

REVIEW ESSAY

## **Michel Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. The fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality***

**Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*, ed. Frédéric Gros, Paris: Gallimard, 2018, ISBN 9-782072-700347**

With *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*, a long awaited and major publication in Foucault's oeuvre has finally become available.

In order to fully understand *Les aveux de la chair* and its contribution to Foucault's work, Foucault Studies and future use of Foucault's work, it is necessary to understand its publication history as well as its place within Foucault's wider oeuvre and, in particular, his *History of Sexuality*.

This review essay therefore begins by providing an outline of the broader context of *Les aveux de la chair* in a section entitled "The Setting of Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh." This part gives an account of the gradual yet decisive and important shift in the period of investigation and the overall perspective of the *History of Sexuality* that led to the publication of *Les aveux* as the fourth volume in this series. Subsequently, the review provides an overview of the main parts of the book and their contents entitled "The structure of *Les aveux*." While the following parts articulate "The contribution of the volume" and "Further implications of the volume," the final part "More to come?" concludes by anticipating possible future publications of Foucault's work.

### THE SETTING OF FOUCAULT'S CONFESSIONS OF THE FLESH

#### **Much awaited and long overdue**

If the publication of new books by Michel Foucault in his lifetime was often a major intellectual occurrence, Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* is undoubtedly a long awaited and belated event.

Published on February 8, 2018 as the fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, *Confessions of the Flesh* forms the most recent addition to a series of books that Foucault initiated with the publication of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, *La volonté de savoir*, in December 1976, which was originally brought out in English in 1978. The second and third volumes of this series – *L'usage des plaisirs* [The Uses of Pleasure] and *Le souci de soi* [The Care of the Self] respectively – were published in 1984, the year of Foucault's death. *Confessions of the Flesh* thus appears forty-two years after the first volume and almost thirty-four years after the second and third volumes of the series. These two considerable periods of delay between these publication years (1976 and 1984,

and 1984 and 2018) raise pertinent questions as to how we should place and understand *Confessions of the Flesh* within the *History of Sexuality*.

Two years before he finally brought out volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault submitted a manuscript entitled *Les aveux de la chair* to his publisher Gallimard, though he emphasized that it was not yet ready for publication.<sup>1</sup> In early 1984, Foucault withdrew the manuscript from the publisher and began re-editing it with the intention of publishing it in October the same year, but in June 1984, Foucault died before he could complete the project. Nevertheless, a note to the second and the third volume was added, which announced the fourth volume and anticipated its content.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to Foucault postponing the intended publication of *Les aveux de la chair* between 1982 and 1984 – which was particularly due to his dissatisfaction with the preface and his parallel work on an extensive volume on Greek and Roman practices that he finally decided to split up in the two published volumes, and on related lectures at the *Collège de France* – the protracted period of waiting for *Confessions of the Flesh* was marked by two substantial postponements: a delay lasting from 1976 until Foucault's death and a delay lasting from his death until today. While the first delay of almost 10 years was primarily due to Foucault's deviation from his originally announced publication plans, the second delay of more than thirty years was mainly related to the question of how to best interpret Foucault's will and conserve his heritage, given that the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* remained unfinished at the time of Foucault's death.

### **An unexpected initial delay: Foucault's deviation from his original plan**

The back cover of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in 1976 listed the title of five volumes to follow: 2. *La chair et le corps* [The Flesh and the Body]; 3. *La croisade des enfants* [The Children's Crusade]; 4. *La femme, la mère et l'hystérique* [The Woman, the Mother, and the Hysteric]; 5. *Les Pervers* [The Perverts]; 6. *Populations et races* [Populations and Races]. This forecast matched the description inside the book of "the domain" to be investigated in the subsequent studies "that will follow the present volume," that is "the dispositive of sexuality: its formation on the basis of the Christian notion of the flesh, as well as its development through the four great strategies that were deployed in the nineteenth century: the sexualization of children, the hysterization of women, the specification of the perverts, and the regulation of populations – all strategies that went by way of a family which must be viewed, not as a force of prohibition but as a major factor of sexualization."<sup>3</sup> While the last four of these announced books were thus intended to investigate various more recent privileged points of investment and hotbeds of the contemporary conception of modern sexuality outlined in the first volume, such as the masturbating child, the hysterical woman, the perverted man and the married couple, they were to be preceded by a second volume investigating practices and conceptions of the confessions of the flesh and the direction of conscience in Catholicism from the Middle Ages and the high-water mark of the medieval papacy at the fourth *Lateran council* of 1215 to the *Counter-Reformation* heralded by the *Council of Trent* between 1545 and 1563.

<sup>1</sup> Frédéric Gros, "Avertissement," in Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair* (2018), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), "prière d'insérer." Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité 3* (1984), "prière d'insérer."

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir. Histoire de la sexualité 1* (1976), 150/Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978), 113-114.

Foucault is known to have written at least part of these volumes before the publication of volume one. In particular, manuscripts for *La chair et le corps* and *La croisade des enfants* had already been drafted and edited. (These manuscripts are currently said to be housed at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*.) When publishing the first volume, Foucault thus seems to have envisioned a high and steady publication rate for the ensuing volumes; and, at some point, he even imagined renaming the second volume on Christian penitence *Les aveux de la chair*. As it turned out, however, none of these envisaged volumes ever saw the light of day, even though parts of them entered and became part of Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France* and elsewhere, both before and after the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*.

Contrary to his initial – arguably overly confident – expectation, Foucault soon began to realize that a proper account of the historical genesis of key related themes in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* required a far more protracted examination of history. This proved to be the case for the genealogy of sexual ethics and the history of desiring humans, which he set himself the task to begin excavating in the first volume. It was also the case for his examination of the desiring subject committed to professing and expressing its oppressed sexuality in order to liberate itself from millennial oppression, which he outlined in the first volume. Such an examination also, in turn, necessitated the investigation of the historical genesis of the confessing subject committed to telling the truth about itself. It proved equally necessary to extend and complicate the investigation of a related field of inquiry that began manifesting itself in the opening pages of volume one. Here Foucault not only queried a current conception of a present repressive 'Victorian' regime of power that subdued, repressed and silenced sexual behavior, but he also advanced an alternative hypothesis of a sustained, steady proliferation and incitation of discourses and practices concerned with sex. Moreover, he deemed that this proliferation and incitation of discourses and practices be viewed as an extension of a continual increase in the scope of the confession of the flesh, which was made into a rule for everyone in the seventeenth century but had been devised long before in an ascetic and monastic setting.<sup>4</sup> In turn, this investigation proved to necessitate an examination of the history of subjects that both governs themselves and are governed by others but that come to be governed by others as they are driven by others to know and conduct themselves in ways that are also known by others.

Only a year after volume one of his *History of Sexuality* was published in November 1976, Foucault began "writing on the Church fathers."<sup>5</sup> In this manner his main period of interest for the second volume gradually began shifting from the later Middle Ages and Early Modernity to the period of the early Christian Church Fathers, extending from the second to the fifth century.

Yet this shift proved not to be the last. Foucault's initial effort to examine the character and the implications of the modern dispositive of sexuality from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century widened even further, as did the range of its historical genesis. In order to thoroughly examine how sexual pleasure is problematized within the history of a subject of desire, Foucault's history of sexuality came to include a journey that stretched as far back as Greek and Roman Antiquity.<sup>6</sup> (Contrary to common adage, however, this

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, 29/Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Defert, "Chronologie," in Michel Foucault, *Œuvres*, tome II (2015), xxvi.

<sup>6</sup> In April 1983, Foucault stated that after having "finished *Les aveux de la chair*," "the book about Christianity," he "wondered where the Christian technology of the self came from" and so "was obliged" "to reexamine what I said in the introduction to *L'usage des plaisirs* about the supposed pagan ethics, because what I had said about pagan ethics were only clichés borrowed from secondary texts." In this

was not the first time Foucault decided to pay Greek Antiquity a visit, since Foucault had already discussed Greek Antiquity at some length in his lectures at the *Collège de France 1970-71* and in his lectures on *Oedipal Knowledge* at the *State University of New York* in 1972.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, towards the end of his life, Foucault's journey to Antiquity resulted in a more prolonged stay.)

