Everyone knows that something has gone wrong, in the United States, with the conventions of privacy. Along with a vastly increased tolerance for variation in sexual life we have seen 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, though perhaps different parts of it are involved in the two movements.

Sexual taboos in the fairly recent past 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. These 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. Yet that is only part of the story. 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, are 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 nonacknowledgment. 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.” As children we have to learn gradually not only to express what we feel but 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 con-

flicting 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 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 article—in a sense it is a defense of the element of restraint in a liberal social order.

Practically, 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 pene-
trates fairly deep, and managing what appears on the surface—both positively and negatively—is the constant work of human life.²

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 conventions of uniformity of surface that may seem dishonest to the naive, but that make 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.³ 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

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.”
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 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 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 man-
age 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 which 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 which 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 someone else engages 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 are 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, and 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 significant degree, the results are very unharmonious, and we find ourselves in the regressed condition of the United States.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} 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.
This is not an easy subject to treat systematically, but there is the following natural three-way division. Some forms of reticence have a social function, protecting us from one another and from undesirable collisions and hostile reactions. 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. And 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 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

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Everyone knows that politicians, like other human beings, lead sexual lives of great variety, and there is no thrill to be got from having the details set out. In the U.S., 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.
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 enough 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. While 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, 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 busi-
ness, 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.

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

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: \text{Groan. . . .}\
\[D: \text{Take your eyes off me, you dandruff-covered creep; how such a drooling incompetent can have got tenure, let alone become a department chair, is beyond me.}\]
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 which 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 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, or the fear of death, or strong feelings about those present, except in a context of intimacy where 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 eve-
rything 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 unifiable worlds in which we live. It is the microscopic social analogue of that large-scale acceptance 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 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, still they 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, shareable 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 arrangement. ‘Leave me my reserve; don’t question it—it’s all I have just now, don’t you see? So that, if you’ll make me the concession of letting me alone with it for as long a time as I require I promise you something or other, grown under the cover of it, even though I don’t yet quite make out what, as a return for your patience.’ She had turned away from him with some such unspoken words as that in her ear, and indeed she had to represent to herself that she had spiritually heard them, had to listen to them still again, to explain her particular patience in face of his particular failure.⁵

It is not enough that the affair should not be acknowledged among all four of the concerned parties—something that would be hard to imagine even in a novel written today. It is essential that it should not be taken up, though known and mutually known to be known, between Maggie and the Prince. If they were really together faced with it, if it were out there on the table between them, demanding some kind of joint response, the manifestation of their reactions would lead to a direct collision, filled with reproaches and counterreproaches, guilt and defi-

ance, anger, pity, humiliation, and shame, which their intimacy would not survive. By leaving a great deal unsaid, they can go on without having to arrive together at a resolution of this extreme passage in their lives—without the Prince having either to justify or to condemn himself, and without Maggie having either to condemn or to excuse him.

What we can tolerate having out in the open between us depends on what we think we can handle jointly without crippling our relations for other purposes. Sometimes the only way to find out is to try, particularly when an unacknowledged fact threatens to be crippling in any case. But in general it's not a bad idea to stick with the conventions of reticence that have developed to govern social, commercial, and professional interactions in normal circumstances. It is best not to overload the field of interaction with excess emotional and normative baggage.

On the other hand, politeness sometimes excludes material which, though disruptive, is relevant to the matter at hand and whose exclusion affects the results, often in a consistent direction. This is the kind of case where deliberate obstreperousness can make a difference, as a form of consciousness-raising. Politeness is also a disadvantage where one party to a situation takes advantage of the conventions of mutual restraint to make excessive claims whose excessiveness he knows cannot be publicly pointed out without impoliteness. Politeness leaves us with few weapons against grasping selfishness except exclusion from the society, and that is not always an available option.

It is possible to imagine things being arranged differently, with greater frankness nevertheless not causing social breakdown. But this would require that people not take up disagreements or criticisms when they surface, and just let them lie there unpursued. It seems more efficient to make explicit acknowledgment function as a signal that something must be collectively dealt with or faced. So the more likely significance of greater frankness would be that one was in a society of busybodies, who thought everything an individual did was the community’s business, and that the opinions of others had to be taken into account at every turn. While this may be necessary in certain extreme circumstances, the more desirable development, as social arrangements come to function smoothly, is to permit different tracks of decision and discourse, from most public to most private, with the former requiring no more than the input strictly needed for the purpose, and the latter (finally, the individual’s purely individual inner life) taking everything on
board, and perhaps even expanding to admit material lurking in the unconscious.

