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REVIEW

Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009), ISBN: 978-0415963718

In *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*,¹ Foucault makes a series of powerful claims about the relationship between confession, truth and sexuality, which, at least to the extent that they bear on confession, are perhaps more counter intuitive now, some thirty years later, than they were even in 1976 when they were first published. Confession does not reveal the truth, it produces it; confession doesn't liberate and free the subject, it condemns her to an endless cycle of guilt, shame and yet more confession; the practice of ritualized confession did not arise as the expression of a deep-seated human need to speak inner truths; on the contrary, the inner self to whom that truth-speaking is attributed was itself a long time in the making, and the eventual confessions of that self were the consequence of highly coercive practices, which co-incidentally and rather conveniently, eventually produced the desire for confession. In other words, the desire to confess followed the act of confession, which was literally forced upon the reluctant, skeptical and initially very resistant European populace of the early Middle Ages, first by the Roman Church and later by the Protestant Churches. Confession, Foucault very clearly demonstrated, is more closely associated with the profanity of violence than it is with the sanctity of heaven.

So how then, a mere few hundred years later and at a time when traditional Christian religious observance is rapidly declining in the West, has confession managed to burst so far out of the containment of the confessional box that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries it has virtually become the *sine qua non* of western subjectivity? How have confessional discourses become so deeply embedded in our desiring bodies and our institutions that we can no longer see or feel the disciplinary bite of regulatory power? The multiple forms of confession are omnipresent now, underpinning the spirit of much of personal, social and cultural life,

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

from the all too popular *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* to reality and make-over television; from self-help and therapy culture, to our literary love affair with autobiographies; Confessional practices underpin our education system, our approach to health and healing; they define and structure our most intimate relationships, and confession is all but the Rosetta Stone of contemporary moral life. To fail to know and be able to confess/speak your "inner truth," in Western culture today is not to experience an existential crisis but an ontological one. Bracket the question of who is doing the listening, we are the subjects who now speak ourselves incessantly into being, who endlessly develop new tools for speaking even more—think Facebook, My Space, the blogosphere—and to the extent that the speaking that matters most is the hard won truth of our inner selves wrenched against our own wills from inner darkness into shameful light, we are indeed the very exquisite embodiment of Foucault's assertion that Western "man" has become a confessing animal. So into this maelstrom of proliferating confessional discourses, Chloë Taylor's very thoughtful, impeccably argued *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* arrives like a very welcome Occam's Razor.

Drawing on Foucault's observation about the contingent nature of confession in *The History of Sexuality*, Taylor's book is deeply structured by the notion that the confessional subjects of today have very little in common with those of the past and her first three chapters are a clear exposition of this point. When biographers like Peter Brown impute to the fourth century church father, Saint Augustine, a project of "finding himself" or engaging in "an act of therapy," they are, as Taylor notes, attributing to him "reasons for which modern subjects commonly confess," (2) and they are "assuming continuity in confessional practices over a vast period of time." (2) This is an assumption that extends to include an unsupportable story of continuity in the subject itself. Thus, Taylor's project is to take the fragments of Foucault's observations about confession, particularly those of his later writings, and substantially supplement them in order to trouble an otherwise totalizing history of confession and the confessional subject that would see a linear narrative running from Augustine to the Christian Middle Ages, through Rousseau and the Enlightenment, to the nineteenth-century rise of psychiatry, and on to the twentieth century institutionalization of psychology, particularly through Freudian psychoanalysis, which has resulted in so many of us now speaking in Freudian tongues. This is indeed much of the terrain of Taylor's book, but, it bears repeating, this is genealogy, not linear history. While Foucault's work is both the departure point and touchstone of Taylor's book, and genealogy is the method, her analyses are deeply enriched, extended and complicated by her engagement with the work of other continental philosophers who have similarly tackled confession and its analogues, namely Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Paul de Man, Ladelles McWhorter, Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva and Franz Fanon, to name but a few.

The book is coherently organized with the first three chapters focused on providing an account of the development of the confessing subject from antiquity to modernity. The fourth chapter departs considerably from the first three in offering a fascinating and important consideration of the disciplining of the one who listens, for confession is always relational; and the fifth and final chapter is a consideration of alternative technologies of the self to confession. Given how deeply embedded Taylor has by this stage shown disciplinary confessional practices to be, this final chapter poses the question of the extent to which there is any room for practices of the self which tip the balance away from discipline and more towards care of the self. Taking as her model Foucault's exemplary accounts of the non-confessional ancient practice of self-writing, *hupomnêmata*, Taylor strikes out on her own in this chapter more than anywhere else and she does so in ways that we can only hope might gesture in the direction of her future work. Her analysis, for example, of the art of Artemesia Gentileschi as an example of non-confessional self-transformation oriented towards self-care rather than discipline is remarkably convincing. This is a book thoroughly researched and referenced, rigorously argued and densely rich in detail, so at best in the remainder of this review I will only be able to draw attention to a few of the highlights.

