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# Between two intimacies: The formative contexts of individual experience

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ABSTRACT

While it is essential that we live as self-defined individuals, independently negotiating with an independent reality, this experience is not exhaustive of our reality. Such experience is importantly contextualized by two other kinds of experience, each an experience of intimacy. First, independent individuality depends upon a process of childhood development in which identity is formed through a familial intimacy in which the child lives from a non-reflective, bodily sense of a sharedness of identity with another (typically, but not necessarily, the mother). Second, independent individuality finds its healthy development in the establishment of new intimate bonds; these adult intimacies, unlike childhood intimacy, are bonds between persons who themselves have developed the sense of independent individuality and thus have experiential characteristics significantly different from those of childhood intimacy. From a developmental perspective, each of these two forms of intimacy is something good in itself but also something whose good resides in its enabling of something else, childhood intimacy facilitating the transformation into independent individuality and adult intimacy facilitating a transformative engagement with one's own limitations.



## 1. Introduction

In an important and essential way, we live as self-defined individuals, independently negotiating with an independent reality. While this is essential to our reality, it is not, however, exhaustive of it. This experience of independent, self-reliant individuality is, I argue, importantly contextualized by two other kinds of experience, each of which is an experience of intimacy. First, our independent individuality depends upon a process of childhood development in which our identities are formed through an experience of familial intimacy in which we, as children, live from a non-reflective and bodily sense of a sharedness of identity with another, (typically, but not necessarily, the mother). Second, our independent individuality finds its healthy adult development in the establishment of new intimate bonds in which we again live from a sense of sharedness of identity; these adult intimacies, unlike childhood intimacy, are bonds between persons who themselves have developed the sense of independent individuality and thus have experiential characteristics significantly different from those of childhood intimacy. I will specifically consider how, from a developmental perspective, each of these two forms of intimacy is something good in itself—something that is inherently desirable and worthwhile—but also something whose good resides in its character as enabling something else: it is essential that each form of intimacy enable transformation and growth, childhood intimacy facilitating our transformation into independent individuals and adult intimacy facilitating our transformative engagement with our own limitations.

My interpretation of personal development will largely rely upon the phenomenological method of investigation, which approaches the interpretation of the person through a description of lived experience. I will describe "from the inside" various characteristic forms of human experience, as these have been documented in the empirical research of a range of 20th-Century phenomenologists, psychoanalysts and developmental psychologists. Through describing these experiences, I will reveal the relationships of self to other selves and of self to world that are implicit in and integral to these experiences. My analysis is primarily a study of interpersonal relationships—family relationships, romantic relationships and so on—and such relationships can take extremely varied forms. My analysis does not presume any particular form of familial or romantic life to be normative, but investigates instead the structures that characterize these forms of relationship *as such*, in order to reveal what is at stake for us in the way we cultivate such relationships. I thereby provide a model for understanding the essential role of intimacy in human life *in principle*, in a way that is relevant to the rich multiplicity of the

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forms of interpersonal life, well beyond the limits of the Western nuclear familiar or heteronormative monogamy.

## 2. Childhood intimacy

Whenever we act, we rely upon our ability to have our hands move, or our arms move or our legs move when we want them to. Even to think or to formulate an explicit intention to ourselves requires that our brain functions (in a mysterious way we never experience directly) when we want it to, and so on. Action only happens if there is an immediate identity between my will and my body: the very fabric of my hands has to be me—it has to be *me* grabbing, me feeling, me turning as my body turns.[1] To the extent that we are agents, then, there is some domain of reality to which we must have an essentially non-alienated ontological relationship, namely, that part of my body that is going to have to move when I will it to. There is thus an intimacy between myself as a subject and the material stuff of the real, which is a precondition for experience and which must be ontologically prior to the experience of myself as alienated from the world.[2]

Beyond the minimal experience of moving our hands and so on, in our everyday life we constantly feel that we have a similar kind of intimate relationship with reality when we draw on things upon which we depend: those tools, those parts of the world, that we act *from* rather than those parts of the world that are the objects of our attention and that we are acting *upon*.[3] To act and to live, we fundamentally need to be at home in things: *they* need to be where *we* are.[4] And within this broader theme of our being at home in things, we can recognize that other people can play that same metaphysical role for us that the hand does or the clothing or the typewriter or any other tool does, that is, there are people we "live from," people who form our platform for action rather than being the objects of our actions. It is the establishing of this intersubjective intimacy, this "making a home in other people," that is the decisive issue in childhood.