This last is a particularly important aspect of a culture of selective reticence: It permits the individual to acknowledge to himself a great deal that is not publicly acceptable, and to know that others have similar skeletons in their mental closets. Without reticence, repression—concealment even from the self—is more needed as an element in the civilizing process. If everything has to be avowed, what does not fit the acceptable public persona will tend to be internally denied. One of Freud’s contributions, by analyzing the process of internal censorship, is to have made it less necessary.

IV

The public-private boundary faces in two directions—keeping disruptive material out of the public arena and protecting private life from the crippling effects of the external gaze. I have been concentrating on the former, social function of reticence and nonacknowledgment. I now turn to the latter.

It is very important for human freedom that individuals should not be merely social or political beings. While participation in the public world may be one aspect of human flourishing, and may dominate the lives of certain individuals, it is one of the advantages of large modern societies that they do not impose a public role on most of their members.

Since the liberty we need is different from that of the ancients, it needs a different organization from that which suited ancient liberty. In the latter, the more time and energy man dedicated to the exercise of his political rights, the freer he thought himself; in the kind of liberty to which we are drawn, the more time the exercise of political rights leaves us for our private interests, the more precious liberty will be to us.

Hence, the need for the representative system. The representative system is nothing but an organization by means of which a nation charges a few individuals to do what it cannot or does not wish to do itself. Poor men look after their own affairs; rich men hire stewards.6

And the inner life, in all its immense variety, requires a social protection of pluralism that can be effective only if much of what is idiosyncratic to the inner fantasies and obsessions and personal relations of individuals remains out of sight.

But it isn't just pluralism that demands privacy. Humans are, so far as I know, the only animals that suffer from self-consciousness—in the ordinary sense, i.e., inhibition and embarrassment brought on by the thought that others are watching them. Humans are the only animals that don't as a rule copulate in public. And humans clothe themselves, in one way or another, even if it is only with paint, offering a self-presentation rather than their nakedness to the public gaze. The awareness of how one appears from outside is a constant of human life, sometimes burdensome, sometimes an indispensable resource. But there are aspects of life which require that we be free of it, in order that we may live and react entirely from the inside. They include sexual life in its most unconstrained form and the more extreme aspects of emotional life—fundamental anxieties about oneself, fear of death, personal rage, remorse, and grief. All these have muted public forms, and sometimes, as with collective grief, they serve an important function for the inner life, but the full private reality needs protection—not primarily from the knowledge but from the direct perception of others.

Why should the direct gaze of others be so damaging, even if what is seen is something already known, and not objectionable? If newspapers all over the country published nude photographs of a political candidate, it would be difficult for him to continue with the campaign even if no one could charge him with any fault. The intrusive desire to see people in extremis with their surface stripped away is the other side of the human need for protection from such exposure.

In some respects what is hidden and what is not may be arbitrary. We eat in public and excrete in private, but the obvious fantasy of a reversal of these natural functions is memorably brought to life in Bunuel’s film, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. I am also reminded of this rather chilling passage from Gide. He and his wife are in a restaurant in Rome:

> We had barely sat down when there entered a majestic old gentleman whose admirable face was set off by a halo of white hair. A bit short perhaps; but his entire being breathed nobility, intelligence, serenity. He seemed to see no one; all the waiters in the restaurant bowed as
he passed. The maitre d’hotel hastened to the table where the Olympian had seated himself; took the order; but returned twice more when summoned, to listen with respect to I know not what further instructions. Evidently the guest was someone illustrious. We hardly took our eyes off him and could observe, as soon as he had the menu in his hands, an extraordinary alteration in the features of that beautiful face. While placing his order, he had become a simple mortal. Then, immobile and as if set in stone, without any sign of impatience, his face had become completely expressionless. He came to life again only when the dish he had ordered was put before him, and he took leave immediately of his nobility, his dignity, everything that marked his superiority to other men. One would have thought that Circe had touched him with her magic wand. He no longer gave the impression, I don’t say merely of nobility, but even of simple humanity. He bent over his plate and one couldn’t say that he began to eat: He guzzled, like a glutton, like a pig. It was Carducci.  

