time than we are willing to express, and civilization would be impossible if we could all read each other's minds. Apart from everything else there is the sheer chaotic, tropical luxuriance of the inner life. To quote Simmel: "All we communicate to another individual by means of words or perhaps in another fashion—even the most subjective, impulsive, intimate matters—is a selection from that psychological-real whole whose absolutely exact report (absolutely exact in terms of content and sequence) would drive everybody into the insane asylum."<sup>1</sup> As children we have to learn gradually not only to express what we feel but also to keep many thoughts and feelings to ourselves in order to maintain relations with other people on an even keel. We also have to learn, especially in adolescence, not to be overwhelmed by a consciousness of other people's awareness of and reaction to ourselves—so that our inner lives can be carried on under the protection of an exposed public self over which we have enough control to be able to identify with it, at least in part.

There is an analogy between the familiar problem that liberalism addresses in political theory—of how to join together individuals with conflicting interests and a plurality of values under a common system of law that serves their collective interests equitably without destroying their autonomy—and the purely social problem of defining conventions of reticence and privacy that allow people to interact peacefully in public without exposing themselves in ways that would be emotionally

1. Kurt H. Wolff, ed. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 311–12; translated from Georg Simmel, *Soziologie* (1908).

traumatic or would inhibit the free operation of personal feeling, fantasy, imagination, and thought. It is only an analogy: One can be a political liberal without being a social individualist, as liberals never tire of pointing out. But I think there is a natural way in which a more comprehensive liberal respect for individual autonomy would express itself through social conventions, as opposed to legal rules. In both cases a delicate balance has to be struck, and it is possible in both cases to err in the direction of too much or too little restraint. I believe that in the social domain, the restraints that protect privacy are not in good shape. They are weakest where privacy impinges on the political domain, but the problem is broader than that. The grasp of the public sphere and public norms has come to include too much. That is the claim I want to defend in this essay—in a sense it is a defense of the element of restraint in a liberal social order.

In practice, it is hard to know what to do about a problem like this. Once a convention of privacy loses its grip, there is a race to the bottom by competing media of publicity. What I would like to do here is to say something about the broader phenomenon of boundaries and to consider more particularly what would be a functional form of restraint in a culture like ours, where the general level of tolerance is high and the portrayal of sex and other intimate matters in general terms is widely accepted—in movies, magazines, and literature. Knowing all that we do, what reason is there still to be reticent?

While sex is a central part of the topic, the question of reticence and acknowledgment is much broader. The fact is that once we leave infancy and begin to get a grip on the distinction between ourselves and others, reticence and limits on disclosure and acknowledgment are part of every type of human relation, including the most intimate. Intimacy creates personal relations protected from the general gaze, permitting us to lose our inhibitions and expose ourselves to one another. But we do not necessarily share all our sexual fantasies with our sexual partners, or all our opinions of their actions with our closest friends. All interpersonal contact goes through the visible surface, even if it penetrates fairly deep, and managing what appears on the surface—both positively and negatively—is the constant work of human life.<sup>2</sup>

This is one topic of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the problem of constructing on an animal base human beings capable of living together in harmony. But the additional inner life that derives through internalization from civilization itself creates a further need for selection of what will be exposed and what concealed and further demands of self-presentation. I would like to begin by discussing some of the

2. Surface management is wonderfully described by Erving Goffman. See, for example, "On Face-Work," in his collection of essays, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

conventions of uniformity of surface that may seem dishonest to the naive but that make civilized life possible.

## II

The first and most obvious thing to note about many of the most important forms of reticence is that they are not dishonest, because the conventions that govern them are generally known. If I don't tell you everything I think and feel about you, that is not a case of deception since you don't expect me to do so and would probably be appalled if I did. The same is true of many explicit expressions that are literally false. If I say, "How nice to see you," you know perfectly well that this is not meant as a report of my true feelings: Even if it happens to be true, I might very well say it even if you were the last person I wanted to see at just that moment, and that is something you know as well as I.<sup>3</sup> The point of polite formulae and broad abstentions from expression is to leave a great range of potentially disruptive material unacknowledged and therefore out of play. It is material that everyone who has been around knows is there—feelings of hostility, contempt, derision, envy, vanity, boredom, fear, sexual desire, or aversion, plus a great deal of simple self-absorption.

