

*Émile Armand*

# On Sexual Liberty

1916

Before explaining our notion of “sexual liberty,” I think it is necessary to define *liberty* itself. We all know that liberty could not be an end, for there is no absolute liberty; just as there is no general truth, practically speaking, but what exists in particular verities, there is no general *liberty*; there are only particular, individual liberties. It is not possible to escape certain contingencies; one cannot be free, for example, to not breathe or digest. . . Liberty is only a abstraction like Truth, Purity, Goodness, Equality, etc. And an abstraction cannot be an end.

Considered instead, from the particular point of view, ceasing to be an abstraction, and becoming a way, a means, *liberty* is understood. It is thus that we call for the freedom of thought, which is to say the power, without external hindrance, to express thoughts in speech or in writing, in the manner in which they present themselves in the mind. It is thus the integral expression of the thought which is the goal pursued, and not liberty.

It is precisely because there are only particular liberties that we can, departing from the domain of the abstract, place ourselves on a solid terrain and affirm “our needs and our desires” — much better than “our rights,” an abstract and arbitrary expression — stifled, mangled or distorted by various sorts of authorities.

Intellectual life, artistic life, economic life, sexual life — we demand for them the liberty to manifest themselves freely, as individuals, in view of the liberty of individuals, apart from the legalistic conceptions and the prejudices of religious or civil order. We demand for them, grand rivers where human activity flows, to run without obstacles, — without the locks of “moralityism” or the dams of “traditionalism” troubling or miring their course. All in all, better *the liberties*, with their impetuous errors, their nervous jolts, their impulsive “lack of perspective,” than the *authorities*, immobile façades, frozen gates before which we wilt and die. Between life out of doors and life in the cellar, we choose the outdoor life.

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When we call for “sexual liberty” — what do we mean? Do we mean “freedom to rape” or debauchery? Do we desire the annihilation of sentiment in the love-life, the disappearance of attachment, tenderness and affection? Do we glorify unthinking promiscuity or animalistic sexual satisfaction, at any time and place? Not at all. In calling for sexual liberty, we simply demand *the possibility for every individual to dispose, as they wish and in all the circumstances of their sexual life — according to the qualifications of temperament, sentiment, and reason which are peculiar to them.*

Thus we do not demand the liberty to “rape.” Attention: **their sexual life** — that does not imply the sexual life of another. Neither do we demand a liberty of the sexual life which would precede any sexual education. On the contrary, we believe

that, gradually, in the period preceding puberty, the human being should be left ignorant of nothing that concerns sexual life, — that is, the inevitable attraction of the sexes — whether that sexual life is considered from the sentimental, emotional or physiological point of view. We believe that advanced minds should have taken it to heart to recommend and propagate that education, to never let an occasion escape to engage in it; we think that from the moment that we have just indicated, not only should the human being know what delights — sentimental, emotional, and physical — the sexual life hold, but also what responsibilities it leads to. Both sexes should be led to understand, for example, that it is up to the woman to choose the hour of conception. And neither sex should be ignorant of the means of contraception. Following my thought to its logical conclusions, I would say that in a society which had not made it possible for its female constituents to refuse or avert an *undesired* pregnancy, those constituents would be perfectly justified in leaving their progeny to the care of the collectivity.

We do not separate the “liberty of the sexual life” from “sexual education.”

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Contrary to the prejudices of religious or civil orders, we treat the sexual question like the intellectual question, like all the questions raised by human activity. Just as the experiences of life, taken as a whole, appear necessary to us so do experiences in that particular phase of life that is sexual life seem indispensable. We declare it an “absurdity” for a young boy or girl of sixteen years to be bound for life in marriage and yet nothing appears more natural than a being of that age maintaining sexual relations with another, of the emotional or physical sort. Moreover, the sexual life from fifteen to twenty years of age differs from the sexual life considered at thirty-five or in the autumn of life. Sexual life is so complicated that the existence of [multiple] simultaneous experiences of sexual life is easily comprehensible, since in each experience, sometimes it is the sentimental or emotional side which dominates, sometimes the emotional or sensual side, and sometimes is the side of pure physical satisfaction. From experience to experience, the degrees of moral, emotional or voluptuous sensations, vary so strangely that we can conclude from it that no experience resembles that which preceded it, or is pursued similarly.

We do not normally pursue identical experiences.

For we do not exclude intense, voluptuous, sensual pleasure from the experiences; we put it on the same plane intense intellectual pleasure (artistic, literary, etc.), moral pleasure, economic pleasure. We consider paltry moralists, morally mutilated, those who place it on some lesser plane. None of the experiences of life are inferior except those caused by the fear of life or the imbalance of the

will. Now, normal voluptuousness — whether that is the enjoyment of a splendid landscape or an intensely lived sensual experience — to engender, on the contrary, love of life and exercise of the will.

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Thus “liberty of sexual life” is not synonymous with “debauchery,” otherwise known as “loss of moral equilibrium.” Sexual liberty is exclusively individual order. It presupposes an education of the will which permits each to determine *for themselves* the point where they will cease to be master of their passions or penchants, and education perhaps much more instinctive than it appears at first look. Like all liberties, that of the sexual life involves an effort, not of abstinence — (in fact, abstention from the experiences of life is a mark of moral insufficiency, as debauchery is a sign of moral weakness) — but of judgment, discernment, and classification. In other words, it is not so much a question of the *quantity* or *number* of experiments as of the *quality* of the experimenter. To conclude, *liberty of the sexual life* remains united, in our mind, with a *preparatory sexual education* and a *power of individual determination*.

Liberty of sexual life in *all circumstances*, of course: *in* or *out* of union . . . If it is true that sexual experiences differ from one another, how can jealousy — morbid attitude of love — exist? Can an individual, subject or object of an experience, reasonably bemoan the lack of necessary qualifications which make one of their fellows the subject or object of another experience? Sentimental experience is one thing, sensual experience another, and the choice of a procreator yet another. It could be that the being that a woman chooses for procreator would not be the one for whom she feels the most affection and that she seeks in the one certain physical qualities to which she is indifferent in the other. Could the one be reasonably jealous of the other? . . .

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Let’s finish. By replacing the emotional phenomena among the experiences of ordinary life, we have not at all wanted to diminish the importance of the factor “love” in human existence. We think that an experience can be experienced seriously, profoundly, intensely, but that we would be spared many disenchantments and sufferings if a number of the facts of life, instead of being considered as definitive, appeared as temporary, modifiable, revisable — essentially variable. This is accepted from the scientific point of view — from the intellectual point of view — from all points of view, — we can’t comprehend how it would be otherwise from the sentimental, emotional or sexual point of view. It is not enough for us

that this idea be adopted hypocritically and practiced clandestinely. We demand for the research and practice of sexual liberty the same broad daylight as for those of other liberties, persuaded that to its development and evolution are linked not only the increase of individual and collective happiness, but also in large part the disappearance of the present state of things.

Moreover, we do not declare ourselves more in favor of unicity or plurality in love than we do against either; and it could well be that in a given couple, one of the constituents will practice unicity while the other practices plurality. And it could be that after some time, unicity could appear preferable to plurality and vice-versa. These are individual questions. What we are asking is that we cease to qualify experience as more or less legitimate depending on whether it is simple or unique. We also ask that we instruct *all* being on these things and that the father, mother, or partner not profit from their privileged situation to keep them hidden from those who are obliged to trust them. To each then, education, to determine their sexual life as they intend, to vary its experiences or to hold themselves to one alone: in a word, to proceed "at will."

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