Learning to eat in a way that others can witness without disgust is one of our earliest tasks, along with toilet training. Human beings are elaborate constructions on an animal foundation that always remains part of us. Most of us can put up with being observed while we eat. But sex and extreme emotion are different.

Ordinary mortals must often wonder how porn stars can manage it. Perhaps they are people for whom the awareness of being watched is itself erotic. But most of us, when sexually engaged, do not wish to be seen by anyone but our partners; full sexual expression and release leave us entirely vulnerable and without a publicly presentable “face.” Sex transgresses these protective boundaries, breaks us open, and exposes the uncontrolled and unpresentable creature underneath; that is its essence. We need privacy in order not to have to integrate our sexuality in its fullest expression with the controlled surface we present to the world. And in general we need privacy to be allowed to conduct ourselves in extremis in a way that serves purely individual demands, the demands of strong personal emotion.  

The public gaze is inhibiting because, except for infants and psychopaths, it brings into effect expressive constraints and requirements of

self-presentation that are strongly incompatible with the natural expression of strong or intimate feeling. And it presents us with a demand to justify ourselves before others that we cannot meet for those things that we cannot put a good face on. The management of one's inner life and one's private demons is a personal task and should not be made to answer to standards broader than necessary. It is the other face of the coin: The public-private boundary keeps the public domain free of disruptive material; but it also keeps the private domain free of insupportable controls. The more we are subjected to public inspection and asked to expose our inner lives, the more the resources available to us in leading those lives will be constrained by the collective norms of the common milieu. Or else we will partially protect our privacy by lying; but if this too becomes a social norm, it is likely to create people who also lie to themselves, since everyone will have been lying to them about themselves since childhood.

Still, there is a space between what is open to public view and what people keep to themselves. The veil can be partly lifted to admit certain others, without the inhibiting effect of general exposure. This brings us to the topic of intimacy. Interpersonal spheres of privacy protected from the public gaze are essential for human emotional and sexual life, and I have already said a good deal about this under the heading of individual privacy: Certain forms of exposure to particular others are incompatible with the preservation of a public face.

But intimacy also plays an important part in the development of an articulate inner life, because it permits one to explore unpublic feelings in something other than solitude, and to learn about the comparable feelings of one's intimates, including to a degree their feelings toward oneself. Intimacy in its various forms is a partial lifting of the usual veil of reticence. It provides the indispensable setting for certain types of relations, and also a relief from the strains of public demeanor, which can grow burdensome however habitual it has become. The couple returning home after a social evening will let off steam by expressing to one another the unsociable reactions to their fellow guests which could not be given voice at the time. And it is quite generally useful to be able to express to someone else what cannot be expressed directly to the person concerned—including the things that you may find difficult to bear about some of your closest friends and relations.

Intimacy develops naturally between friends and lovers, but the chief
social and legal formalization of intimacy is marriage in its modern bourgeois form. Of course it serves economic and generational purposes as well, but it does provide a special protection for sexual privacy. The conventions of nonacknowledgment that it puts into force have to be particularly effective to leave outside the boundary children living in the same household, who are supposed not to have to think about the sex lives of their parents.

Marriage in the fairly recent past sanctioned and in a curious way concealed sexual activity that was condemned and made more visible outside of it. What went on in bed between husband and wife was not a fit topic for comment or even thought by outsiders. It was exempt from the general prurience which made intimations of adultery or premarital sex so thrilling in American movies of the fifties—a time when the production code required that married couples always occupy twin beds. Those who felt the transgressive character of even heterosexual married sex could still get reassurance from the thought that it was within a boundary beyond which lay the things that were really unacceptable—where everything is turned loose and no holds are barred.