Part of growing up is developing an external self that fits smoothly into the world with others that have been similarly designed. One expresses one's desires, for example, only to the extent that they are compatible with the publicly acknowledged desires of others, or at least in such a way that any conflict can be easily resolved by a commonly accepted procedure of decision. One avoids calling attention to one's own obsessions or needs in a way that forces others either to attend to them or too conspicuously to ignore them, and one avoids showing that one has noticed the failings of others in order to allow them to carry on without having to respond to one's reactions of amusement or alarm. These forms of tact are conspicuously absent in childhood, whose social brutality we can all remember.

At first it is not easy to take on these conventions as a second skin. In adolescence one feels transparent and unprotected from the awareness of others, and one is likely to become defensively affected or else secretive and expressionless. The need for a publicly acceptable persona also has too much resonance in the interior, and until one develops a sure habit of division, external efforts to conform will result in inner falsity, as one tries hopelessly to become wholly the self one has to present to the world. But if the external demands are too great, this problem may become permanent. Clearly an external persona will always make some

3. Paul Grice once observed to me that in Oxford, when someone says, "We must have lunch some time," it means, "I don't care if I never see you again in my life."

demands on the inner life, and it may require serious repression or distortion on the inside if it doesn't fit smoothly or comfortably enough. Ideally the social costume shouldn't be too thick.

Above all it should not be confused with the whole self. To internalize too much of one's social being and regard inner feelings and thoughts that conflict with it as unworthy or impure is disastrous. Everyone is entitled to commit murder in the imagination once in a while, not to mention lesser infractions. There may be those who lack a good grip on the distinction between fantasy and reality, but most people who enjoy violent movies, for example, are simply operating in a different gear from the one in which they engage with other people. The other consequence of the distinction is that one has to keep a firm grip on the fact that the social self that others present to us is not the whole of their personality either, and that this is not a form of deception because it is meant to be understood by everyone. Everyone knows that there is much more going on than what enters the public domain, but the smooth functioning of that domain depends on a general nonacknowledgment of what everyone knows.

Admittedly, nonacknowledgment can sometimes also serve the purpose of deceiving those, like children or outsiders, who do not know the conventions. But its main purpose is usually not to deceive but to manage the distinction between foreground and background, between what invites attention and a collective response and what remains individual and may be ignored. The possibility of combining civilized interpersonal relations with a relatively free inner life depends on this division.

Exactly how this works is not easy to explain. One might well ask how it is that we can remain on good terms with others when we know that behind their polite exteriors they harbor feelings and opinions that we would find unacceptable if they were expressed publicly. In some cases, perhaps, good manners do their work by making it possible for us to believe that things are not as they are and that others hold us in the regard that they formally display. If someone is inclined toward self-deception, that is certainly an option. But anyone who is reasonably realistic will not make that use of the conventions, and if others engage in flattery that is actually meant to be believed, it is offensive because it implies that they believe you require this kind of deception as a balm to your vanity.

No, the real work is done by leaving unacknowledged things that are known, even if only in general terms, on all sides. The more effective the conventions controlling acknowledgment, the more easily we can handle our knowledge of what others do not express and their knowledge of what we do not express. One of the remarkable effects of a smoothly fitting public surface is that it protects one from the sense of exposure without having to be in any way dishonest or deceptive, just as clothing does not conceal the fact that one is naked underneath. The mere sense

that the gaze of others, and their explicit reactions, are conventionally discouraged from penetrating this surface, in spite of their unstated awareness of much that lies beneath it, allows a sense of freedom to lead one's inner life as if it were invisible, even though it is not. It is enough that it is firmly excluded from direct public view and that only what one puts out into the public domain is a legitimate object of explicit response from others.