In order to properly understand the content, role and contribution of the newly published *Confessions of the Flesh*, it is important to consider how Foucault's investigation of the history of sexuality gradually shifted in scope and ambition. Moreover, to accurately comprehend and assess the text, we must re-insert it as a contribution to and an extension of the new longer and more complex history of sexuality resulting from the displacement described above. As an extension that describes an earlier period than Foucault imagined when working on *La chair et le corps*, *Les aveux* ultimately came to focus on the Church Fathers of the Western Church between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, the resulting fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* must be read as an intermediate link that prolongs and resituates the in-depth examination of Greek and Roman Antiquity that Foucault concluded in volumes two and three and that also points further ahead, towards later developments in the Middle Ages, Early Modernity, and finally to our present time.

As it was indicated in the "inserted note [prière d'insérer]" in the second and third volumes when they appeared in 1984, the now published volume four is intended to inscribe itself within the new trajectory of this "genealogy of the desiring human from Classical Antiquity through to the first centuries of Christianity", which was the result of this decisive and re-iterated re-centering of the centre of gravity in his history of sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

According to the note, the *Use of Pleasure* examines how classical philosophical and medical Greek thought reflected upon what would later be termed sexual comportment in terms of the "uses of pleasure" and formulated four key axes of intervention for this experience: the relationship to the body, the relationship to the spouse, the relationship to boys, and the relationship to truth.

Continuing this investigation closely with regard to the theme, the *Care of the Self* "analyzes this problematization" as it comes to the fore in Greek and Latin texts originating in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, where it concomitantly takes a new turn as it is re-inserted within "a way of life (un art de vivre)" dominated by a life-long preoccupation with the care of the self.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on the period that immediately followed, *Les aveux de la chair* then treats "the experience of the flesh [expérience de la chair] in the first centuries of the Christian

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manner, he "discovered, first, that this pagan ethics was not at all liberal, tolerant, and so on, as it was supposed to be; second, that most of the themes of Christian austerity were very clearly present nearly from the beginning, but that also in pagan culture the main problem was not the rules for austerity, but much more the techniques of the self" (Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in progress, [1983/1984], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 253).

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir. Cours au Collège de France. 1970-1971* (2011)/Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the will to know. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1970-1971* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), "prière d'insérer."/Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité 3* (1984), " prière d'insérer."

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, "prière d'insérer."/Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi*, "prière d'insérer." For a discussion of redrafts of the plans of the *History of Sexuality* in 1983-1984, cf. Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016), 164-190.

era and the role played in this context by a hermeneutics and a purifying decipherment of desire.<sup>10</sup>

Due to its long delay in publication after the first volume, its decisive intermediate position in what came to be the final outline of the history of sexuality, and the fact that it failed to materialize at the time of Foucault's death (even though it constantly seemed close at hand), *Les aveux de la chair* has often acquired the status of a much sought after *missing link* in Foucault Studies – an important and anticipated hypothetical intermediate existence in a series of evolutionary forms that allows us to bridge the gap and establish an overview of a coherent trajectory.

### **The Subsequent Suspension: Harbored in a bank vault for close to thirty years**

This missing link in Foucault studies took so long to materialize that readers of Foucault's works often thought of it as a never existing chimaera or at least an extinct and lost species. While the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality* announcing the publication of the fourth volume appeared on Parisian booksellers' shelves shortly before Foucault's death in 1984, readers had to wait another 34 years for the publication of the fourth volume.

The main reason for this delay was that, close to two years before his death, Foucault had left a note stating that there were to be "no posthumous publications" of his work. Even though, as we know now, *Les aveux* was at a relatively advanced stage at the time of Foucault's death, this note certainly also concerned the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*; and the heirs of the Foucault estate decided to respect Foucault's wish. Foucault's partner, Daniel Defert, removed *Les Aveux* from Foucault's apartment and "locked" it away "in a bank vault" for close to thirty years, together with other important manuscripts.<sup>11</sup>

When the most comprehensive collection of Foucault's minor publications, articles, interviews and discussions *Dits et écrits I-IV* came out in French in 1994, Foucault's wish continued to be honored.<sup>12</sup> These four volumes contained only texts and discussions published and authorized by Foucault in his life-time or published relatively shortly after his death with his authorization. A few of the texts published in *Dits et écrits* were French translations of texts that Foucault had previously published in other languages.

However, with increasing pressure for additional publications and, in particular, the appearance of more or less faithful pirated editions, Foucault's heirs gradually began to think differently about their approach to posthumous publication.

Partly motivated by the appearance of pirated editions, the publication of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France from 1997 onwards, authorized by Foucault's heirs, was not perceived as countering Foucault's wishes, since it was arguably just a rendering of public lectures that had already been recorded. Moreover, these recordings had not only been publicly available at the research library *Bibliothèque du Saulchoir* in Paris for some time, but they had also already been publicly disseminated, either as audio-recordings or transcriptions of the audio-recordings following fluctuating standards of fidelity. However, to meet the highest editorial standards, the editors were also given permission to make use of Foucault's own manuscripts to supplement recordings where they proved deficient; and, as the series progressed from the relatively comprehensively recorded lectures held by Foucault around 1974 to earlier, less

<sup>10</sup> *L'usage des plaisirs*, "prière d'insérer." / *Le souci de soi*, "prière d'insérer."

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Elden, "Review: 'Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh' *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2018. 2018

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I-IV* (1994).

comprehensively recorded (or even unrecorded) lecture series, the attitude towards posthumous publication among scholars and Foucault's heirs became increasingly liberal. As such, over time, scholars and publishers made increasing use of Foucault's own unpublished manuscripts to ensure the quality of published work and to facilitate publication of the entire lecture series *tout court*. The stipulation that material could only be published if it had already been publically available became less and less categorical.

Of course, this slow but motivated and well-founded destabilization of Foucault's ban against the publication of unpublished material led to an increasingly legitimate expectation that *Les aveux* might eventually be published. The pressure for publication has only increased since 2013, when Foucault's manuscripts were sold to the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris* and were thus accessible to researchers all over the world.

As a result of the slow and gradual shift in publication policy, the publication of *Les aveux* earlier this year seems very timely. Moreover, even though one has to grant the book a special status in Foucault's oeuvre insofar as it cannot be regarded as a final publication authorized by Foucault, even a cursory glance at the volume shows that the monograph is relatively worked-through and based on comprehensive research of archival material from the period of investigation. As well as this, the publishers and in particular the editor Frédéric Gros, who has already been responsible for editing no less than four years of Foucault lectures at the Collège de France, have taken great pains to ensure a meticulous publication of Foucault's manuscript. While one could have wished for an index of common concepts and notions – as has been practice in the editions of Foucault's lectures –, the volume contains a very useful list of cited works. In addition to basing the text on both Foucault's handwritten manuscript and its typescript (with corrections added by Foucault himself), Gros also sought assistance from editors of Foucault's lectures as well as from Daniel Defert and Henri-Paul Fruchaud from the Foucault estate.

In summary, everything is set for a much-anticipated contribution not only to the *History of Sexuality* but also to Foucault's oeuvre in general, which is likely to affect the future reception of his work. Let us now turn to the structure, content and character of this contribution.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF *LES AVEUX DE LA CHAIR*

With 426 pages, *Les aveux de la chair* is a substantial study. However, from the very beginning, its unfinished state is made plain – if only because it lacks an introduction and starts in medias res. Foucault's dissatisfaction with the original introduction for trading on clichés from the secondary literature was an essential motivation for withdrawing the earlier version of the book, and it seems he was either unable to replace it with another that did justice to his extensive work on primary sources or simply deemed this unnecessary. As the second and third volume stand, in any case, Foucault's famous and much discussed introduction to the second volume<sup>13</sup> now serves as a joint introduction to the entire reconceived series.