We are now in a more relaxed sexual atmosphere than formerly, but sex remains in essence a form of transgression, in which we take each other apart and disarrange or abandon more than our clothes. The availability of an officially sanctioned and protected form of such transgression, distinguished from other forms which are not sanctioned, plays a significant role in the organization of sexual life. What is permitted is for some people still essentially defined and protected from shame by a contrast with what is forbidden. While the boundaries change, many people still seem to feel the need to think of themselves as sexually "normal," and this requires a contrast. Although premarital sex is by now widely accepted, the institution of heterosexual marriage probably confers a derivative blessing on heterosexual partnerships of all kinds. That is why the idea of homosexual marriage produces so much alarm: It threatens to remove that contrastive protection, by turning marriage into a license for anyone to do anything with anybody. There is a genuine conflict here, but it seems to me that the right direction of development is not to expand marriage, but to extend the informal protection of intimacy without the need for secrecy to a broader range of sexual relations.

The respect for intimacy and its protection from prurient violation is
a useful cultural resource. One sign of our contemporary loss of a sense of the value of privacy is the biographical ruthlessness shown toward public figures of all kinds—not only politicians but writers, artists, scientists. It is obligatory for a biographer to find out everything possible about such an individual’s intimate personal life, as if he had forfeited all rights over it by becoming famous. Perhaps after enough time has passed, the intrusion will be muted by distance, but with people whose lives have overlapped with ours, there is something excruciating about all this exposure, something wrong with our now having access to Bertrand Russell’s desperate love letters, Wittgenstein’s agonized expressions of self-hatred, Einstein’s marital difficulties. A creative individual externalizes the best part of himself, producing with incredible effort something better than he is, which can float free of its creator and have a finer existence of its own. But the general admiration for these works seems to nourish a desire to uncover all the dirt about their creators, as if we could possess them more fully by reattaching them to the messy source from which they arose—and perhaps even feel a bit superior. Why not just acknowledge in general terms that we are all human, and that greatness is necessarily always partial?

V

After this rather picaresque survey of the territory, let me turn, finally, to normative questions about how the public-private boundary or boundaries should be managed in a pluralistic culture. Those of us who are not political communitarians want to leave each other some space. Some subgroups may wish to use that space to form more intrusive communities whose members leave each other much less space, but the broadest governing norms of publicity and privacy should impose a regime of public restraint and private protection that is compatible with a wide range of individual variation in the inner and intimate life. The conventions that control these boundaries, while not enforced in the same way as laws and judicial decisions, are nevertheless imposed on the individual members of a society, whose lives are shaped by them. They therefore pose questions of justifiability, if not legitimacy. We need to figure out what conventions could justifiably command general acceptance in a society as diverse as ours.

My main point is a conservative one: that we should try to avoid fights
over the public space which force into it more than it can contain without the destruction of civility. I say “try,” because sometimes this will not be possible, and sometimes starting a cultural war is preferable to preserving civility and the status quo. But I believe that the tendency to “publicize” (this being the opposite of “privatize”) certain types of conflict has not been a good thing, and that we would be better off if more things were regarded as none of the public’s business.

This position could be called cultural liberalism, since it extends the liberal respect for pluralism into the fluid domain of public culture. It is opposed not only to the kind of repressive intolerance of private unconventionality usually associated with conservative cultures. It is opposed also to the kind of control attempted through the imposition of any orthodoxy of professed allegiance—the second best for those who would impose thought control if they could. I do not think the vogue for political correctness is a trivial matter. It represents a strong antiliberal current on the left, the continuation of a long tradition, which is only in part counterbalanced by the even older antiliberalism of the right.

This is the subject of endless fulminations by unsavory characters, but that doesn’t make it illegitimate as an object of concern. It shouldn’t be just a right-wing issue. The demand for public lip-service to certain pieties and vigilance against tell-tale signs in speech of unacceptable attitudes or beliefs is due to an insistence that deep cultural conflicts should not simply be tolerated, but must be turned into battles for control of the common social space.