Even if public manners are fairly relaxed and open, they can permit the exposure of only a small fraction of what people are feeling. Toleration of what people choose to do or say can go only so far: To really accept people as they are requires an understanding that there is much more to them than could possibly be integrated into a common social space. The single most important fact to keep in mind in connection with this topic is that each of the multifarious individual souls is an enormous and complex world in itself, but the social space into which they must all fit is severely limited. What is admitted into that space has to be constrained both to avoid crowding and to prevent conflict and offense. Only so much freedom is compatible with public order: The bulk of toleration must be extended to the private sphere, which will then be left in all its variety behind the protective cover of public conventions of reticence and discretion.

One of our problems, as liberal attitudes become more prevalent, is how to draw the line between public and private tolerance. It is always risky to raise the stakes by attempting to take over too much of the limited social space. If in the name of liberty one tries to institute a free-for-all, the result will be a revival of the forces of repression, a decline of social peace and perhaps eventually of generally accepted norms of toleration. I think we have seen some of this in recent cultural battles in the United States. The partial success of a cultural revolution of tolerance for the expression of sexual material that was formerly kept out of public view has provoked a reaction that includes the breakdown of barriers of privacy even for those who are not eager to let it all hang out. The same developments have also fueled the demand from another quarter for a return to public hypocrisy in the form of political correctness. The more crowded the public arena gets, the more people want to control it.

Variety is inevitable, and it inevitably includes elements that are in strong potential conflict with one another. The more complicated people's lives become, the more they need the protection of separate private domains. The idea that everything should be out in the open is childish and represents a misunderstanding of the mutually protective function of conventions of restraint, which avoid provoking unnecessary conflict. Still more pernicious is the idea that socialization should penetrate to the innermost reaches of the soul, so that one should feel guilty or ashamed of any thoughts or feelings that one would be unwilling to express publicly. When a culture includes both of these elements to a sig-

nificant degree, the results are very unharmonious, and we find ourselves in the regressed condition of the United States.

In France, a postadolescent civilization, it is simply taken for granted that sex, while important, is essentially a private matter. It is thought inappropriate to seek out or reveal private information against the wishes of the subject; and even when unusual facts about the sexual life of a public figure become known, they do not become a public issue. Everyone knows that politicians, like other human beings, lead sexual lives of great variety, and there is no thrill to be had from hearing the details. In the United States, by contrast, the media and much of the public behave as if they had just learned of the existence of sex and found it both horrifying and fascinating. The British are almost as bad, and this, too, seems a sign of underdevelopment.

This is not an easy subject to treat systematically, but there is the following natural three-way division: (1) Some forms of reticence have a social function, protecting us from one another and from undesirable collisions and hostile reactions. (2) Other forms of reticence have a personal function, protecting the inner life from a public exposure that would cause it to wither or would require too much distortion. (3) As a modification of both these forms of reticence, selective intimacy permits some interpersonal relations to be open to forms of exposure that are needed for the development of a complete life. No one but a maniac will express absolutely everything to anyone, but most of us need someone to whom we can express a good deal that we would not reveal to others.

There are also relations among these phenomena worth noting. For example, why are family gatherings often so exceptionally stifling? Perhaps it is because the social demands of reticence have to keep in check the expression of very strong feelings, and purely formal polite expression is unavailable as a cover because of the modern convention of familial intimacy. If the unexpressed is too powerful and too near the surface, the result can be a sense of total falsity. On the other hand, it can be important what spouses and lovers do not say to one another. The calculated preservation of reticence in the context of intimacy provides Henry James with some of his richest material.

### III

The social dimension of reticence and nonacknowledgment is most developed in forms of politeness and deference. We don't want to tell people what we think of them, and we don't want to hear from them what they think of us, though we are happy to surmise their thoughts and feelings and to have them surmise ours, at least up to a point. We don't, if we are reasonable, worry too much about what they may say about us behind our backs, just as we often say things about a third party that

we wouldn't say to his face. Since everyone participates in these practices, they aren't, or shouldn't be, deceptive. Deception is another matter, and sometimes we have reason to object to it, though sometimes we have no business knowing the truth, even about how someone really feels about us.

