

Foucault Studies

Issue 29

April 2021



Special issue:
History of Sexuality vol. 4
Confessions of the Flesh

Foucault Studies

© Sverre Raffnsøe, Alain Beaulieu, Barbara Cruikshank, Bregham Dalglish, Knut Ove Eliassen, Verena Erlenbusch, Alex Feldman, Marius Gudmand-Høyer, Thomas Götselius, Robert Harvey, Robin Holt, Leonard Richard Lawlor, Daniele Lorenzini, Edward McGushin, Hernan Camilo Pulido Martinez, Giovanni Mascaretti, Johanna Oksala, Clare O'Farrell, Rodrigo Castro Orellana, Eva Bendix Petersen, Alan Rosenberg, Annika Skoglund, Dianna Taylor, Martina Tazzioli, Andreas Dahl Jakobsen, Rachel Raffnsøe & Signe Macholm Müller 2021

ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.vi29.6206>

Foucault Studies, No. 29 i-iii, April 2021

EDITORIAL

Sverre Raffnsøe, Alain Beaulieu, Barbara Cruikshank, Bregham Dalglish, Knut Ove Eliassen, Verena Erlenbusch, Alex Feldman, Marius Gudmand-Høyer, Thomas Götselius, Robert Harvey, Robin Holt, Leonard Richard Lawlor, Daniele Lorenzini, Edward McGushin, Hernan Camilo Pulido Martinez, Giovanni Mascaretti, Johanna Oksala, Clare O'Farrell, Rodrigo Castro Orellana, Eva Bendix Petersen, Alan Rosenberg, Annika Skoglund, Dianna Taylor, Martina Tazzioli, Andreas Dahl Jakobsen, Rachel Raffnsøe & Signe Macholm Müller.

With this issue of *Foucault Studies*, a markedly expanded editorial team is established. While Sverre Raffnsøe, Alain Beaulieu, Barbara Cruikshank, Knut Ove Eliassen, Verena Erlenbusch, Alex Feldman, Marius Gudmand-Høyer, Thomas Götselius, Robert Harvey, Leonard Richard Lawlor, Daniele Lorenzini, Edward McGushin, Hernan Camilo Pulido Martinez, Giovanni Mascaretti, Johanna Oksala, Clare O'Farrell, Rodrigo Castro Orellana, Eva Bendix Petersen, Alan Rosenberg, Dianna Taylor and Martina Tazzioli continue on the editorial team, *Foucault Studies* is delighted to welcome Annika Skoglund¹, Bregham Dalglish² and Robin Holt³ as co-editors.

The addition of prominent scholars to the editorial team marks a noticeable advance for *Foucault Studies*. In addition to lending further scholarly and institutional weight to the journal, the accretion decisively increases not only the diversity but also the breadth in geographical location, as well as the scholarly and social outlook of the editorial team. Scattered throughout the world and centrally situated within different cultures and receptions of Foucault's thought, the team of co-editors vouch both for susceptibility to various traditions and openness with regard to various new approaches as they develop around the globe.

¹ Department of Civil and Industrial Engineering, Uppsala University.

² Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Tokyo University.

³ Department of Management, Politics & Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School.

SPECIAL ISSUE ON FOUCAULT'S *HISTORY OF SEXUALITY* VOL. 4, *CONFESSIONS OF THE FLESH*

The editors of *Foucault Studies* are inordinately pleased to publish this issue of *Foucault Studies* containing a special issue on *Foucault's History of Sexuality Vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*, guest edited by Agustín Colombo (Université Catholique de Louvain). It has been a great pleasure to work with our guest editor on this issue, as well as with Edward McGushin (Stonehill College), who has taken great pains to ensure a successful collaboration between the guest editor and *Foucault Studies*.

The occasion of the special issue is the publication in English of Foucault's long-awaited *Histoire de la sexualité 4. Les aveux de la chair*, brought out in French by Gallimard on February 8, 2018. With the English translation, the most recent addition to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is now available in both English and French, as is the full 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 under the title *The Will to Knowledge* in 1978.

The publication of the English translation of course calls for an appraisal of the contents and implications of the published volume. Yet, the posthumous appearance of a work that failed to materialize at the time of Foucault's death in 1984, and which subsequently has often acquired the status of a much sought after missing link in Foucault Studies and in the series of books, may also be an opportune moment to take stock of Foucault's entire history of sexuality. The following contributions to this special issue, written by an impressive lineup of prominent Foucault scholars, contribute to both ventures:

- Philippe Büttgen (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne): "Foucault's Concept of Confession."
- Lynne Huffer (Emory University): "Foucault's Queer Virgins: An Unfinished History in Fragments."
- James Bernauer (Boston College): "Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault."
- Bernard E. Harcourt (Columbia University): "Foucault's Keystone: Confessions of the Flesh: How the Fourth and Final Volume of The History of Sexuality Completes Foucault's Critique of Modern Western Societies."
- Agustín Colombo (Université catholique de Louvain): "What Is a Desiring Man?"

The ensuing introduction to the special issue authored by Agustín Colombo and Edward McGushin will specify the content and contribution of the various articles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The journal is most grateful to managing editors Asker Bryld Staunæs, Signe Macholm Müller, Rachel Raffnsøe and Andreas Dahl Jakobsen not only for their most reliable and highly competent assistance in running the journal, but also for making this issue possi-

ble. We would also like to thank Stuart Pethick for copyediting this issue of *Foucault Studies* with great care and meticulousness. Due to other competing professional and personal commitments, Asker Bryld Staunæs steps down as managing editor with this issue. While wishing him all the best in the future, editors are sad to see this highly dedicated, adept and hard-working managing editor go. Concomitantly, we welcome Rachel Raffnsøe and Andreas Dahl Jakobsen as new managing editors. Starting this spring, they have joined forces with the highly capable managing editor Signe Macholm Müller in ways that warrant confidence in the triunity. Finally, we would like to offer our thanks to graphic design student William Lindhardt (<https://www.instagram.com/grafikerministeriet>) for his generous assistance in creating the cover design of this special issue of *Foucault Studies*.

The journal is sponsored by *The Danish Council for Independent Research|Social Sciences* and *The Danish Council for Independent Research|Humanities* as well as by *The Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. The editorial team is most grateful that these bodies have awarded funding for *Foucault Studies* over the years and have recently decided to do so in the coming time. The continuous funding is an essential prerequisite for running the journal and makes it possible for the editorial team to look and plan ahead.