The reason this is part of the same topic as our main theme of reticence and concealment is that it involves one of the most effective forms of invasion of privacy—the demand that everyone stand up and be counted. New symbols of allegiance are introduced and suddenly you either have to show the flag or reveal yourself as an enemy of progress. In a way, the campaign against the neutral use of the masculine pronoun, the constant replacement of names for racial groups, and all the other euphemisms are more comic than anything else, but they are also part of an unhealthy social climate, not so distant from the climate that requires demonstrations of patriotism in periods of xenophobia. To some extent it is possible to exercise collective power over people’s inner lives by controlling the conventions of expression, not by legal coercion but by social pressure. At its worst, this climate demands that people say what they do not believe in order to demonstrate their com-
mitment to the right side—dishonesty being the ultimate tribute that individual pride can offer to something higher.

The attempt to control public space is importantly an attempt to control the cultural and ideological environment in which young people are formed. Forty years ago the public pieties were patriotic and anticommunist; now they are multicultural and feminist. What concerns me is not the content but the character of this kind of control: Its effect is to make it difficult to breathe, because the atmosphere is so thick with significance and falsity. And the atmosphere of falsity is independent of the truth or falsity of the orthodoxy being imposed. It may be entirely true, but if it is presented as what one is supposed to believe and publicly affirm if one is on the right side, it becomes a form of mental suffocation.

Those who favor the badges of correctness believe that it is salutary if the forms of discourse and the examples chosen serve as reminders that women and minorities can be successful doctors, lawyers, scientists, soldiers, etc. They also favor forms for the designation of oppressed or formerly oppressed groups that express, in the eyes of members of those groups, an appropriate respect. But all this is dreadfully phony and, I think, counterproductive. It should be possible to address or refer to people without expressing either respect or disrespect for their race, and to talk about law without inserting constant little reminders that women can be judges. And it ought to be possible to carry out one's responsibilities in the role of a teacher of English or philosophy or physics without at the same time advancing the cause of racial or sexual equality or engaging in social consciousness-raising.

The avoidance of what is offensive is one thing; the requirement to include visible signals of respect and correct opinion is another. It is like pasting an American flag on your rear windshield. We used to have a genuinely neutral way of talking, but the current system forces everyone to decide, one way or the other, whether to conform to the pattern that is contending for orthodoxy—so everyone is forced to express more, in one direction or another, than should be necessary for the purposes of communication, education, or whatever. One has to either go along with it, or resist, and there is no good reason to force that choice on people just in virtue of their being speakers of the language—no reason to demand external signs of inner conformity. In the abyss at the far end of the same road one finds anticommunist loyalty oaths for teachers or
civil servants, and declarations of solidarity with the workers and peasants in the antifascist and anti-imperialist struggle.

The radical response to orthodoxy is to smash it and dump the pieces into the dustbin of history. The liberal alternative does not depend on the defeat of one orthodoxy by another—not even a multicultural orthodoxy. Liberalism should favor the avoidance of forced choices and tests of purity, and the substitution of a certain reticence behind which potentially disruptive disagreements can persist without breaking into the open, and without requiring anyone to lie. The disagreements needn't be a secret—they can just remain quiescent. In my version, the liberal ideal is not content with the legal protection of free speech for fascists, but also includes a social environment in which fascists can keep their counsel if they choose.

I suspect that this refusal to force the issue unless it becomes necessary is what many people hate about liberalism. But even if one finds it attractive as an ideal, there is a problem of getting there from a situation of imposed orthodoxy without engaging in a bit of revolutionary smashing along the way. It is not easy to avoid battles over the public terrain which end up reducing the scope of the private unnecessarily. Genuine pluralism is difficult to achieve.

The recent sexual revolution is an instructive case. The fairly puritanical climate of the 1950s and early 1960s was displaced not by a tacit admission of sexual pluralism and withdrawal of the enforcement of orthodoxy, but by a frontal public attack, so that explicit sexual images and language, and open extramarital cohabitation and homosexuality became part of everyday life. Unfortunately this was apparently inseparable from an ideology of sexual expressiveness that made the character of everyone's sexual inner life a matter of public interest, and something that one was expected to want to reveal. This is undesirable in fact, because sexual attitudes are not universally compatible, and the deepest desires and fantasies of some are inevitably offensive to others.