The distinction between mendacity and politeness is blurry, in part because the listener contributes as much to the formation of the resulting belief as does the speaker, in part because the deceptiveness of any particular utterance depends on its relation to a wider context of similar utterances. A visitor to a society whose conventions he does not understand may be deceived if he takes people's performance at face value—the friendliness of the Americans, the self-abnegation of the Japanese, the equanimity of the English. Sensitivity to context also operates at the individual level. Indeed, if someone consistently and flagrantly fails to tell the truth, he loses the capacity to deceive and becomes paradoxically less dishonest than someone who preserves a general reputation for probity or candor and uses it to deceive only on rare occasions. (People who don't wish to be believed, and who cultivate a reputation for unreliability, are not so rare as you might think; the strategy must have its usefulness.)

What is the point of this vast charade? The answer will differ from culture to culture, but I believe that the conventions of reticence result from a kind of implicit social contract, one that, of course, reflects the relations of power among elements of the culture but that serves to some degree (though unequally) the interests of all—as social conventions tend to do. An unequal society will have strong conventions of deference to and perhaps flattery of superiors, which presumably do not deceive the well placed into thinking their subordinates admire them, except with the aid of self-deception. My interest, however, is in the design of conventions governing the give and take among rough social equals and the influence that a generally egalitarian social ideal should have on conventions of reticence and acknowledgment. Does equality support greater exposure or not? One might think *a priori* that in the absence of strong hierarchies, we could all afford to tell each other what we think and show what we feel; but things are not so simple. Although an egalitarian culture can be quite outspoken (this seems to be true of Israel), it need not be, and I believe there is much to be said for the essentially liberal, rather than communitarian, system whereby equality does not mean that we share our inner lives, bare our souls, and give voice to all our opinions—in other words, become like one huge unhappy family. The real issue is how much of each person's life is everybody else's business, and that is not settled by a conception of equality alone. Equality can be combined with greater or lesser scope for privacy, lesser or greater invasion of personal space by the public domain.

What, then, is the social function of acknowledgment or nonacknowledgment with respect to things that are already common knowledge? I believe the answer is this: The essential function of the boundary between what is acknowledged and what is not is to admit or decline to admit potentially significant material into the category of what must be taken into consideration and responded to *collectively* by all parties in the joint enterprise of discourse, action, and justification that proceeds between individuals whenever they come into contact. If something is not acknowledged, then even if it is universally known it can be left out of consideration in the collective social process, though it may play an important role separately in the private deliberations of the individual participants. Without such traffic control, any encounter might turn into a collision.

For example, A and B meet at a cocktail party; A has recently published an unfavorable review of B's latest book, but neither of them alludes to this fact, and they speak, perhaps a bit stiffly, about real estate, their recent travels, or some political development that interests them both. Consider the alternative:

B: You son of a bitch, I bet you didn't even read my book, you're too dimwitted to understand it even if you had read it, and besides you're clearly out to get me, dripping with envy and spite. If you weren't so overweight I'd throw you out the window.

A: You conceited fraud, I handled you with kid gloves in that review; if I'd said what I really thought it would have been unprintable; the book made me want to throw up—and it's by far your best.

At the same party C and D meet. D is a candidate for a job in C's department, and C is transfixed by D's beautiful breasts. They exchange judicious opinions about a recent publication by someone else. Consider the alternative:

C: Groan. . . .

D: Take your eyes off me, you dandruff-covered creep; how such a drooling incompetent can have got tenure, let alone become a department chair, is beyond me.

The trouble with the alternatives is that they lead to a dead end, because they demand engagement on terrain where common ground is unavailable without great effort, and only conflict will result. If C expresses his admiration of D's breasts, C and D have to deal with it as a common problem or feature of the situation, and their social relation



must proceed in its light. If, on the other hand, it is just something that C feels and that D knows, from long experience and subtle signs, that he feels, then it can simply be left out of the basis of their joint activity of conversation, even while it operates separately in the background for each of them as a factor in their private thoughts.