Foucault Studies

© Agustín Colombo & Edward McGushin

ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.vi29.6209>

Foucault Studies, No. 29, 1-5, April 2021

INTRODUCTION

Special Issue: *Confessions of the Flesh* – Guest Editors' Introduction

Agustín Colombo, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

Edward McGushin, Stonehill College, USA

In February 2018, almost 35 years after Michel Foucault's death, *Histoire de la sexualité 4, Les Aveux de la chair* was finally published in France. The book, dedicated to analysing the sexual ethics built up by the Church Fathers, made available for the first time a crucial part of Foucault's research on *History of Sexuality*. Last February, the English translation of the book by Robert Hurley was published by Pantheon Books. We are pleased to present this special issue devoted to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*. The special issue includes original contributions that, from a variety of perspectives, investigate the main topics studied by Foucault in the final volume of *History of Sexuality* (e.g., confession, virginity, desire). We hope this special issue will contribute to the reception of Michel Foucault's long-awaited book; a reception inaugurated by the conference *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* held at the Université Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in February 2018. A further development of the contributions presented in that conference will be published in a forthcoming volume, *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, edited by Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforini (Éditions de la Sorbonne, June 2021).

Many of the contributions included in this special issue were first presented as papers at the Harvard Colloquium of Intellectual History, "Confessions of the Flesh: Michel Foucault's final volume of the History of Sexuality", held at the Minda de Gunzburg Center of European Studies at Harvard University in December 2019. We would like to thank the organisers, Anabelle Kim and Julian Bourg, and also the participants of the Colloquium for giving us the chance to work together and discuss Foucault's *Confessions*, which, at that time, was not yet translated into English.

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

The special issue includes five original articles.

Philippe Büttgen's (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France) article "Foucault's concept of confession" starts by focusing on the rich semantic ambivalence of the French word "aveu" and its specific meaning as compared to the English terms "avowal" and "confession". Büttgen's discussion of the "challenges of translation" leads into an analysis of confession as a key concept through which we can understand the intellectual evo-

lution of the last Foucault. Büttgen first notes “Foucault’s relative failure to bring together the various dimensions of confession as confession of sins *and* confession of faith in early Christianity”. Foucault prioritises the confession of sins over the confessions of faith. Consequently, Büttgen claims, Foucault was not able to fully account for the illocutionary force of the creed’s statements, “with all the religious and political implications this ‘force’ carries with itself, and the type of attitude these statements imply towards one’s belief”. The analysis of the interplay between the two aforementioned dimensions of confession leads Büttgen to focus on the “duty of truth”, as Foucault specifically developed this notion in *Confessions of the Flesh*. By drawing upon the problem of the “duty of truth”, Philippe Büttgen sheds new light on the transitional role that Christian confession plays in the final Foucault and his problematisation of *parrhesia* in ancient philosophy. In doing so, he reveals the extent to which “Foucault’s discovery of the illocutionary force of statements (or, to put it in other words, of the power of declarations) stood in a complex relationship with his approach to early Christianity”.

Lynne Huffer’s (Emory University, USA) paper, “Foucault’s queering virgins: an unfinished history in fragments” investigates Foucault’s research on virginity through the rhetorical figure of “chiasmus”. In Huffer’s view, the structure of chiasmus illustrates the movement of self-conversion (*metanoia*) involved in the practice of virginity: “*Metanoia* is the experience of chiasmus, from the Greek, ‘crossing,’ from *chiazō*, a verb: ‘to shape like the letter X’”. The analysis of virginity through the figure of the chiasmus leads Huffer to focus on Foucault’s account of counter-conducts. This is because the rotation of chiastic inversion also describes “‘the movement of thought and practice’ that impels what Foucault describes as counter-conduct”. Drawing upon chiasmus as a conceptual tool, Huffer argues for an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct in Foucault by showing that the chiastic structure frames not only *Confessions of the Flesh* but all of Foucault’s work “as a fragmented, self-hollowing speech haunted by death and the dissolution of the subject”. The chiasmus reveals how, as apophatic speech, Foucault’s work always shifts and comes back to us modified in a deathly movement of eternal recurrence. Through the posthumous publication of *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault returns to us, speaking from the limits, placed on the threshold of life and death. In doing so, the book itself can be conceived as a reading experience through which we can be transformed.

James Bernauer begins his article, “Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault”, by recollecting some of the occasions in which he felt the sense of “bewilderment” that both lies at the source of Foucault’s intellectual project and is the effect that project so often provokes in us. These recollections include attending Foucault’s lectures in 1980 at the Collège de France, *The Government of the Living*, where it was clear that Foucault was exploring “spiritual continents” that both he and his audience were in many ways unprepared to fully appreciate and where the sense of bewilderment was palpable in the lecture hall. But it is this sense of bewilderment – both surprise and amusement – that Bernauer worries we are likely to miss when we approach the new volume with our ready-made interpretations in hand. In our effort to demonstrate how

this newly published work fits into an intellectual itinerary we are all too familiar with, we risk overlooking the rich and strange experience of the flesh Foucault found in the early Christian Fathers. Foucault's painstaking account of the ancient art of virginity, which was so central to the early Christians, exemplifies the extent to which this experience remains irreducible to the terms we are likely to impose upon it. Rather than the familiar categories of desire, law, and repression, or even of the struggle of the flesh and the spirit, Bernauer argues that the art of virginity testifies to an experience of the flesh "that is both incarnational (witnessing to godly presence) and seditious (reminding us of our fallen state)". He speculates that Foucault's own bewilderment in face of this experience was a major motive driving him to reconceive his plans for the *History of Sexuality* series. Perhaps the extensive and ever-growing scholarly commentary on Foucault's work that has elucidated his project in so many ways has, nevertheless, obscured important dimensions of that work that do not mesh easily with well-established categories. In particular, Bernauer alerts us to the fact that Foucault's abiding and profound engagement with religious experience, and in particular Christian and Catholic experience, has been too often overlooked or reduced to that familiar set of categories – pastoral power, confessional technologies, desire, and repression. He argues that engaging with the religious experience evoked by the "Catholic Foucault" in all of its richness and strangeness may lead us to surprising new insights into forms of subjectivity and counter-conduct, as it did for Foucault.