Following an introduction by the editor, Frederic Gros, the bulk of the book consists of three main parts. The first part is approximately 140 pages and the second and third parts are approximately 100 pages each. Labeled for the most part by the editor, these

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. also in this issue, Sverre Raffnsøe et al., "Philosophical Practice as Self-modification: An Essay on Michel Foucault's Critical Engagement with Philosophy," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 8-54.

parts are entitled "I. The formation of a new experience," "II. Being a virgin" and "III. Being Married."

These main parts are followed by four "appendixes [annexes]" of varying lengths and statuses, which contain sections closely related to *Les aveux* that Foucault had placed in separate folders after the first part yet not integrated into the manuscript. While Appendix 1 is a brief reminder of the general aims of the book and its relationship to the previous volumes in the series, Appendix 2 is a more developed examination of the shift from "exomologesis" to "exagoresis." It is a shift from penance as an outward public expression of wrongdoing and the resolve to correct it as it comes to the fore in a momentous single outstanding event to an ongoing ascetic spiritual practice centered on minute self-examination intent on a renunciation of the self. In a direct continuation of discussions on "exomologesis" and "exagoresis" in Part One of the book, this appendix also offers a wider perspective insofar as it inscribes this shift and the development described in the book within a larger contemporary institutional monastic and ecclesiastic context. At the same time, it connects to the development the "art of arts", the "*regimen animarum*," or the government of souls that govern themselves as well as with other subsequent relevant developments in a contemporary context. Appendix 3 also contributes to discussions outlined in Part One, expanding on an explanation of John Chrysostom's views on sin and confession in biblical figures such as Cain, David and Eve. Appendix 4 contributes to the discussions in Part Three with its brief investigation of St. Augustine's views on original sin and the Fall of man. Together, the four appendixes amount to about forty pages.

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE VOLUME

Insofar as *Les aveux* primarily examines works published by the Church Fathers between the beginning of the second century and the fifth century, which laid the conceptual groundwork for the Western Church, it picks up the thread from the two previous volumes in the *History of Sexuality*.

*Les aveux* discusses Christian thinkers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, notably Justin Martyr (100-165), Athenagoras (c. 133 – c. 190), Tertullian (160-220) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215), and thinkers from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-339), St. Ambrose (c. 340 – 397), Saint Jerome (347 – 420), John Chrysostom (347-407), St. Augustine (354-430), and John Cassian (c. AD 360 – c. 435).

Not only does *Les aveux* study a period in time contiguous to the historical period in the two previous volumes; it is also close to the previous two volumes in its detailed and tactful articulation of slow and gradual historical transitions, as well as in its austere and unobtrusive, relatively limpid style of writing, which gradually builds a wide web of gentle displacements and slight modifications. In this way, it differs from the more condensed, highly-strung, and pointedly rhetorical style of writing Foucault opted for until the mid-1970s. At times, however, this style of writing may make it difficult to discern the precise form of the overall argument in the book, which must be developed in its relationship to and continuance with the overall shifts depicted in the previous volumes, if one is to discern its fault lines.

### Continuance with regard to moral codes, shifts with regard to problematization

Taken together, volumes two to four of his *History of Sexuality* question what Foucault considers a widespread understanding of an allegedly almost insurmountable historical chasm between, on the one hand, a strict medieval Christian morality exigently binding our sexual relations and activity, and, on the other hand, a far freer relationship to sexual pleasure in Antiquity, with a distinctive tolerance toward everything that Christianity subsequently gradually forbade. According to this understanding, sexual lusts enjoyed relatively good and free conditions in Antiquity, after which they were subjected to a chastising restraint by Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Foucault problematizes this commonly endorsed historical discontinuity by pointing out the difficulties in establishing the “the topography of the parting of the waters [la cartographie du partage des eaux]” between Antiquity and Christianity – thematically as well as periodically.<sup>15</sup> The danger associated with the sexual act, its restriction to the bounds of marriage, the condemnation of homosexuality, and abstinence as a condition for the true way of life were not unknown in the Classical Period. For sexual morality, they rather constituted what Foucault referred to as “four major domains of experience: the relation to the body, the relation to the wife, the relation to boys and the relation to truth.”<sup>16</sup>

While Foucault retains the moral codes as relatively uniform and stable over time, he also emphasizes that they are problematized in different ways in Classical Antiquity, Imperial Rome, and early Christianity. Hence, Foucault operates with and incorporates both continuity and discontinuity in his historical analysis: continuity insofar as it is concerned with ethical problematization of sexual morals within equivalent experiential domains, and discontinuity insofar as these ethical problematizations of sexual issues were clearly different in approach and scope, implying not only distinct ways of dealing with moral problems of the body, marriage, same-sex relations, abstinence and access to truth but also a distinction between more comprehensive horizons of experience.

### Transitions in ethical substance

To mark discontinuity, Foucault can also use the ethical substance in order to distinguish more broadly between the “the experience of *aphrodisia*, the experience of the flesh and the modern experience of sexuality,” which are conceived “not as three domains of separated objects, but rather as three modes of experience, that is to say, three modalities of the relation of the self to the self within the relation we can have to a certain domain having to do with sex.”<sup>17</sup>

In Antiquity, as Foucault sees it unfolded through writers such as Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle and Hippocratic medicine, the ethical substance was *ta aphrodisia*, translatable as those things that have something to do with *Aphrodite*, the Greek goddess of love and pleasure, and comprise a number of sexual acts required by and connected

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 20-31, 273-278/Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 14-24, 249-254. Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité 3* (1984), 269-274/Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self. History of Sexuality 3* [1984] (1990), 235-240

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, “Le combat de la chasteté” [1982], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (1994), 308/Foucault, Michel, “The Battle for Chastity,” in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 196.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), “prière d’insérer.” Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité 3* (1984), “prière d’insérer.”

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité. Cours au Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2014), 78/ Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2017), 76.



to nature through intense pleasure. At the same time, the force naturally inherent in these acts was that it could threaten the individual's health through excess and inner revolt or turmoil.<sup>18</sup> However, the principle for regulating this precarious activity was not defined in terms of a universal legislation that could determine and distinguish between permitted and forbidden acts of pleasure. According to Foucault, the mode of subjection – the second ethical element – took the shape of *knowhow*: an art form or technique that prescribed the uses of pleasure according to certain variables (need, time, status), which could not be decreed generally. The labor the individual had to perform upon the self – the third ascetic element of ethics – therefore took the shape of a battle where the individual had to establish complete control over the self, such that it reflected domestic as well as political power exercised by that self. According to this logic, there can be no power over the self without power over the urges, no power over the city state without power over your household, yourself and your desires. This was how the argument would run in the classical problematization of ethical labor. In extension of this, the fourth ethical element – the mode of being that was implemented as a goal through this ethical labor – could be characterized by the exercise of an active freedom which could not be distinguished from a visible relationship to the truth. Foucault summarized this issue in an interview in 1984: “The Greeks problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem. But ethical in the sense in which the Greeks understood it: *ēthos* was a way of being and of behavior. It was a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others. A person's *ēthos* was evident in his clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on. For the Greeks, this was the concrete form of freedom; this was the way they problematized their freedom. A man possessed of a splendid *ēthos*, who could be admired and put forward as an example, was someone who practiced freedom in a certain way. (...) But extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an *ēthos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary.”<sup>19</sup>

In Imperial Rome, during the 1st and 2nd centuries, the ethical substance was still given as a matter of natural force, which is why *ta aphrodisia* could be directly given as *venera* (*Venus* being the Latin name for *Aphrodite*); this force should be resisted by the individual who should be the master of it. According to Foucault, however, there was in this struggle, characterized as it was by violence, excess and constant rebellion, an ever-greater focus on individual weakness and powerlessness; a new fragility came into view, as did an effort to avoid the inexorable natural force. The mode of submission still had the character of techniques of living (*technē tou biou*) built around aesthetic and ethical criteria, but life art was increasingly generalized by a reference to universal principles as especially the Stoics saw them applied in nature or universal human reason. There was some modification of the ethical labor performed on the self, since knowledge of the self became ever more important for the exercises on abstinence and self-mastery: “the task of testing oneself, examining oneself controlling in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth – the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing – central to the formation of the ethical

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 105-106/Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 93.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, “L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (1994), 714/ Foucault, Michel, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self,” in *Foucault Live. (Interviews, 1961-1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer [1984] 1996, 436. 1996, p. 286)

subject.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, there was the fourth ethical element, the aim, which was still defined as the individual’s sovereignty over the self. However, this sovereignty was only applicable within an experiential horizon where the relationship to self took the shape of not only self-mastery but also a certain kind of moderate valuation of the self as a place emptied of desire and turned away from the problems of life.