While there is much material of value in the first chapter, including a lovely account of the differences which underlie the confessional subject of antiquity—a subject clearly not confessing to the truth of himself for the inner self has yet to be produced—and an informative exposition of penance as the antecedent to confession, it is Taylor's work with Augustine which stands out, not only because it takes up the greater part of the first chapter, but perhaps because she is tackling here a subject Foucault did not. Needless to say, Augustine looms large in any conversation about confession, identified as he so consistently is with the discursive origins of confession's literary soul mate, autobiography. So his unexplained absence in Foucault's work reads first as lacuna, then as intentional, and finally as intriguing. Thus, and perhaps paradoxically, Taylor gives voice to Foucault's silence by offering a careful exposition of the many ways in which Augustine was not an obvious exemplar of Foucauldian confession in an account that does double duty by also meaningfully contributing to the vast body of scholarship on Augustine, especially around the question of the development of interiority. Taylor concludes that "Augustine's work is neither an example of discipline nor of self care." (46) To the extent that Foucault's definition of confession is a self-examination directed towards telling the truth of oneself to another, careful examination makes it clear that Augustine's *Confessions* do not convincingly fit this definition. Contrary to the tenacious readings of Augustine that would have him confessing the truth of himself, and for all that the *Confessions* do contain some biographical material, as

Taylor acutely observes, they actually leave aside considerably more than they cover. Moreover, there is proportionally more theological argument, biblical exposition, accounts of other people's lives, prayers and refutations, than there is biographical material, thus making the claim for autobiography tenuous at best. In the end, Taylor argues, Augustine's *Confessions* are a confession to his faith in God, and the plurality of material within them is best explained by this interpretation. Moreover, and as importantly, while the apparently agitated soul searching that characterizes the tone of different moments might reverberate for modern readers and critics with what they take to be recognizable anxieties, the Augustinian interiority from which those anxieties emanate differs markedly from modern interiorities, as does the intention of expressing them. It's worth citing Taylor at length here because in her characteristically understated way, she beautifully gestures towards the differences between modern confessional subjects confessing the truth of themselves and Augustine confessing his desire for the Other, for God"

Augustine is writing in the hopes that God will respond, crying out in the hopes of an answer, speaking because he wishes to listen to one who has too long remained silent. This straining of his ears, the ears even of his heart, is the painful longing which pulsates through the entire *Confessions*, and not the longing for self-revelation. Augustine is compelled to write his *Confessions*, and is anxious and beset, not like Rousseau, not by the need to speak about himself, but by the longing to hear the Other speak at last. (40)

In emphasizing Augustine's concerns with the Other rather than the self, Taylor very clearly signals discontinuity rather than continuity in the confessing subject.

Chapter two fairly closely charts Foucault's trajectory in offering an account of the emergence of confessional subjectivity from the Counter-Reformation through the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century. This is a trajectory that sees confession invested in the production of particular kinds of truths and inexorably caught up in what Foucault describes as "perpetual spirals of pleasure and power." (104) As we might expect, this chapter includes a substantive consideration of Rousseau and it is a discussion rendered both more complex and more interesting by Taylor's engagement with the readings of Jacques Derrida and Paul De Man, particularly concerning Rousseau's account of the incident of the stolen ribbon. At stake is the status of the truth of confessions, the seductive power of confessions, and the question of confession's guilty shameful pleasures. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the writings of contemporary autobiographers, Annie Ernaux and Nelly Arcan, through which Taylor offers a very insightful challenge to Foucault's assertion that confession is always caught up in spirals of pleasure. On the contrary, she says, the seductive failures of Ernaux and Arcan's confessions "show the manner in which we may believe what Foucault writes about seductiveness and the erotic

pleasures of confession at our peril." (115)

As noted earlier, chapter three concludes the chapters dealing with the production of the confessional subject and offers an extended consideration of whether psychoanalysis is inherently normative and disciplinary or whether it can also be an expression of self-care. Here Taylor considers the work of Julia Kristeva, who affirms the notion of psychoanalysis as an aesthetic practice of self care and John Toews, who argues that a contemporary neo-Freudian psychoanalysis can be understood in terms of Foucault's later work on self-governance.

For different reasons, chapters four and five stand out in the way they strike new ground. Taylor's analysis in chapter four of the ethics of the relation between confessor and confessant that focuses more on the experience of the one who listens is compelling. Noting that the confessional subject desires as much to hear the confessions of others as she does to offer her own, Taylor draws our attention not to the benevolence of this desire but to its subtle violence. The confessional subject, she suggests, desires the confessions of others "as occasions to reflect on herself or in order to spark further confessional self-reflection," (173) thus making this a very narcissistic act of self assertion rather than regard of the other. With the coercive expectation of reciprocity that underpins so much of the dynamic of contemporary confessional practices, and in the endless assertion of self, we are a very long way here from Augustine's confession of his desire to hear the voice of the Other.

Taylor's final chapter on alternatives to confession stands out for me in two ways. Firstly her engagement with silence as a technology of self-care is intriguing if tantalizingly brief. She notes Foucault's own silence with respect to certain kinds of self-disclosure and she is appropriately cautious about silence as a strategy of resistance to normative discipline given the way it has so often been a tool of the powerful. Notwithstanding this concern, alongside the significant role of speech in confessional discourses, perhaps silence warrants a more substantive engagement. Secondly, while there are numerous references throughout to the work of feminist philosophers, this final chapter is clearly more broadly engaged with feminism, albeit an ambivalent engagement. For example, Taylor rightly criticizes the way many feminist art critics have appropriated the life of Artemisia Gentileschi in order to read her art in ways that untenably push it to tell contemporary stories of women's desires and oppression. By contrast Taylor offers her own analysis of Gentileschi's work as an example of non-confessional Foucauldian self-care. Bertha Pappenheim's politically inspired social work after her "failed" analysis with Joseph Breuer is another convincing example of non-confessional self-care. And Taylor notes that for many Foucauldian feminists, feminism itself functions as a technology of the self more oriented towards care than discipline. In the end, however, one is

left with the sense that Taylor's own sensibilities more closely follow those of Ladelle McWhorter, who observed that while feminist practice was initially a joyful act of self-fashioning, and thus had affiliations with freedom, its attachment to the normative category of woman ultimately meant that McWhorter would abandon feminism in favour of her ongoing philosophical practice, which she identified as less normative, less disciplinary. In many ways this is an appropriate place for Taylor to end her book. By implicitly offering philosophy itself as a practice of self-care we return at the end to where we began, to the ancients. Surely, Foucault would approve.

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