In "Foucault's Keystone: *Confessions of the Flesh*: How the Fourth and Final Volume of *The History of Sexuality* Completes Foucault's Critique of Modern Western Society", Bernard Harcourt makes the bold claim that *Confessions of the Flesh* does nothing less than provide us the "long awaited completion" of Foucault's "intellectual project". Harcourt figures this intellectual project as centred on the critique of the modern forms of governing that culminate in neoliberal governmental rationality. This project took shape in Foucault's studies of the relations of power and knowledge in works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality vol 1*. When Foucault turned to ancient Greek practices for constituting ethical subjects of sexual pleasures (*aphrodisia*), many readers were disappointed because it appeared to them as if he abandoned the politically relevant study of power. But Foucault's turn to the practices of ethical subjectivity in his final period, Harcourt argues, does not represent a repudiation or displacement of the earlier work on relations of power and knowledge but rather continues it. Foucault's previous studies had shown the extent to which subjects are effects of the constituting work of technologies of power-knowledge relations. These studies also led him to the insight that the dimension of subjectivity could not be fully reduced to the functions of the other two dimensions. The critical genealogy of modern forms of governing, then, cannot be complete until subjectivity is taken fully into account not only as an effect of the first two, power and knowledge, but also as a dimension of experience interrelated with them though irreducible to them. Harcourt argues that *Confessions of the Flesh* completes Foucault's project by showing us the sources of modern subjectivity in the ancient arts of the self that the early Christians developed around the experience of the flesh and

sexual desire. This final volume of the *History of Sexuality* series culminates in Foucault's reading of Augustine, which, Harcourt argues, provides the final piece of the critical project. It is in Augustine that the juridical subject of rights emerges out of a reflection on the ethics of sexual relations in the context of the marriage relation. This juridical subjectivity will come to play a key role in the formation of the modern governmental configuration. In this way, Harcourt claims, *Confessions of the Flesh* closes the circle, showing how the analysis of the history of sexuality and the genealogy of the practices by which individuals constituted themselves as ethical subjects of sexual desire and pleasure gives rise to the juridical subject that eventually will become integrated into modern forms of governing the self and others.

In "What is a desiring man?", Agustín Colombo (F.R.S – FNRS, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium) investigates the *History of Sexuality's* key concept of "desiring man" in light of *Confessions of the Flesh*. In order to do so, he analyses Foucault's diagnosis of the development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" by Christianity, which closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. As he shows, the "principle of desiring man" on which the "modifications" of *The History of Sexuality* pivots constitutes a further elaboration of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence". The analysis of the two main components of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" (i.e., John Cassian's hermeneutics of thoughts and Augustine's account of libido) shows that Foucault's diagnosis proves to be problematic. This is because Cassian's and Augustine's different accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition complicates the interplay of these components. These problematic aspects of Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" allows us to grasp the extent to which the *History of Sexuality* project was prematurely curtailed by Foucault's death. However, it also reveals the crucial importance that the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* has. If, as it seems, Foucault's diagnosis of the "principle of desiring man" proves to be problematic, can we affirm that this principle was developed within the Christian experience of the flesh? If not, then when and how was this principle elaborated? Did Christianity build up the idea that the truth of individuals, what individuals "are", should be deciphered through desire? The final volume of *History of Sexuality* actually seems to reopen the main genealogical hypotheses of Foucault's whole project. In doing so, the book suggests that the role that Christianity plays within *History of Sexuality* should be reconsidered. A possible new line of investigation regarding Augustine's perspective on desire as a matter of "identity" is suggested in the conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank *Foucault Studies* editorial board, especially Sverre Raffnsøe and Daniele Lorenzini, for their support and for having received with enthusiasm, from the beginning, the idea of dedicating a special issue to Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. We want to express our gratitude to *Foucault Studies* Managing editor, Signe Macholm Müller, for her excellent work. We would also like to thank *Foucault Studies* staff involved in the preparation of the front cover of this special issue. Finally, we are immensely grate-

ful to the authors who accepted participating in this special issue. Without the commitment and the extraordinary work of all these people, this special issue would not have been possible.

ARTICLE

Foucault's Concept of Confession

PHILIPPE BÜTTGEN

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

ABSTRACT. Setting out from the difficulty of translating the Foucauldian notion of *aveu*, this paper proposes an account of Foucault's concept of confession in the years 1979-1983 surrounding the writing of *Confessions of the Flesh*. I focus on Foucault's relative failure to bring together the complementary dimensions of confession as confession of sins and confession of faith in early Christianity. Foucault's attempts to tackle this challenge nonetheless reveal a number of crucial aspects of his thought throughout the 1970s, e.g., the critique of the notion of ideology and the role that critique played in the setting of Foucault's "critical philosophy of veridictions". A comparison with the lectures given at Louvain and the Collège de France suggests that Foucault took an original and rather solitary path in *Confessions of the Flesh*, which may explain the surprises awaiting the reader. Finally, I propose an explanation of Foucault's final shift away from Christian confession towards Greek *parrhesia*, pointing to the key role of the idea of a "duty of truth". This idea led Foucault to an original approach to confession and the illocutionary force of statements.

Keywords: Foucault, confession of sins, confession of faith, creed, veridiction, ideology.

The translator of *Les Aveux de la chair* is confronted with a number of challenges, the most puzzling of which lies in the very notion of 'aveu'. Modern French draws a fairly sharp distinction between 'aveu' and 'confession', reserving the latter for religious contexts, while 'aveu' encompasses both the private and judicial spheres. The distinction between the notions of 'avowal', 'admission' and 'confession' in English is not exactly parallel to the French, the English 'confession' being much more widely used than 'avowal'. Rendering *Les Aveux de la chair* by *Confessions of the Flesh* is in a sense correct (at least as far as the title of the book is concerned), for 'confession' is indeed a more general notion, just as 'aveu' is in French. On the other hand, this translation necessarily overlooks the way Foucault played with ordinary significations as he avoided the religious connotations usually associated in French with the word 'confession'.