According to Foucault, the four domains of experience were already present in classical Greek antiquity, and they all encouraged sexual abstinence. Unlike the later Christian and modern conceptions, which both had a tendency to regard sexual experience from a universal perspective, it was an essential characteristic of Greek problematization that each of the four domains of experience appeared in a particular way, such that the individual – in regard to the body, women, the youth, and the search for truth – could find different or even heterogeneous requirements and rules for sexual behavior.<sup>21</sup>

As is made clear from the beginning of *Les Aveux*, the early Church Fathers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century essentially re-confirmed a regime of *aphrodisia*, centered on abstinence, marriage, procreation, disqualification of pleasure and mutually respectful sympathy between husband and wife in the married couple, as it had already been developed by pagan philosophers in late Antiquity. They did this in order to distance themselves from subversive gnostic groups critical of the existing world order and to gain acceptance among the rulers of this world. Behind this apparent continuity with regard to moral codification and the division between what is prohibited and permitted, however, differences gradually begin to emerge, resulting ultimately in “major transformations [transformations capitales]” (p.49). As a result, the inherited codes and dogmas can be said to begin to play a different role as they are acted out in a different setting that is being established.

### **The confessions of the flesh: The formation of new ethical substance, experience of and relationship to oneself**

The Church Fathers gradually begin to draw an outline of a new kind of “relationship of oneself to oneself [mode de rapport de soi à soi]” as it is concomitantly developed in practice in ecclesiastical penitential discipline from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and in monastic ascesis from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. This relationship of oneself to oneself takes the form of an ongoing ascesis, or an “exercise of oneself and work upon and upon oneself [exercice de soi sur soi]” and a new “form of experience [forme d’expérience],” understood both as a “mode of becoming present for oneself [mode de présence à soi]” and a “diagram or blueprint for the transformation of oneself [schéma de transformation de soi]” (p. 50). This new relationship of the self to the self in which one constitutes oneself as a subject manifests itself in a new vocabulary and new basic valorizations. As notions such as temptation, concupiscence and redemptions begin to abound, a new ethical and religious focus on virginity, chastity and purity begins to emerge.

First and foremost, a new ethical substance or ontology comes to the fore and is subjected to intense examination and manipulation. Ousting the earlier ethical substances of the *aphrodisia* and the *venera* as it begins to occupy the central position in the arriving “dispositive [dispositif]” that allows the subject to experience and transform

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité 3* (1984), 85/Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self. History of Sexuality 3* [1984] (1990), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 275/Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 251.

itself in new ways, this new ethical substance is the "problem of the 'flesh'" (p. 50). Substituting a regime of sexual relations or *aphrodisia* in which acts of pleasure and enjoyment should be moderated and cultivated to attain self-mastery and self-control, a fundamental relationship to the flesh begins to penetrate the subject's entire life as a persistent problem to such an extent that this relationship justifies the rules it imposes upon its life and exerts a determining influence on the relationship it establishes to others.

According to Foucault, the 'flesh' should be understood as a "mode of experience" that permits one to know and transform oneself in terms of and through a specific relationship between the cancellation of evil, which is always on the verge of breaking out and breaking through, and the manifestation of truth (pp. 50-51). If one fails to perceive this process of subjectivation in and through which the subject is constituted as a subject, one fails to grasp the processes that permit the moral codes to materialize as ethical conduct and ethical conduct to draft moral codes. As a result of the transition initiated by the early Church Fathers, the problem of the 'flesh' thus becomes a decisive "mode of subjectivation" (p. 51 note).

With Christianity, the flesh comes to the fore as the subject of an intense ongoing scrutiny and belaboring necessary to purge it from evil and manifest truth, since the flesh is a body and soul constantly threatened by being completely consumed by lust or concupiscence yet constantly able to become the temple of God.

An economy of salvation and redemption is established in which each body and soul is led to speak the truth about itself, as a manifestation of its sinful and fallen state to which it simultaneously verifies its will to leave this state behind. In these reiterated confessions of the flesh – veridictions in which one avows the truth about oneself –, permanent self-scrutiny becomes a way of life. Confession thereby takes the form of an ongoing hermeneutics of the self in which one is both the object investigated and the subject that speaks and in which the manifestation of the truth about oneself is a test and an act of purification that enables the crossing from a fallen state to an enlightened state of grace.

Foucault describes how the conception of *metanoia* or *penitentia*, as the movement through which the subject gains access to truth and truth manifests itself, is articulated around the turn of the second century. In Tertullian and other contemporary authors, this process of conversion is often articulated around discussions of the preparation for and the accomplishment of baptism as an outward recognition and confirmation not only of the work upon oneself but also of the death and rebirth of the repentant (p. 52-75). It is also expressed in the idea of chastity and continence permitting a spiritual marriage with Christ (p. 244).

### **The battle for chastity in St. Cassian**

According to *Les Aveux*, the aesthetical use of pleasure for the Church Fathers no longer forms the core of the ethical problematization, as it provides the practical and the experiential domain in which a sexual ethics can be developed and displayed. Instead, desire and its cleansing hermeneutics<sup>22</sup> come to a heightened characteristic expression in Cassian's reflections on techniques of the self within monastic life. To some extent, Foucault had already discussed Cassian in public when, in 1982, he published what he

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 278/Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 254.

still termed an “extract from the third volume of my *History of Sexuality*,” entitled “The battle for chastity,” in a collection of articles on *Western Sex*, edited by Philippe Aries.<sup>23</sup>

While the philosophers task in Antiquity was to acquire mastery over oneself through the definitive victory of the will, the monk’s task here becomes “to perpetually control one’s thoughts, examining them to see if they were pure, whether something dangerous was not hiding in or behind them, if they were not conveying something other than what primarily appeared, if they were not a form of illusion or seduction.”<sup>24</sup> The battle for chastity in Cassian no longer takes the traditional shape of the well-tempered management of *aphrodisia*, but is instead located in the body and the soul’s smallest movements, images, memories, thoughts and dreams that should be interpreted as signs allowing one to determine where and who one is. The battle for chastity becomes an ongoing quest to understand and manage involuntary movements that even if not put into action are still actualized in thought as signs of the underlying desire. Since this ethical substance is immaterial and unreal but still exists, it must become an object of constant re-interpretation.