"Childhood" is not simply a convenient label that we apply to persons between the chronological limits of, say, zero and eight or ten years of age; nor is childhood simply a biological category, identifying the period of organic development prior to puberty. Beyond simple chronology and biology, childhood is also a distinctive form of *experience*. *Phenomenologically*, childhood can be defined as a form of experiencing that is characterized by different forms of subject-object relationships than those which define adult experience. It is this phenomenological analysis of childhood that I am pursuing here, especially for the purpose of showing how it is that the form our childhood experiences of intimacy takes is formative of our developed, adult lives.

Our healthy development is crucially dependent upon good experiences of interpersonal intimacy in childhood: the establishing of a sense of sharedness of experience with the immediate family (or equivalent, other situations of upbringing) is crucial to our personal formation.[5] This childhood intimacy with others, though, is not an interpersonal connection *in contrast to* an engagement with things; on the contrary, definitive of childhood experience is the fact that it is a process *simultaneously* of growing into the world, growing into a shared experience with someone else (a primary care-giver), and growing into a sense of self. For the child, the experience of learning to walk or of exploring a new room, for example, is in large part the experience of doing something with, or with the support of, "momma" or "pappa."[6] Walking, in other words, is not just a separate relationship between the child learning to navigate her or his organic body and space, but is a way of venturing forth within the terms of a shared life: the very floor and the very process of walking are developments of intimacy, developments of that shared inhabitation of the world.[7] Let us consider what is at stake for the child in this initial experience of intimacy.

It is within this experience of a bond with a primary caregiver and a growing bond with the larger immediate family/community that the child is offered its primary resources for developing (1) a sense of courage, to feel able to venture forth and explore; (2) a sense of propriety, to feel that it is proper to do this—that the world is rightly understood as my place; that it is fitting that I take it as my domain and my dwelling; and related to this, (3) a sense of belonging, of being a real and welcome "part" of "what's happening."[8] Crucially, that is, though we might initially think of intimacy as a sense of belonging with another person, in fact one of the crucial things that this interpersonal intimacy has to convey is a sense of belonging to the world: "I'm entitled to be here, it is proper for me to be here, I am of a piece with it."[9] And, to the extent that the child's explorations of the world are in fact the development of its shared sense of being with someone, the child is being initiated into a sense of the world as a place *for us*, as a place where there are other people, as a place for shared living. These are the crucial, human lessons that need to be coming from the experience of the primal bond of childhood.

Note, though, that these lessons of primal intimacy, are not just matters for the child as such: these characteristics of self-reliant confidence in dealing with a world in which it is proper to me to act are, rather, the crucial parameters of the way an independent adult individual experiences herself in relation to the world—they are precisely the dimensions of experience that define "independence." Without a secure sense of world as a place where it is proper for one to act, without a secure sense of oneself as someone who can go forth and do something creative and transformative, without a secure sense of the world as a place where one shares life

[1] This is the fundamental idea behind Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body" [*le corps propre* or *le corps vécu*]; see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part One, Chapter 1 and 3. See also John Russon, "The Spatiality of Self-Consciousness."

[2] For a strong, contemporary discussion of the inherently embodied character of subjectivity, see Scott Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity*, Chapter 1, pp. 11–38.

[3] On the "from-to" relationship see Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, pp. xviii, 11 and *passim*. This analysis is fundamentally based upon Heidegger's analysis of "readiness to hand" [*Zuhandenheit*]; see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 96–102.

[4] Compare Heidegger's fundamental notion that human being is "*Dasein*," "there-being," *Being and Time*, pp. 27, 78–86. For extensive discussion of this notion of "*Dasein*," see John Russon and Kirsten Jacobson, "Heidegger and Space."

[5] For this theme in general, see Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," especially on the theme of "syncretic sociability." On the essential and primary intimacy with the other, see Eva-Maria Simms, "Milk and Flesh: A Phenomenological Reflection on Infancy and Coexistence," Chapter 1 of *The Child in the World*, and Daniel N. Stern, *The First Relationship: Infant and Mother*. See also D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 15–20. The idea that the inner life of the child is shaped through the experience of the mother is also central to the works collected in Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945*.

[6] See D.W. Winnicott, "First Experiments in Independence". Compare Eva Simms, "The World's Skin Ever Expanding: Spatiality and the Structures of Child Consciousness," Chapter 2 of *The Child in the World*, p. 35: "To venture into the unknown means at first to be tethered by an immediate parental anchor that makes the world safe."

[7] Compare Kym Maclaren, "Embodied Perceptions of Others as a Condition of Selfhood?"

[8] The theme of the development of courage is studied in John Russon, "The Virtues of Agency: A Phenomenology of Confidence, Courage and Creativity." The theme of the development of a sense of propriety/property is considered in John Russon, *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, Chapter 4, pp. 94ff.

[9] This is the central idea behind R.D. Laing's analysis of "ontological insecurity" in *The Divided Self*, pp. 17–61.

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