The paradox of Foucault's book lies in the fact that, while obviously concentrating on early Christianity and dealing with the religious practice of confession, it apparently refers through 'aveux' to a broader range of signification. Yet it is not easy to determine

what kind of additional meanings those ‘aveux’ should bear, for the context of Foucault’s study is clearly (and, in a sense, solely) a religious one. Foucault may have aimed to remind his readers of his earlier discussions relating to judicial admission in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and to the “confessing animal” (“bête d’aveu”) in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976).¹ The same holds for his lectures given at the Collège de France on the *Abnormal* that inaugurated Foucault’s reflection on confession in the years 1974-1975.²

This is certainly more than a conjecture. It would be misleading, however, to assume that the issue of subjectivity, for example, could by itself provide the missing link between the notion of confession in the study of modern and contemporary disciplinary techniques and its use in Foucault’s study of early Christianity. On the contrary, an interesting feature of Foucault’s early analysis of judicial avowal in *Discipline and Punish* is that it explicitly proceeded without referring to the notion of a confessing self, as if the self would *not* be needed at all.³ Foucault’s later critical interventions in the field of legal psychiatry may have contributed to a first unified approach to both issues in his work. This has led to the following statement of 1978, which may be just another translator’s crux: “au-delà de l’aveu, il faut une confession”, “beyond the avowal [of one’s crime], a confession [of the criminal] is needed”.⁴

In fact, it was only later that all strands really came together in Foucault’s thought. The Berkeley and Dartmouth lectures on “Subjectivity and Truth” and “Christianity and Confession” (1980) have filled the conceptual gap between confession and the self through the idea of a “genealogy of the self” in which the confession of one’s sins was to play a major part.⁵ This “genealogy” might be only too well known by now. Indeed, it has provided the basis for the first studies on Foucault on confession.⁶

A more interesting point is that the Foucauldian self actually *ceased to confess* shortly after Foucault had officially engaged (or simply announced) the “genealogy of the self” in the early 1980s. In the lectures *The Government of Self and Others* of 1982-1983, the self achieved some new kind of accomplishment through another sort of speech: no longer the self-pitying discourse of the Christian flesh confessing its sins but the glorious wager of the *parrhesia*, the truth-telling of the ancient Greeks, whose “politics of truth” quickly replaced the “genealogy of the self” amongst Foucault’s main interests.⁷

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1995), 35–47; *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction [=The Will to Knowledge]* [1976] (1979), 59.

² Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* [1999] (2003). See also Michel Foucault, *Théories et institutions pénales. Cours au Collège de France (1971-1972)*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt *et alii* (2015), 204–208, sp. 207: “toute une éthique et une théologie de l’aveu de vérité”, a seminal phrase for Foucault’s later evolution.

³ See Philippe Büttgen, “Aveu et confession,” in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini (2021), 85–107.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “L’évolution de la notion d’‘individu dangereux’ dans la psychiatrie légale du XIX^e siècle” [1978], in *Dits et écrits* Vol. 3, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 444.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Confession,” “Christianity and Confession” [1980], in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (1997), 171–198, 199–236.

⁶ See, e.g., Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession. A Genealogy of the ‘Confessing Animal’* (2009); James Bernauer, “Confessions of the Soul,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (2005), 557–572.

⁷ See Torsten Bech Dyrberg, *Foucault and the Politics of Parrhesia* (2014); Petra Gehring and Andreas Gelhard (ed.), *Parrhesia: Foucault und der Mut zur Wahrheit* (2012); Daniele Lorenzini, “Performative, Passionate, and

It is important to take a close look at this shift in the late Foucault. The correct interpretation of *Confessions of the Flesh* depends on it. A striking feature of the book is that the confession itself apparently vanishes from the middle of *Confessions of the Flesh*. At some point, Foucault's perspective suddenly changes. After part 1, he abruptly interrupts his study of the doctrines and rituals of Christian penance. He then turns to the Patristic theologies of virginity (part 2) and of the goods of marriage (part 3). The Christian flesh is obviously involved in those middle and last parts of the study. But is it still really *confessing* anything?

This sudden shift of interest in *Confessions of the Flesh* gives an important insight into the intellectual evolution of the last Foucault. According to Frédéric Gros, Foucault must have written the final manuscript of *Confessions of the Flesh* in the years 1981-1982,⁸ i.e., at some point between the lectures on the "genealogy of the self" in the United States and the last lectures on *parrhesia* at the Collège de France. More importantly perhaps, I think that this shift in Foucault's last years is a shift *in the confession itself*. By this I mean a kind of internal fluctuation inside the notion of confession itself, from one meaning to another, namely from the "deciphering of oneself as a subject of desire" through religious penance⁹ to the proclamation of truth through political *parrhesia*.

At this point, it seems that we have moved far beyond the challenges of translation. The challenge relating to the correct translation of the Foucauldian "aveux" has turned into a more fundamental one. In the following, I will focus on Foucault's relative failure to bring together the various dimensions of confession as confession of sins *and* confession of faith in early Christianity. Foucault's attempts to tackle this challenge reveal, nonetheless, a number of crucial issues of his thought throughout the 1970s. A comparison with the lectures given at Louvain and the Collège de France suggests that Foucault took an original and rather solitary path in *Confessions of the Flesh*, which may reflect the reader's first impression that his discussion of confession suddenly breaks down. Finally, I propose an explanation of Foucault's final shift away from Christian confession towards Greek *parrhesia*, pointing to the key role of the idea of a "duty of truth". This idea led Foucault to an original approach to confession and the illocutionary force of statements.

SILENT WORDS OF THE SPEAKING FLESH

Foucault's paradox in *Confessions of the Flesh* can now be reformulated. On the one hand, Foucault suggests that he operates with a broader notion of confession ('aveu') that might echo his former inquiries into judicial and psychiatric disciplines. Yet, on the other hand, his concept of Christian confession is strangely narrow. Foucault is exclusively interested in the confession of sins (*confessio peccatorum*), systematically underplaying the role of the confession (or profession) of faith (*confessio fidei*) in early Christianity. The model set up

Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force," *Critical Inquiry* 41:2 (2015), 254–268.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh* (*The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 4) [2018] (2021), x.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth" [1984], in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 260.

by Augustine for the concept of confession was even threefold, as one knows, adding the confession of praise (*confessio laudis*). By the time of Foucault's first lectures on early and mediaeval Christianity (*Abnormal*, 1974-1975; *On the Government of the Living*, 1979-1980), patristic scholarship had long provided all information relating to the complex semantics of *confessio*.¹⁰ The study of early Christianity corroborates that the formal admission of one's sins is but one aspect of the overall problem of confession; obviously the most important one when it comes to one's sexuality, but not when it comes to the confession itself. Foucault's somewhat mysterious statement of 1978: "au-delà de l'aveu, il faut une confession" therefore makes sense, at least if one adds that "beyond the confession" (of the sins) there still must be a confession or even two (of faith, of praise).