For Cassian, the battle for chastity and against immorality thus takes the form of a thorough investigation of consciousness that distinguishes and interprets all thought that appears. For the monk, this applies to the degrading wet dreams as well as the tempting illusions that appear in sleep; and the problem becomes determining whether ejaculation is based in one thing or the other: Was there some pleasure and desire in my sleep or just when I woke up? Did I enjoy it? Do I regret it? For this reason, the monk must constantly question himself, though he is just as likely to reach opposite conclusions. In other words, the monk cannot be sure of himself. He stands on an unstable foundation and must therefore – according to the monastic tradition – present the problem to the elders. By himself, the monk is simply not able to determine whether or not he is impure: He requires help from higher authorities to perform the interpretation that can inform him where he stands. For this reason, a relatively innocent and unavoidable wet dream raises the specter of possible desires, which, in turn, must become the object of a distinguishing analysis of consciousness, in which the individual must not restrain from making immediate decisions about the self but must also obediently leave it to others to take part in the examination and the decisions.<sup>25</sup> In so far as he was inhabited by a foreign principle that is at the same time a source of illusion, the monk will have to rely on obedience to others in his work of self-examination as this is paradigmatically expressed in the technique of confession, which is also conceived as a mode of the art of arts, of an art permitting a specific government of the self (p. 107-176).

In this sense, possible desire becomes an opportunity for analysis. Here the desire is not a problem as such, but it supplies the substance that can determine if one is sufficiently free of sin to participate in the Holy Communion, a most important part of life. Sexual desire is not treated as a basic instinctual drive from which all other drives derive, as it is in some versions of Freudianism. Rather, signs of sexual desire are

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, “Le combat de la chasteté” [1982], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (1994), 295-308/Michel Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity,” in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 185-197.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, “Sexualité et solitude,” [1981], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits IV: 1980-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 177/Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude” [1981], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 183.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité. Cours au Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2014), 261-269/Foucault, Michel, *Subjectivity and Truth. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2017), 266-75.

expressive of other vices that may be found in the human soul in the shape of deceitful demons that, however difficult, must be fought. The sexual is therefore particularly important as an epiphenomenon, since wet dreams and other temptations reveal more serious vices, such as anger, greed, or vanity, which, in turn, can lead to what is even more sinful. Foucault is therefore able to claim that the monastic contribution to the history of sexuality is to combine a powerful aversion to the flesh with sexual libido, understood as a manifestation of the personal.<sup>26</sup>

This is therefore a hermeneutic of desire: to watch over personal thoughts pertaining to desire in order to understand one's mode of being. This surveillance involves a process of subjectivation, which is inseparable from a commitment to speak a certain truth about oneself. This ethical labor happens in a state of constant suspicion of oneself: One must always suspect oneself of being on the way to an undesirable location and must therefore seek help from others to avoid this. Such a process of subjectivation involves a non-terminating process of self-objectivation (p. 244-245). Moreover, "this subjectivation, in its quest for the truth about oneself, functions through complex relations with others, and in many ways. One must rid oneself of the power of the Other, the Enemy, who hides behind seeming likenesses of oneself, and eternal warfare must be waged against this Other, which one cannot win without the help of the Almighty, who is mightier than he. Finally, confession to others, submission to their advice, and permanent obedience to one's superiors are essential in this battle."<sup>27</sup>

While leaving the economy of pleasures behind without yet establishing a clear separation between body and soul, the subject in this spiritual quest for chastity becomes engaged in a perpetual toil with the most intimate obscure and involuntary movements of thought insofar as it is involved in a fight with a concupiscence, a lust threatening to pollute its will (p. 239-242).

In turn, this permits the subject to "lead a life in this world that is not of this world [une vie qui n'est pas de ce monde]" (p. 234). Whereas Christian existence in Tertullian goes to its greatest possible lengths to reach out towards a possible marriage with Christ, in Cassian, "more of a witness than an inventor," it performs a "splitting and a doubling [un dédoublement]" that permits it to withdraw from the world in a manner that "frees and generates [dégage] the entire profundity of an internal scenario [la profondeur d'une scène intérieure]" (pp. 243-244). Rather than "the interiorization of a catalogue of prohibitions," this inaugurates, opens up and unfolds a new "field [domaine] of thought, with its irregular and spontaneous course" (p. 244). Here, "an entire technique," allowing the subject to "supervise, analyze and diagnose thought, its origins, its qualities, its dangers, its force of seduction, and all the obscure forces that may hide under the appearance that it presents," comes into play (p. 244). It permits the subject to exercise a constant and heightened "vigilance," a lingering "suspicion that one must harbor everywhere and at all times against oneself" (p. 244). While this "asceticism of chastity" constitutes a "process of subjectivation" that differs decisively from an ethical problematization centered on the economy of actions, this process of subjectivation taking the form of a quest for the truth concerning oneself leads to an open-ended and never ending objectivation of oneself and a constant invocation of the assistance of others (p. 245).

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, "Interview de Michel Foucault" [1981], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (1994), 661.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, "Le combat de la chasteté" [1982], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV* (1994), 307/Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 195.

### The libidinalization of existence in St. Augustine

Part three of *Les aveux* contains a detailed examination of St. Augustine. Claiming that an “art of matrimonial existence” (p. 240) is lacking in earlier Christian treatises that valorize monastic life with its radical renunciation of the world and its focus on virginity, Foucault describes how, in response to the development and propagation of intense ascetism in the latter half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the religious signification of daily life is subsequently asserted. Around the end of the fourth century, an art of the relationship between the spouses is developed, which provides a new foundation for and re-asserts an already existing ethics of marriage to such an extent that it re-elaborates the sexual relationship in marriage (pp. 249-270). Even within the dual relationship of marriage, the crux of the matter now becomes what to do with and how to administer one’s own concupiscence; and thus the new issue becomes how to manage one’s relationship to oneself. Consequently, even the issue of how to establish and maintain the right and rightful sexual relations in married life comes to be conceived and organized as the question: How is it possible to manage the all-decisive relationship to oneself in and through the relationship to the other (p. 282).

This development comes to a head as an art of matrimonial existence, which is developed in terms of a theory of concupiscence and an economy of desire in St. Augustine (p. 324). Whereas Augustine presents the sexual as a natural part of social relations, desire constantly emerges as a problem for the human will. He continually focuses on desire as an internal activity in the human being that does not necessarily relate to anything in the real world and remains difficult to control. In Augustine, the Greek ethics of the right use of pleasures seems to be replaced by an ethics concerned with the dispositions of desire. This approach no longer asks whether or not one is moved by one’s desire or lust to perform a certain action; and it does not primarily base its ethical judgement on whether or not one is able to practically master a desire that may be problematic but is innocent in and of itself. Rather, it asks which mental disposition the desire stems from, and, regarding the desire itself, it begins to problematize the intention of an action that has not and might never be performed.

Although Augustine is concerned with what guides people in their deepest choices and founds their lives – self or God? – he does not consider our carnal nature as evil per se. What is decisive, however, is whether man is moved by good or ill will. According to Augustine, sin is comprised of a perverted or perhaps inverted will. In sin, one is closest to oneself and, as a consequence, also loses one’s very self, which is why sin also goes by the name of arrogance (*superbia*).

In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine develops a thought experiment about sexual relations in Paradise that further explains this problem of the will. Unlike his predecessors, Augustine considered the possibility of intercourse in the afterlife. The Fall did not entail that these degrading and bodily relations had become a necessity but that there had occurred irreparable damage that made it impossible to retain a sovereign will. If Adam had wanted to procreate in the Garden of Eden, he could, according to Augustine, have done it with the same control and mastery as he had with all his other limbs. In Paradise, man did not know of spasmodic and degrading sexual excitement because, until the Fall, self-mastery was a natural and real state. After the Fall, involuntary bodily excitement became a rebellion against man’s originally free and human will, since it became a sign of man’s rebellion against God. According to Augustine, what Adam did to deserve punishment was to elude the will of God and thereby attain his own

independent will. He hereby disregarded that his own will was utterly dependent on God's. As a punishment for this rebellion, Adam lost his Elysian self-mastery. As Foucault recapitulated in a lecture from 1981: "He wanted to acquire an autonomous will and lost the ontological support for that will."<sup>28</sup>

In this quotation, Foucault recognizes a new general problem of sexual ethics: "Sex in erection is the image of man revolted against God. The arrogance of sex is the punishment and the consequence of the arrogance of man. His uncontrolled sex is exactly the same as what he himself has been toward God – a rebel" (Foucault 1994 IV, p. 175/Sexuality and solitude, p. 181-182).<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the genitals and the sex can thus be said to come into existence and to distend as a testimony of man's rebellion, arrogance and shame. To man, the genitals and the sex is what man is to God: "a rebel. Man's man, erected before and against him" (p. 336).