What is allowed to become public and what is kept private in any given transaction will depend on what needs to be taken into collective consideration for the purposes of the transaction and what would, on the contrary, disrupt it if introduced into the public space. That doesn't mean that nothing will become public that is a potential source of conflict, because it is the purpose of many transactions to allow conflicts to surface so that they can be dealt with and either collectively resolved or revealed as unresolvable. But if the conventions of reticence are well designed, material will be excluded if the demand for a collective or public reaction to it would interfere with the purpose of the encounter.

In a society with a low tolerance for conflict, not only personal comments but also all controversial subjects, such as politics, money, or religion, will be taboo in social conversation, necessitating the development of a form of conversational wit that doesn't depend on the exchange of opinions. In our present subculture, however, there is considerable latitude for the airing of disagreements and controversy of a general kind, which can be pursued at length, and the most important area of nonacknowledgment is the personal—people's feelings about themselves and about others. It is impolite to draw attention to one's achievements or to express personal insecurity, envy, the fear of death, or strong feelings about those present, except in a context of intimacy in which these subjects can be taken up and pursued. Embarrassing silence is the usual sign that these rules have been broken. Someone says or does something to which there is no collectively acceptable response, so that the ordinary flow of public discourse that usually veils the unruly inner lives of the participants has no natural continuation. Silence, then, makes everything visible, unless someone with exceptional tact rescues the situation:

A: Did you see in the news this morning that X has just won the Nobel prize?

B: I wouldn't accept the Nobel Prize even if they offered it to me.

C: Yes, it's all so political, isn't it? To think that even Nabokov. . . .

In a civilization with a certain degree of maturity people know what needs to be brought out into the open, where it can be considered jointly or collectively, and what should be left to the idiosyncratic, individual responses of each of us. This is the cultural recognition of the complexity of life and of the great variety of essentially ununifiable worlds in which we live. It is the microscopic social analogue of that large-scale accept-

ance of pluralism that is so important an aspect of political liberalism. We do not have to deal with the full truth about our feelings and opinions in order to interact usefully and effectively: In many respects each of us can carry on with our personal fantasies and attitudes and with our private reactions to what we know about the private reactions of others, while at the same time dealing with one another on a fairly well-defined, limited field of encounter with regard to those matters that demand a more collective reaction.

The liberal idea, in society and culture as in politics, is that no more should be subjected to the demands of public response than is necessary for the requirements of collective life. How much this is will depend on the company and the circumstances. But the idea that everything is fair game and that life is always improved by more exposure, more frankness, and more consensus is a serious mistake. The attempt to impose it leads, moreover, to the kind of defensive hypocrisy and mendacity about one's true feelings that is made unnecessary by a regime of reticence. If your impure or hostile or politically disaffected thoughts are everyone's business, you will have reason to express pure and benevolent and patriotic ones instead. Again, we can see this economy at work in our present circumstances: The decline of privacy brings on the rise of hypocrisy.

Reticence can play an enabling role at every level of interaction, from the most formal to the most intimate. When Maggie in *The Golden Bowl* lets the Prince, her husband, know that she knows everything, by letting him see the broken bowl and describing her encounter with the antiquary from whom she has bought it, they still do not explicitly discuss the Prince's affair with her stepmother, Charlotte. They do not "have it out," as would perhaps have been more likely in a novel written fifty or a hundred years later; the reason is that they both know that they cannot arrive at a common, shared attitude or response to this history. If their uncombinable individual feelings about it are to enable them to go on together, those feelings will have to remain unexpressed, and their intimacy will have to be reconstructed at a shared higher layer of privacy, beneath which deeper individual privacies are permitted to continue to exist. Maggie imagines what lies behind her husband's silence after she lets him know that she knows:

[T]hough he had, in so almost mystifying a manner, replied to nothing, denied nothing, explained nothing, apologized for nothing, he had somehow conveyed to her that this was not because of any determination to treat her case as not "worth" it . . . she had imagined him positively proposing to her a temporary accommodation. It had been but the matter of something in the depths of the eyes he finally fixed upon her, and she had found in it, the more she kept it before her, the tacitly offered sketch of a working