At this point, one may ask: is it because Foucault did not consider the whole essence of confession that his theory of confession ('aveu') eventually fell short in *Confessions of the Flesh*? And is the striking absence of any reference to Augustine's *Confessions* in Foucault's manuscript to be explained by the fact that this work carefully calibrates the three dimensions of confession in a way that is not compatible with Foucault's construction?¹¹

The first part of *Confessions of the Flesh* deals with a "different type of experience", a difference that, according to Foucault, transcended the continuity of pagan and Christian sexual "codes" through a "certain mode of relation of oneself with oneself, and a certain relation between the wrongful and the true": Foucault, after the Church Fathers, names it "flesh".¹² How is flesh, taken as a "form of experience" and a "form of subjectivity", identified as a *sinner's* flesh? Foucault's answer is twofold. The first answer points to "penitential discipline", a set of procedures that came along with the baptism of converts and the formal forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, the so-called "second penance". A second answer lies in "monastic asceticism" as a way for the flesh to experience itself. In both "practices" of penance and asceticism, Foucault says, "nullification of evil", "manifestation of truth" and the "knowledge and transformation of oneself by oneself" flowed together.¹³

The confession of sins first regarded penitential discipline as *exomologesis* and *confessio*¹⁴; it was then additionally incorporated into the practices of monastic asceticism under the form of the so-called *exagoreusis*, i.e., the close examination of one's thoughts (*cogitationes*) under the guidance of a director of conscience. These are the two main steps in Foucault's account of confession.¹⁵ How are they related with what *we* now call confession of sins?

¹⁰ See, e.g., Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (1950); Joseph Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der 'Confessio'," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 3/4 (1957), 376–392.

¹¹ See Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 42–46 for an alternative, though less plausible explanation: Augustine's *Confessions* are first and foremost a confession of faith, associated with the "climatic moment" of conversion.

¹² Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–78, 101–110.

Foucault here gives a nuanced answer. Among the “truth procedures” pertaining to penitential discipline (*exomologesis*) according to Tertullian, Cyprian and Jerome, he draws an “axis of the verbal and the non-verbal”.¹⁶ Along this line, Foucault goes on to emphasize within confession what first went beyond (or stood below) the “verbalization of sins committed”,¹⁷ such as tears, self-inflicted wounding, prostrations, etc., which were not meant to “tell the truth” but to “do the truth”.¹⁸ An example for this was the Roman matron Fabiola (fourth century CE), whose public penance (“ritual of *exomologesis*”) at the Lateran basilica after the death of her second consort had to be viewed primarily as a “penitential drama” rather than an articulated discourse of self-disclosure.¹⁹

According to Foucault, the extensive “verbalization” of one’s sins appeared at a relatively late stage in the history of Christian penance, although the Church has always been careful to maintain the dramatic, objective and thereby shareable aspect of public confession. The problem, if one were to formulate it in the language of the sources, is that of the *expositio casus*, i.e., the spoken part of penance. Starting from a merely preliminary step of the ceremonial, the *expositio casus* has developed throughout the Middle Ages into a key-element of the “penitential rite”.²⁰ A decisive transition in this regard was provided by the “examination-confession” (“examen-aveu”), which put the emphasis on the *virtus confessionis*.²¹

Let us summarize: the flesh of *Confessions of the Flesh* does not only speak. Its “experience” and “exercise” are not only made of words.²² Foucault’s originality in *Confessions of the Flesh* lies without doubt in the focus put on the silent part of penance, which the notion of confession had to take on; a speechless confession. The flesh always confesses, even if it does not speak. Foucault insists that for early Christian writers the involuntary motions of the flesh were confessions as well; the male erection, for example, so much feared by Augustine, was a confession of the sinning flesh, a kind of ‘aveu de la chair’ that is *not* a ‘confession’.²³

It is interesting to note here that Foucault, while writing *Confessions of the Flesh*, was simultaneously developing a pragmatics of confession as a “speech act”. A trace of those reflections is to be found in the Louvain lectures *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* of 1981. They are significantly absent from *Confessions of the Flesh*. The book takes an alternative path (also, at that time, a rather solitary one): Foucault underplays the “critical philosophy of veridictions” developed in the Louvain lectures²⁴ and focuses instead on what the Dartmouth lecture on “Christianity and Confession” had called the “ontological temptation” of early Christianity, as opposed to a “constant

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* [2012] (2014), 102.

¹⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68–69; see Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 202, 207, 212.

²⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 67.

²¹ Ibid., 101–110.

²² See *ibid.*, 35, 39, 46–47, etc.

²³ Ibid., 265–266.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* [2012] (2014), 20.

verbalization” viewed as its “epistemological temptation”.²⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh* may be read as Foucault’s great phenomenological book, together with *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963): the ‘flesh’, no doubt, required it, just like the ‘medical gaze’ did twenty years earlier.

Is this the reason why Foucault suddenly stops dealing with confession after the first part of the book? For the flesh, for sure, sets forth its “exercise” in virginity and marriage – albeit silently, or with other words than those of confession. Foucault’s book indeed has a unity – but is it the same for his notion of confession? Even in the few passages of *Confessions of the Flesh* in which Foucault explicitly refers to the semantics of *confessio* in early Christianity, he insists that confession was to be defined as “a general act by which one is recognized being a sinner”.²⁶ He thereby refers to some sort of action which cannot be subsumed into the sole *confessio oris*, the confession of the mouth, “as it will be found later at the heart of the penitential rite”.²⁷ This “general act” however, according to Foucault, did not extend to the confession of faith.

This is all the more striking as the confession of faith has actually been associated with confession of sins throughout the history of confession in Christianity. Foucault briefly mentions a rule in that sense in Hippolytus of Rome’s *Apostolic Tradition* (215 CE), without drawing the necessary conclusions as to the unity of confession in early (and later) Christianity.²⁸ Here it is clear that Foucault draws a rather schematic sketch of the historical development of confession along the “axis of the verbal and the non-verbal” at the expense of the unity of penance and faith that has long been testified in the history of the Christian Churches.