Since rebellious man was thereby guilty of a crime that required unending punishment, an unending tendency toward uncontrollable sexual drives became ever-present. This predisposition could be subdued but would forever remain active. In this context, the previously prized Greek virility could no longer represent the same sign of male virtue. Previously, virility could only be problematic as long as it was not under ascetic self-control. Now, it was precisely controlled self-mastery that had become an ontological impossibility for the Christians; and consequently, the drive will remain problematic in this life.

According to Foucault, it becomes possible to identify a new relationship between sexuality and subjectivity. There was still a primarily male "phallic" sexuality (p. 337), where femininity was a derivative and dependent variable, but instead of the Greek emphasis on willing penetration and activity, a problematization arises of the relationship between passivity and unwilling erection. As a consequence, the problematization does not focus as much on the relationship with other people as on the self-relation, paradigmatically expressed in the relation between one's will and involuntary bodily expressions. Instead of a Greek-Roman 'penetrative' relation, characterized by an aggressive invocation of active self-mastery, Foucault holds that Augustine gave rise to an 'erectile' and passive self-relation.

Augustine named the basic principle of the movement and drives in the sexual organs *libido*, which originally meant 'lust,' 'desire,' or 'longing,' but was given the additional meanings of 'illicit inclination' and 'sexual desire.' In addition to coupling *libido* and bodily pleasure, the main challenges with regard to sexual desire concerning its force, origin and effects also become a central issue within the human will. As *libido*, desire is no longer an external hindrance for the will to overcome but an internal part of that very will. Desire in the shape of *libido* is no longer a manifestation of the unimportant and base inclinations that the will can conquer; rather, it becomes a consequence of will, given that it was already man's will that had become guilty by transgressing the limitations originally set by God.

With his story of the Fall, Augustine initiated a process in which the center of Christian thought was to be found within the self. This is because he finds an 'evil discord' in fallen man that makes it impossible for him to achieve self-transparency. This foul note in human will was a sign that the original sin had become a part of human

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<sup>28</sup>Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et solitude," [1981], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits IV: 1980-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 175/Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" [1981], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 181-182.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et solitude," [1981] (1994), 177/Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" [1981] (1997), 183.

nature and the involuntary movements of desire was one of the primary areas where this could be detected.

Here, unlike in Plato, the spiritual battle against desire and the self is not a question of turning one's gaze upward toward a higher sphere in order for this higher sphere to provide norms for one's passion. In extension of Augustine's analysis, our spiritual battle should consist in turning our gaze downward, toward the inner, in order to decipher which among all the movements in the soul stem from the *libido*. This endeavor rests on unstable ground because will and libido cannot be fully separated.

According to Augustine's analysis, concupiscence should not be understood as a specific force within the soul or "a passivity that limits its power." Instead of an involuntary commotion against the will, concupiscence is "the involuntary of the will in itself," a lassitude or infirmity of the will without which the will is unable to will (p. 345). Whereas in Cassian desire and will are still conceived as two different and opposed forces and authorities, concupiscence in Augustine forms an essential and inalienable part of the will (p. 345).

In spiritual combat, as articulated by Cassian and other contemporary likeminded Church Fathers, attention focuses on the goal or purpose of desire that arouses and drives it. To prevent impure objects from becoming objects of man's desire determining and possessing his will, one must scrutinize the objects that present themselves and accept only pure objects of desire and expel impure objects. They should be expelled, even as objects of representation that may tempt one beyond one's power of resistance. In Augustine, by contrast, the object to be consented to or rejected is no longer the object of desire, the will and representation. Rather, the subject's object of investigation, consent and rejection is its own will. It is one's own will that it must examine, will and not will in its present problematic, concupiscent and erectile form (pp. 354-355).

With his call for a sustained investigation and renouncement of a concupiscent will, Augustine manages to combine the exercise of virginity, the spiritual quest and the practice of marriage and to make these previously articulated themes converge in and revolve around a common theme of utmost importance: the question and problem of the will. How is it possible to will one's will as it is given in its actual involuntary postlapsarian form? How is it possible to will and to put to good and proper use a concupiscent and involuntary, erectile and insubmissive will that exercises and imposes itself in ways one cannot control but by which one suffers and is affected?

In so far as the decisive issue becomes the good or bad usage of one's libido, the sexual relationship and regulation of sexual conduct comes to depend on and becomes the problem of the subject. The subject becomes a subject of desire that must itself establish and decide the truth about itself and its relationships by seeking this truth at the hearth of itself. The subject is thereby well on the way to becoming a legal person, where its actions must be deemed good or bad according to the relationship to the subject they appear to express and testify to (p. 360).

After having integrated and played the game of a morality that had already taken shape within paganism, Christianity, according to Foucault, "later in its history, from the fourth and fifth centuries, developed something new, which is precisely the experience of the flesh;" and as a consequence "the relation of Christianity to sex [is not constructed] at all [through] a conjugal morality, [but through] something else, [which is] the experience of the flesh formed a bit later, after the first developments of



Christianity, on the basis of the development of monasticism, of the asceticism of the fourth and fifth centuries."<sup>30</sup>

#### FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF THE VOLUME

As *Les aveux* progresses, it consequently becomes increasingly clear to the reader that it is inadequate only to consider the texts of the Church Fathers in their continuity with established codes of conduct in Greek and Roman Antiquity. The period must instead be deemed a pivotal moment. In spite of the apparent continuity with Antiquity stressed at the beginning of the book, *The Confessions of the Flesh* in the long run articulates a decisive period of marked transition and complex change that represents a historic watershed dividing previous and future ways of thinking and acting, exerting a determining influence on what is yet to come.

In this manner, Foucault also complies with the request contained in citation from the French poet René Char that appears on the back cover of the second, third and fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*: "The history of men is the long succession of synonyms of the same term [*vocable*]. To contradict them is a duty".

#### **A new ethical substance, a new mode of subjectivation & an erectile libidinal will**

With the problem of the 'flesh', the Church Fathers draw an outline of a *new ethical substance*. Replacing the earlier *aphrodisia* or *venera*, the flesh becomes the privileged subject of an intense ethical examination and manipulation. But the Church Fathers do not stop here. At the same time, they begin to establish and develop an *unprecedented ethical experience of oneself*. This new mode of becoming present for oneself takes the form of a continuously established and re-established relationship of oneself to oneself. Here, one is able to constitute oneself as a subject in and through a process of subjectivation, an ethical conduct of one's conduct that involves continually scrutinizing oneself in order to transform oneself. The avowals of the flesh thus provide the blueprint for a new, more differentiated *mode of subjectivation*.

Conducting continued ethical labor on oneself and one's desire to understand one's mode of being gives rise to a mode of subjectivation that in turn permits the subject to withdraw from this world in a manner that frees and generates an entire profundity of a new internal scenario, a scenario that reaches fruition in Tertullian and other late Church Fathers. Thus, this new mode of subjectivation can also be said to enable the subject to differentiate itself from the existing world in order to establish a *parallel world that is not of this world*. Moreover, the subject is not only able to lead a life in this world that is not of this world but is also capable of sharing this life with others.