Not only that, but sex has unequal importance to different people. It is now embarrassing for someone to admit that they don't care much about sex—as it was forty years ago embarrassing for someone to admit that sex was the most important thing in their lives—but both things are true of many people, and I suspect that it has always been the case. The current public understanding, like that of the past, is an imposition on those whom it does not fit.
We should stop trying to achieve a common understanding in this area, and leave people to their mutual incomprehension, under the cover of conventions of reticence. We should also leave people their privacy, which is so essential for the protection of inner freedom from the stifling effect of the demands of face. I began by referring to contemporary prurience about political figures. President Clinton seems to have survived it so far, but the press remains committed to satisfying the curiosity of the most childish elements of the public. Outside of politics, the recent discharge of a woman pilot for adultery, and then the disqualification of a candidate for chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on grounds of “adultery” committed thirteen years before, while he was separated from his wife on the way to a divorce, are ridiculous episodes. The insistence by defenders of the woman that the man be punished just to preserve equal treatment was morally obtuse: If it was wrong to punish her, it was also wrong to penalize him.

A more inflammatory case: Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court could have been legitimately rejected by the Senate on grounds of competence and judicial philosophy, but I believe the challenge on the basis of his sexual victimization of Anita Hill was quite unjustified, even though I’m sure it was all true. At the time I was ambivalent; like a lot of people, I would have been glad to see Thomas rejected for any reason. But that is no excuse for abandoning the private-public distinction: This sort of bad personal conduct is completely irrelevant to the occupation of a position of public trust, and if the press hadn't made an issue of it, the Senate Judiciary Committee might have been able to ignore the rumors. There was no evidence that Thomas didn't believe in the equal rights of women. It is true that Hill was his professional subordinate, but his essential fault was being personally crude and offensive: It was no more relevant than would have been a true charge of serious maltreatment from his ex-wife.

But consider the situation we are in: The only way to avoid damage to someone's reputation by facts of this kind, in spite of their irrelevance to qualification for public office, is through a powerful convention of nonacknowledgment. If this is rejected as a form of male mutual self-protection, then we are stuck with masses of irrelevant and titillating material clogging up our public life and the procedures for selection of public officials, and shrinking the pool of willing and viable candidates for responsible positions. I'm not objecting to the regulation of conduct
at the individual level. It is a good thing that sexual coercion of an employee or a student should be legally actionable, and that the transgression of civilized norms should be an occasion for personal rebuke. What is unfortunate is the expansion of control beyond this by a broadening of the conception of sexual harrassment to include all forms of unwelcome or objectionable sexual attention, and the increasingly vigilant enforcement of expressive taboos. Too much in the personal conduct of individuals is being made a matter for public censure, either legally or through the force of powerful social norms. As Mill pointed out in On Liberty, the power of public opinion can be as effective an instrument of coercion as law in an intrusive society.

Formerly the efforts to impose orthodoxy in the public sphere and to pry into the private came primarily from the forces of political and social conservatism; now they come from all directions, resulting in a battle for control that no one is going to win. We have undergone a genuine and very salutary cultural revolution over the past thirty years. There has been an increase in what people can do in private without losing their jobs or going to jail, and a decrease in arbitrary exercises of power and inequality of treatment. There is more tolerance of plurality in forms of life. But revolution breeds counterrevolution, and it is a good idea to leave the public space of a society comfortably habitable, without too much conflict, by the main incompatible elements that are not about to disappear.

Before the current period we had nearly achieved this in the area of religion. Although national political candidates were expected to identify themselves as belonging to some religion or other, loud professions of faith were not expected, and it was considered very poor form to criticize someone’s religion. In fact, there was no shortage of silent anti-clericalism and silent hostility between communicants of different religions in the United States, but a general blanket of mutual politeness muffled all public utterance on the subject. The political activism of the religious right has changed all that, and it is part of the conservative backlash against the sexual revolution. We would be better off if we could somehow restore a state of truce, behind which healthy mutual contempt could flourish in its customary way.

There are enough issues that have to be fought out in the public sphere, issues of justice, of economics, of security, of defense, of the definition and protection of public goods. We should try to avoid forcing
the effort to reach collective decisions or dominant results where we
don't have to. Privacy supports plurality by eliminating the need for
collective choice or an official public stance. I believe the presence of a
deeply conservative religious and cultural segment of American society
can be expected to continue and should be accommodated by those
who are radically out of sympathy with it—not in the inevitable conflicts
over central political issues, but in regard to how much of the public
space will be subjected to cultural contestation.