CONFESSION AND IDEOLOGY

By contrast, the lectures contemporary to the writing of *Confessions of the Flesh* developed a complete approach to the semantics of confession that also included the pragmatics of avowal I previously referred to in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. The absence of these semantics and pragmatics from *Confessions of the Flesh* is all the more striking in as much as Foucault borrowed the materials for his book from these lectures. In the next two sections, I will show how this approach to confession reshaped Foucault’s philosophical project in the years 1979-1982, and how it may pertain to today’s philosophical concerns.

In the lectures *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault first justifies his choice to exclude the confession of faith from his discussion of the “historical problem of the formation of a relation between the government of men and truth acts”. A confession of faith immediately relates to a *doctrine*:

It is, of course, a regime of truth constituted by a body of doctrine that, [on the one hand,] depends upon a permanent reference to a text and, on the other hand, refers to an

²⁵ Foucault, “Christianity and Confession,” 228.

²⁶ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

institution that is also permanent, and that changes and maintains something as enigmatic as tradition. So, a body of doctrine, but also truth acts required from the faithful, non-reflexive truth acts, but truth acts in the form of beliefs, acts of faith, professions of faith.²⁹

Shortly before, Foucault provides a general definition of what an "act of truth" is, namely the "insertion of the subject (...) in the procedures of manifestation of truth" or "the part that falls on a subject in the procedures of alethurgy", the production of truth.³⁰ Within those procedures the "insertion of the subject" follows three main modes, depending on the role the subject takes as an "operator", a "spectator" or the "object itself of alethurgy".³¹

Foucault's decision not to consider the confession of faith is tacitly justified by the idea of some reflexive virtue or property supposedly inherent to superior forms of alethurgy, as the subject finds a way to identify her- or himself as an "object in the procedures of truth manifestation", e.g., in the confessions of her or his sins.³² The "act of confession", Foucault says, is a matter of (actively) discovering and "exploring" oneself, whereas the "act of faith" is merely a matter of (passively) "accepting" a doctrine and "adhering" to it:

The regimes of faith and confession in Christianity are very different, since what is involved in the case of faith is adherence to an inviolable and revealed truth in which the role of an individual, and therefore the truth act, the point of subjectivation is essentially in accepting this content and in agreeing to demonstrate that one accepts it – this is the meaning of the profession of faith, of the act of profession of faith – whereas in the other case, in confession, it is not at all a matter of adhering, but of exploring individual secrets, and of exploring them endlessly. We can say, more or less, from the point of view that interests us here at any rate, that Christianity has been constantly traversed by this extraordinary tension between the two regimes of truth, the regime of faith and the regime of confession.³³

Foucault's assumption of the superiority of the (active, reflexive) act of avowal over the (quasi-passive, pre-reflexive) act of faith may appear surprisingly traditional through the kind of depreciation of belief it implies. The interesting thing about this reformulation of the age-old faith-knowledge problem, however, is that it takes place in a discussion of *confession*. For confession actually *is* the regime of truth that breaks down into adherence and self-exploration. Foucault may not have drawn all consequences from such a theoretical shift that has put the notion of confession at the center of a theory of truth. After all, the notion of an "act of truth" itself is borrowed by Foucault from the scholastic doctrines of penance as a sacrament, with its three components, *actus contritionis*, *actus satisfactionis*,

²⁹ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81, see 6–7 on alethurgy.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 82 (translation modified).

³³ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

and *actus veritatis*.³⁴ But this, in turn, may reflect the priority Foucault has always given to the confession of sins over the confession of faith.

Foucault's choices are significant. He assumes that creeds and confessions of faith can only be looked at as "bodies of doctrines". The only kind of analysis that may be relevant here is "ideological", i.e., based on the "ideological nature of the content of the dogma and beliefs".³⁵ This is partly misleading: what is also fascinating about creeds is the illocutionary force of their statements, with all the religious and political implications this "force" carries with itself, and the type of attitude these statements imply towards one's belief. This attitude can be, precisely, reflexive, of this particular kind of reflexivity that characterizes illocutionary statements in many rituals.³⁶ The confession of faith can indeed, as well as the confession of sins, be viewed "in terms of truth acts" that are no less interesting as those of penance.³⁷

Foucault's obsessive concern with the notion of ideology throughout the 1970s, his critique of "ideological analysis" as an inadequate way of interpreting discourse, certainly explains the absence of the notion of confession of faith in *Confessions of the Flesh*. "I have insisted on this rejection of ideological analysis many times. I have returned to it, I think, in practically all the annual courses I have given".³⁸ It is also important to note that this critique of ideological analysis accompanied the introduction of religious issues into Foucault's thought, e.g., in *Security, Territory, Population* in 1977-1978.³⁹ Nevertheless, this may now all sound a bit outdated. Quite obviously, Foucault's discussion of confession also bears the wounds of his life-long fight against Marxist orthodoxy. The question is whether we still can find some use for Foucault's critique in that respect. A lesson that can be drawn is that the critique of ideological analysis, as well as the critique of ideologies itself, prevents one from claiming any method that would be particularly designed for the study of religion. This already had been the scope of the critique of religion in Marx, which does not need to develop particular means to target religion but, on the contrary, uses the notion of ideology as a tool for *not* essentializing religion – *indifferentiating* it, as it were, as a product of ideology among many others. Viewed from their result, both Foucauldian and Marxist critiques do stand in some sort of continuity with each other.

THE RELIGION OF CONFESSION

Indeed, Foucault did not entirely ignore the confession of faith. Having noticed "the extraordinary tension between the two regimes of truth, the regime of faith and the regime of confession", he then adds:

³⁴ Ibid., 80–81.

³⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁶ See Philippe Büttgen, "Formules de foi et d'attestation," *Philosophie* 145 (2020), 30–46.

³⁷ *On the Government of the Living*, 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 75–76.

³⁹ See Craig Martin, "Ideology and the Study of Religion: Marx, Althusser, and Foucault," *Religion Compass* 7:9 (2013), 402-411; Philippe Büttgen, "Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62:5 (2009), 1129–1154, sp. 1142–1143.