As highlighted in Augustine, life lived in this created parallel world also assumes a new, hitherto unexperienced intricate shape. Here a relation of the self to the self is established where desire is not primarily conceived as an external hindrance for the human will to overcome but rather as an integral part of that very will. Thus, as it becomes essential for the subject to constantly decipher and address the *involuntary libidinal and erectile character of the will in itself*, a potent impotence of the will precluding will, control and direct action,<sup>31</sup> a new level of existence is established, a parallel world

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité. Cours au Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2014), 179/Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1980-1981* (2017), 177.

<sup>31</sup> Sverre Raffnsøe, "Beyond rule; trust and power as capacities," *Journal of Political Power* 6:2 (2013), 255.

not of the previously existing world that can differentiate itself and spread in ever widening circles.

### **An analytics of the subject of concupiscence**

According to Foucault, increasing differentiation with regard to sex life, the experience of oneself and forms of subjectivation becomes palpable in the relationship to the sexual act. In Antiquity, the sexual act was primarily thought of as a “paroxystic block” (p. 360). Sexual acts were approached and dealt with as relatively undifferentiated unities. While the individual here gave himself to and indulged in the pleasure to be had in his relationship to others, he concomitantly risked giving himself up to the intensity, the sudden attacks and violent expressions of these pleasures. In this manner, he risked not only losing control and wasting semen but also jeopardizing his life force to such an extent that it might border on death. With Christianity, by contrast, it became possible to divide this paroxystic block of undifferentiated pleasures and force apart and articulate them in differentiated ways. It became conceivable to differentiate sexual acts and distinguish between them not so much according to their relationship to a certain pre-established code, but rather according to the specific role that the sexual acts seemed to have in the new regime of ethical labor, the new level of existence, articulated by the Church Fathers. One was now capable of distinguishing between the various acts and evaluating them according to the role they appeared to play within and how they affected a larger economy: the economy concerned with the conduct of oneself and others. Instead of being an undifferentiated block ordered around pleasure and the relationship to others, the unity of sexual acts could now become subject to a more articulate and differentiated analysis in terms of the subject and its desire, its rules and way of life, its fall and resurrection (p. 361). Moreover, this analysis could now take the form of a close scrutiny of oneself that one must submit to and that can be performed by oneself and by others. As a result, a relatively undifferentiated limited housekeeping or “economy of paroxystic desire” is replaced by a more articulate and differentiated economy and “analytics of the subject of concupiscence” (p. 361).

### **A most interesting spirited animal**

In this manner, in *Les Aveux*, Foucault also manages to respond to and rise to the daunting challenge Nietzsche set himself in his *Genealogy of Morals* as he aimed to show how the human being had “attained depth” and become a “most interesting” spirited “animal.” In an interview in the year of his death, when he was working on *Les aveux*, Foucault indirectly paid his respects to the considerable growth in refinement and dangerousness spurred in early Christianity as he distanced himself from the adoration of Greek thought and its stylization of existence often attributed to him: “– A style of existence – that’s admirable. These Greeks, did you find them admirable?” (...) “– No. – Neither exemplary nor admirable? – No. – What did you think of them? – Not very much. They were stymied right away against what seems to me to be the point of contradiction in ancient morality: between, on the one hand, this obstinate search for a certain style of existence, and on the other, the effort to make it common to everyone (...) All of Antiquity seems to me to have been a ‘profound error’ [une ‘profonde erreur’].”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, “Le retour de la morale” [1984], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits IV*. Édition établie sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald, avec la collaboration de Jacques Lagrange. (1994), 698/ Michel Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” in *Foucault Live. (Interviews, 1961-1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer [1984] 1996, 466-467.

This critical rebuttal of classical moral thought was further clarified in a comment from 1983: "The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to virile society, to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of your own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting!"<sup>33</sup> Evidently, for Foucault, the preposterous idea of resurrecting a time and a stage before early Christianity made no sense. Rather, his ambition was to explore and articulate the implications of a heritage left by early Christianity that impacted on later developments and thereby remains with us today.

### **The point where history begins**

With *Les aveux*, Foucault equally proves able to return to, substantiate and further articulate the deep fascination with the period of the Church Fathers he expressed early in his career, but which, to this day, remains relatively unthematized in Foucault Studies and the reception of Foucault's works. Already in a postface to Flaubert's *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, published in 1964, Foucault gives voice not only to the signification of Flaubert's work but also to the decisive influence of the period and of the Christian hermit form of life exemplified by Anthony the Great and revived by Flaubert:

"In the space of this Egyptian night still haunted by the past of the East, an entire European culture is deployed: the Middle Ages with their theology, the Renaissance and its erudition, the Modern age with its science of the world and of life. (...) Christian Egypt – and with it Alexandria, and Antony – appears at the zero point between Asia and Europe, and as a fold of time [comme au pli du temps]: At the point where Antiquity trembles and caves in on itself [s'effondre sur elle-même], only to let its forgotten horrors [monstres] come back to haunt the day, and at the point where the modern world, with its promises of an indefinite knowledge, germs [trouve son germe], one finds oneself at the lowest point where history begins [au creux de l'histoire]."<sup>34</sup>

Compared with this early condensed text, which is enigmatic but also full of implications, *Les aveux* may at first – and at times – strike the reader as somewhat dull and tedious reading, with its detailed analysis of the subtleties of relatively unfamiliar texts. However, this soporific effect soon begins to recede. As soon as the reader moves beyond the minor adjustments that first catch the eye and begins to grasp what transpires in and through them, a very interesting and engaging history begins to appear.

### **A new starting point for the discussion of the period of the Church Fathers**

Even before the publication of *Les Aveux*, interesting discussions of Foucault's relationship to the Church Fathers, Christianity, and religion and spirituality in Christianity had already been opened up in response to Foucault's previous minor

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in progress" [1984], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow. London: Penguin (1997), 258.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, "(Sans titre). Postface à Gustave Flaubert, *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*" [1982], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I*. Édition établie sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald, avec la collaboration de Jacques Lagrange (1994), 307.

studies of the period.<sup>35</sup> However, with the appearance of the fourth volume, a new decisive starting point has now been established that is likely to spark off new debates concerning these issues.

As *Les aveux* collects previously published literary remains and assembles them into a more coherent edifice, it also begins to form a passage across the zero point where, according to Foucault, history begins and an entire European culture starts to be deployed, a specific route that also points further ahead in various directions. The fourth volume demonstrates how new interesting fields of investigation and discussion begin to be articulated in the period of the Church Fathers and call for further investigation and articulation in the ensuing centuries.

### The desiring subject

In the centuries to come, however, the shift described in *Les Aveux* from the main ethical question being about one's relationship to others to being about one's relationship to oneself also proves fraught with consequences. With this shift, the theme and the principle of the "desiring man" or the "desiring subject" is established, which, according to Foucault, "appeared to have been inherited" "from a long Christian tradition" and led further ahead to the "experience of sexuality" "in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."<sup>36</sup>

Already in the introduction to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault had suggested the need to examine the genesis of the desiring subject and the constitution of a hermeneutics of desire as an essential precursor of the modern experience of sexuality in some important respects; and he had correspondingly indicated his premonition of this link as an essential motive for deviating from the original plan of the history sexuality:

"While the experience of sexuality, a singular historical figure, is perhaps quite distinct from the Christian experience of the flesh,' both appear nonetheless to be dominated by the principle of 'desiring man.' In any case, it seemed to me that one could not very well analyze the formation and development of the experience of sexuality from the eighteenth century onward, without doing a historical and critical study dealing with desire and the desiring subject. In other words, without undertaking a 'genealogy.' This does not mean that I proposed to write a history of the successive conceptions of desire, of concupiscence, or of *libido*, but rather to analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen. In short, with this genealogy the idea was to investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire, a hermeneutics of which their sexual behavior was doubtless the occasion, but certainly not the exclusive domain. Thus, in order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of a 'sexuality,' it was

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Bovaryn, Elisabeth A. Castelli, (ed.), *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 10, Nos. 3-4, July/October 2001, 357-555. Philippe Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011). Jeremy R. Carette, (ed.), *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (1999).