In culture as in law, the partisans of particular conceptions of per-
sonal morality and the ends of life should be reluctant to try to control
the public domain for their own purposes. Even though cultural norms
are not coercive in the way that law is, the public culture is a common
resource that affects us all, and some consideration of the rights of
members should operate as a restraint on its specificity. We owe it to
one another to want the public space to preserve a character neutral
enough to allow those from whom we differ radically to inhabit it com-
fortably—and that means a culture that is publicly reticent, if possible,
and not just tolerant of diversity. Pluralism and privacy should be pro-
tected not only against legal interference but more informally against
the invasiveness of a public culture that insists on settling too many
questions.

The natural objection to this elevation of reticence is that it is too
protective of the status quo, and that it gives a kind of cultural veto to
conservative forces who will resent any disruption. Those who favor
confrontation and invasion of privacy think it necessary to overthrow
pernicious conventions like the double standard of sexual conduct, and
the unmentionability of homosexuality. To attack harmful prejudices, it
is necessary to give offense by overturning the conventions of reticence
that help to support them.

Against this, my position is in a sense conservative, though it is moti-
vated by liberal principles. While we should insist on the protection of
individual rights of personal freedom, I believe we should not insist on
confrontation in the public space over different attitudes about the con-
duct of personal life. To the extent possible, and the extent compatible
with the protection of private rights, it would be better if these battles
for the soul of the culture were avoided, and no collective response re-
quired. Best would be a regime of private freedom combined with public
or collective neutrality.
The old liberal distinction between toleration and endorsement may be applicable here. One case where I think it supports restraint is the issue of public support for the arts. Even though art that is extremely offensive to many people should certainly not be censored, it is entirely reasonable to withhold public financial support from the more extreme productions of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and Karen Finley. Even where the allocation of public funds is delegated to experts, there has to be some rough political consensus in the background about the kind of thing that is worthy of government support, and it is inappropriate to storm the barricades by insisting that the National Endowment for the Arts repudiate that consensus. The trouble with public support is that it increases the importance of public agreement in artistic domains where individualistic pluralism is essential. The consequence may be unexpected, but the liberal defense of the public-private boundary should not be limited to cases that favor broader liberal sympathies.

What I have offered is not legal analysis but social criticism—trying to describe desirable and undesirable ways of handling the conflicts that pervade our society through conventions of reticence and acknowledgment and management of the limited and easily disrupted public space in which we must encounter all those with whom we may differ profoundly. It is an anticommunitarian vision of civility. And it is entirely compatible with the strict protection of the individual rights of persons to violate the conditions of civility in the context of collective political deliberation, i.e., a strong legal protection of freedom of expression.8 Finally, the same public-private division that tries to avoid unnecessary clashes in the public sphere leaves room for the legal protection of enormous variety in the private, from pornography to religious millenarianism. It is wonderful how much disagreement and mutual comprehension a liberal society can contain in solution without falling to pieces, provided we are careful about what issues we insist on facing collectively.

Communitarianism—the ambition of collective self-reaiization—is one of the most persistent threats to the human spirit. The debate over its political manifestations has been sustained and serious. But it is also a cultural issue, one whose relation to the values of political liberalism

8. See Robert C. Post, Constitutional Domains (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 146–47, on what he calls the “paradox of public discourse”—that the law may not be used to enforce the civility rules that make rational deliberation possible.
has been clouded by the fact that some of those values seem such natural candidates for collective public promotion. My claim has been that liberals should not be fighting for control of the culture—that they should embrace a form of cultural restraint comparable to that which governs the liberal attitude to law, and that this is the largest conception of the value of privacy. No one should be in control of the culture, and the persistence of private racism, sexism, homophobia, religious and ethnic bigotry, sexual puritanism, and other such private pleasures should not provoke liberals to demand constant public affirmation of the opposite values. The important battles are about how people are required to treat each other, how social and economic institutions are to be arranged, and how public resources are to be used. The insistence on securing more agreement in attitudes than we need for these purposes, and on including more of the inner life in the purview of even informal public authority, just raises the social stakes unnecessarily.