That there has been profound tension does not mean that there have been two heterogeneous and unrelated regimes. After all, we should not forget that the notion of confession, the meaning of the word "confession" in the Latin Church, is precisely at the fork, as it were, of these two regimes (...) So, Christianity is, at bottom, essentially, the religion of confession, to the extent that the confession is the hinge of the regime of faith and the regime of confession of self (*aveu*), and, seen from this perspective, Christianity is underpinned by two regimes of truth.⁴⁰

In the Dartmouth lecture "Christianity and Confession", given the same year, Foucault added in a somewhat hesitant English: "As everybody knows, Christianity is a confession".⁴¹ How are the confessions of the flesh exactly related to that "religion of confession"? Here is an attempt in that direction in 1981:

It seems to me that an absolutely fundamental aspect of Christianity is that it is a religion bearing two sets, two types, two modes of obligation for truth. On the one hand, there is an obligation to believe in revealed truth or dogma; this is also the truth of the text. And on the other, in Christianity, [either] through the exomologesis (...) or the exagoreusis (...), in all this we see the appearance of an obligation of truth. This obligation does not take the form of believing in dogma, nor does it take the form of an act of faith. Rather, it is an obligation of truth that takes the form of the necessary exploration of oneself, of the necessary discovery of a truth within the self, of the fundamental obligation to tell this truth. Truth of the text, truth of the self. Truth of the text, truth of the soul. Hermeneutics of the text, hermeneutics of the self.⁴²

In a similar way, as we have seen, the *Government of the Living* lectures commented on confession being at the crossroads (the "fork") of two regimes of truth. Here Foucault goes on to insist that between the obligation to believe and the obligation to discover oneself "there is an affiliation", a "fundamental connection".⁴³ In Christianity, the revealed truth of the confession of faith has to connect with the revelation of oneself through the confession of sins.⁴⁴

CONFESSION AND THE DUTY OF TRUTH

Foucault's thoughts on the entanglement of faith and penance in an overall regime of confession found their way to only one limited section in *Confessions of the Flesh*. This text is nonetheless crucial.

Appendix 3 of the edition provided by Frédéric Gros includes a separate set of reflections that Foucault might have intended to insert into his discussion of "second penance" dealing with the "fundamental character of the truth obligation (...) as a precondition for

⁴⁰ *On the Government of the Living*, 84.

⁴¹ "Christianity and Confession," 200.

⁴² Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 165–166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

possible redemption".⁴⁵ The main text develops reflections on the confessions of Adam and Eve, and of King David acknowledging his sins, and, on the other hand, on Cain's "refusal of truth" after murdering his brother Abel. In Appendix 3, these reflections find a continuation through the reading by Foucault of a chain of exegesis including texts by John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine.⁴⁶ Foucault here comments on the "obedience to the principle of truth-telling", an obvious echo to the "critical philosophy of veridictions" he presented at the same time in his lectures on *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*.⁴⁷

This shift is significant. As already shown, part 1 of *Confessions of the Flesh* essentially focusses not on 'truth-telling' but on 'truth-doing' in the beginnings of Christian penance, with an accent on the non-spoken part of the penance ritual. Here, on the contrary, non-verbal manifestations of penance (e.g., Adam and Eve's sudden shame of nudity after committing sin) are deciphered through a language code that displays a correlation between the "obligation of truth in relation to transgressions" and the "obligation of truth in relation to Revelation".⁴⁸ The "fundamental connection" between revealed truth and self-revelation mentioned in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* comes here to the foreground. At the core of Cain's drama, Augustine saw an inner relation between a "call to recognize the truth of his crime" and the "call to recognize the truth of the Gospel". Augustine thereby reinforced a shift that according to Foucault was already to be identified in Ambrose and Chrysostom, namely "from the avowal (*aveu*) of faults to faith in the Gospel".⁴⁹

At this point, Foucault is in the position to take up again the semantics of Christian confession:

Truth-telling and believing, veridiction in regard to oneself and faith in the Word are or should be inseparable. The duty of truth, as belief and as confession, is at the center of Christianity. The two traditional meanings of the word "confession" include these two aspects. In a general way, "confession" is the recognition of the duty of truth.⁵⁰

In a somewhat indirect way, without referring to *Confessions* and quoting instead from *Contra Faustum* (XII, 10), Foucault's exegetical reflections finally recognize Augustine's major role in the history of the Christian theory and practice of confession. Foucault here reintegrates flesh into a Christian regime of veridiction that seemed relatively under-developed throughout the manuscript. In addition to the parallel sections in the lectures from the years 1979-1981 at Louvain and the Collège de France, *Confessions of the Flesh*, at least in that Appendix, manifest a concern about "faith" that might open new horizons in his thought.

⁴⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 315–320, see 74–75.

⁴⁶ See Sébastien Morlet, "L'exégèse d'une exégèse: Foucault, lecteur de Chrysostome", in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini (2021), 139–158.

⁴⁷ *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 320.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

CHRISTIAN CONFESSION AND GREEK PARRHESIA

The horizon here is an ethical one, including “faith” and the “duty of truth”. This might be no surprise to readers of Foucault. I think, however, that new light may be shed on Foucault’s so-called “ethical turn” by trying to situate the “duty of truth” within the process that led Foucault away from Christian confession to *parrhesia* in Classical and Hellenistic Greek sources. In Foucault’s late thought, the idea of a duty of truth is a pivotal notion; it brings us back to my first question as to the transitional role of Christian confession for Foucault and its replacement by the notion of *parrhesia*.

In the notion of a “duty of truth,” Foucault’s analytics of the flesh and semantics of confession finally come together. The “duty of truth” connects the confessions of the flesh to the kind of “obligation” that according to Foucault may define every possible regime of truth:

By regime of truth I mean that which constrains individuals to a certain number of truth acts (...). Roughly speaking, a regime of truth is that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth.⁵¹

This is a key text: in *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault achieves a kind of synthesis of the “regimes of production of truth” in *Discipline and Punish* and the “regime of confession (*aveu*)” first mentioned in *The Will to Knowledge*.⁵² This synthesis expands on the lectures of 1982-1983 on *The Government of Self and Others*. In these lectures, truth obligation is formulated for the first time as an issue *for philosophy*, “the philosophical question of the relationship between the obligation of truth and the practice of truth”.⁵³

The discussion here takes place within a new framework that Foucault defines as that of a “general dramatics of true discourse”.⁵⁴ He thereby insists on what distinguishes this new project from a “pragmatics of discourse”.⁵⁵ Strangely enough, his discussion makes *parrhesia* “the opposite of the performative”,⁵⁶ which is quite a nonsense from an Austinian point of view. For what would it mean to say that performative utterances have an *opposite*?