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 11/Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 5.

essential first to determine how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire".<sup>37</sup>

With the shift from an ethics centered on relationships to others to an ethics centered on the relationship to oneself, a subject begins to appear that is centered on recognizing itself as a subject of desire and on discovering in desire the truth of its being, not only when relating to itself but also when relating to others.

### **The willing judging self**

Alongside the appearance of the desiring subject, a problematic of the will begins to appear in a new form. The overriding concern was no longer to assert mastery over others and to exercise controlled self-mastery over one's violent passions to such an extent that one can remain in charge of a relationship to others in which penetration plays an important role. Rather, with St. Augustine, the paramount concern becomes the formidable and unending task to examine, scrutinize and deal with an insubmissive will: to try to forge the right relationship to the dealings of a will that arises over and over again as an unwilling willing erectile force that also has the character of a forceful longing transgressing the limitations of the immediately given.

Insofar as Augustine "no longer centers his analysis of concupiscence on the problem of purity and impurity, of soul and body, of matter and mind, of passion and mastery over oneself, but on the voluntary and the involuntary, or more precisely on the very structure of the will," he, according to Foucault, begins to inscribe the analysis of concupiscence "within a system of juridical references" (p. 351). Thus, the subject that begins to appear is not only a subject of desire but also a "subject of jurisprudence and justice (sujet de droit)" (p. 352). It is a subject that must continuously struggle with the daunting task of becoming able to will by confirming an already existing erectile will of which one cannot remain in charge and making use of its desire and willing aspirations in a righteous way. It is equally a subject that must accept that it will be judged accordingly – by its understanding and use of its own desire and will.

### **The veridiction and jurisdiction of conjugal life**

According to Foucault, this new experience permits and calls for an intense regulation of conjugal life in Medieval Christianity that follows a pattern unheard of in Antiquity. Starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century in particular, sexual relationships in marriage become the subject of an ongoing veridiction and jurisdiction. It is worth noting that an essential criterion for this juridification of matrimonial relationships – the decisive guideline for the assessment of the sexual acts and interaction of the spouses – is of course here the relationship that the involved parties are able to establish to themselves and to their own concupiscence.

For Foucault, the experience of the involuntary structure of the will and the conception of a subject of desire that is also assessed as a subject of jurisprudence appearing in the court room opens an assignment and an "impossibility" (p. 351) that will continue to occupy the Roman Catholic Church in the centuries to come. How should one best understand, make use of and reconcile with the structure of an involuntary will? How can one begin to conceive of an erring and sinning subject of

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<sup>37</sup> *L'usage des plaisirs. Histoire de la sexualité 2* (1984), 11/*The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (2006), 5-6.

desire as a subject that gives consent to and makes use of its desire and insubmissive will in the right way?

### The modernity of Christianity

The appearance of an ethics centered on the relationship to oneself can equally be seen to open up the prospect of the subsequent schism of the Reformation (p. 351). The task and the “impossibility” of adequately understanding and dealing with an insubmissive will and desire in juridical terms, the task of understanding the desiring and true subject as a subject of right, raises pertinent questions about the rightful faculty of judgment, the tribunal of conscience capable of pronouncing the final judgment in the matter. While this question was raised in a number of “revolts of conduct (révoltes de conduits)” from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which people sought to create a more personal space in regard to the Christian pastorate through an ascetic mastering of the self, the establishment of alternative religious communities, and the return to an independent reading of the Holy scriptures, controversies concerning this issue reached an accentuated height at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.<sup>38</sup>

The appearance of an ethics centered on the relationship to oneself “not to” renders meditation possible in the sense articulated in early Modernity in Descartes (Raffnsøe 2018, p. ##). In an extension of the turn it took with Protestantism at the point when “Christianity became modern,” the turn toward the self can even be seen to form the framework for a subsequent intense questioning of ordinary existence in Kierkegaard’s thought that permits not only access to another world within this life but also to “lead the same life in order to arrive at the other world.”<sup>39</sup>

### The decisive battle against masturbation

Equally, the close ties between sex, subjectivity and truth that began to appear with the shift from the penetration model focused on the relationship with others to an ethics centered on the relationship to oneself in which one recurrently encounters an erection problem forms a precondition for the crucial importance attributed to the masturbation problem in modern times, which Foucault had proposed to examine in (what would have been) the third volume of his original history of sexuality, *La croisade des enfants*. While the masturbation problem, according to Foucault, “was nearly ignored or at least neglected by the Greeks, who considered that masturbation was a thing for slaves and for satyrs, but not for free citizens,” it later became “one of the main issues of sexual life.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas in the Pre-Christian era of Genesis the sin of Onan was depicted as relational insofar as he sinned against his family by spilling the seed on the ground that he was supposed to furnish it with, in Christian times, the cardinal sin of Onan became

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978* (2004), 195-219/Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at The Collège De France, 1977-78* (2008), 191-226.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France. 1984* (2009), 228/Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth. The Government of the Self and Others II. Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984* (2010), 247. Cf. also in this issue, Sverre Raffnsøe et al., “Philosophical Practice as Self-modification: An Essay on Michel Foucault’s Critical Engagement with Philosophy,” *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 8-54.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, “Sexualité et solitude,” [1981], in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits IV: 1980-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 178/Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude” [1981], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 183.

that of masturbation.<sup>41</sup> In an extension of the transition depicted in *Les Aveux*, thus, masturbation could become the incarnation of a problematic, knotty and in all probability too intense, and 'wanking' relationship to oneself and to one's desire.

### MORE TO COME?

While *Les aveux* provides a relatively detailed account of the transitions from late Antiquity to early Christianity, from the use of pleasure to the avowals of the flesh, the volume ends rather abruptly. As such, the later transitions through the Middle Ages and early and late Modernity remain underexposed. How should the subsequent transitions be articulated, leading from the struggle for chastity and purity to the elimination of an arrogant desire rising in the flesh and finally to the more recent conception and experience of sexuality (analyzed in the first volume) in which the ethical goal is seemingly to strive for liberation through a truer expression of repressed desire? And what are the implications of an even more recent experience that Foucault intimates at the beginning and end of the first volume, that the struggle to liberate the ethical substance of sexuality may not lead to the liberation of those engaged in this struggle? To shed light on these outstanding questions, further articulation of a number of intermediary stages and transitions is certainly required – especially as a result of Foucault's deviation from his own original publication plan.

In his lifetime, we could have put these questions to Foucault, who would most likely have addressed them in public lectures or discussions.<sup>42</sup> This is of course no longer an option. Given that the manuscripts for *La chair et le corps* and *La croisade des enfants* are still available at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*, however, it seems that we have not heard the last from Foucault about the subsequent history of sexuality with all its twists and turns.<sup>43</sup> As such, public expectation to publish what could now be considered the fifth and the sixth volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and what some may now consider the missing links between the periods of the Church Fathers and modern times is likely to build. Due to the well-founded change in publication policy with regard to posthumous works, it is likely that this public expectation will be satisfied, and it will be interesting to discover what the remaining transitional forms hold when they can be scrutinized.

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel Bovaryn, Elisabeth A. Castelli, (ed.), *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 10, Nos. 3-4, July/October 2001, 362.

<sup>42</sup> In Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in progress, [1983/1984], in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 253, Foucault discusses "the very slow move, from the privileging of food which was overwhelming in Greece," "to interest in sex." He mentions that "food was still more important during the early Christian days than sex. For instance, in the rules for monks, the problem was food, food, food. Then you can see a very slow shift during the Middle Ages, when they were in a kind of equilibrium... and after the seventeenth century it was sex."

<sup>43</sup> In Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 257, Foucault mentions that he has "more than a draft of a book about sexual ethics in the sixteenth century, in which also the problem of the techniques of the self, self-examination, the cur of souls, is very important, both in the Protestant and Catholic churches."

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