However the complex relationship between “pragmatics of discourse” and “pragmatics of the self” may be looked at in the late Foucault,⁵⁷ one more connection is to be established within the rich network of concepts relating to confession in his work. For the “general dramatics of true discourse” in *The Government of Self and Others* clearly echoes the “drama” or “dramaturgy” Foucault dealt with in the last lectures of *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. At that time, “dramatic” was already conceived of as a notion alternative to that

⁵¹ *On the Government of the Living*, 92–93.

⁵² See Büttgen, “Aveu et confession,” 104.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* [2008] (2011), 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁷ See Lorenzini, “Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance”; “Foucault et la force des mots: de l’extralinguistique à la subjectivation,” *Phantasia* 8 (2019).

of the performative. Judicial avowal according to Foucault is neither performative nor “symbolic” but “dramatic”:

If one understands the “dramatic” not as a mere ornamental addition, but as every element in a scene that brings forth the foundation of legitimacy and the meaning of what is taking place, then I would say that avowal is part of the judicial and penal drama.⁵⁸

Let us now turn more closely to the other “dramatics” in Foucault, namely the dramatics relating to *parrhesia*. Foucault’s critique of what he called the “pragmatics of discourse” is a perplexing case. Notwithstanding the somewhat nonsensical mention of an “opposite of the performative” I have just referred to, Foucault certainly remains true to Austin’s inspiration when he insists that performative utterances are not a matter of sincerity but only of “authority”, for “there does not have to be an, as it were, personal relationship between the person making the utterance and the utterance itself for the latter to be performative”.⁵⁹ He does that, however, primarily in order to highlight the contrast with parrhesiastic truth-telling utterances. These, Foucault says, do not allow the subject’s “personal” position towards her or his own saying to be “indifferent”.⁶⁰ What distinguishes parrhesiastic from performative utterances is a kind of commitment of the speaking subject to what he or she is saying. Foucault defines this commitment as follows:

(...) the parrhesiastic enunciation is the affirmation that in fact one genuinely thinks, judges, and considers the truth one is saying to be genuinely true. I tell the truth, and I truly think that this is true that I am telling the truth when I say it.⁶¹

This aspect he calls the “doubling or intensification of the statement of the truth by the statement of the truth of the fact that I think this truth and that, thinking it, I say it”: the “affirmation of the affirmation”.

At this point one can note that this definition exactly applies to the confession of faith, viewed as the reflexive statement of the truth of the statements of faith through liturgy. At that time, however, Foucault had already left the Christians for the Greeks, shifting towards the “eccentric centrality” of *parrhesia* in his work, as Étienne Balibar calls it.⁶² This was his *rendez-vous manqué* with the confession of faith and with an approach to the phenomenon of Christian doctrine that may reach beyond the limits of mere intellectual history.

Foucault’s views regarding the “affirmation of the affirmation” were indeed not new in 1983. I think that their source lies in the discussion of the *Government of the Living* lectures of 1979-1980 on regimes and games of truth. It is this discussion that also gave the impulse to the discussion on the “duty of truth” we read in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Against the objection that “the truth is sufficient unto itself to make its own law”, Foucault argues:

⁵⁸ *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 210.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Étienne Balibar, “Dire, contredire: Sur les formes de la *parrêsia* selon Foucault,” in *Libre Parole* (2018), 85.

It is not true that the truth constrains only by truth. To put things very simply, in an almost or completely infantile way, I shall say the following: in the most rigorously constructed argument imaginable, even in the event of something recognized as self-evident, there is always, and it is always necessary to assume, *a certain assertion* that does not belong to the logical realm of observation or deduction, in other words, an assertion that does not belong exactly to the realm of the true or false, that is rather *a sort of commitment, a sort of profession (une sorte d'engagement, de profession)*. In all reasoning there is always this assertion (*cette affirmation ou profession*) that consists in saying: if it is true, then I will submit; it is true, therefore I submit; it is true, therefore I am bound.⁶³

This crucial text has already been commented on.⁶⁴ I shall insist on the notion of a “profession”. Foucault connects it with the assertion of truth, strikingly echoing the profession or confession of faith. To put it in other words, truth always requires its own profession, namely a profession of truth. It is this profession that is to be viewed as the shared root, in Christianity, of the confession of sins and the confession of faith; Foucault, however, primarily let it apply to the truth-telling *parrhesia*. In another terminology, I should call it the illocutionary force of statements – the statement of one’s sins and the statement of one’s faith. Foucault rediscovered, at is were, that illocutionary force. I do not know whether his knowledge of speech act theory extended up to that particular point.⁶⁵ If so, it is not established whether Foucault referred to it in this lecture of 1980. But one thing is certain: Foucault’s discovery of the illocutionary force of statements (or, to put it in other words, of the power of declarations) stood in a complex relationship with his approach to early Christianity.

This is the point I shall make as a conclusion. Foucault certainly has grasped the unity of confession; but this sense of unity was of no real relevance for his conception of Christianity. He indeed recognized Christianity as the “religion of confession”: an inspiring phrase that should still be meditated upon. Foucault even designed tools and methods for that purpose, the most important one being the “duty of truth” in *Confessions of the Flesh*. However, that “duty” remained isolated in Foucault’s book. *Confessions of the Flesh* is, in some sense, a book on the unity of confession – but of the confession of sins, in its verbal and non-verbal manifestations. This is, certainly, Foucault’s most ‘catholic’ book; but it may be no coincidence that the discussion on confession failed precisely in that book. For the broader unity of confession is to be found elsewhere in a wider trajectory that connects Foucault’s first attempts towards a philosophy of avowal in *Discipline and Punish* to his final philosophy of *parrhesia*. It is that wider trajectory that finally gives sense to *Confessions of the Flesh*, allowing one to read the book in the light of notions absent from it, namely those of the regime, act, and obligation of truth.

⁶³ *On the Government of the Living*, 95–96 (italics mine)

⁶⁴ See Daniele Lorenzini, *La Force du vrai: De Foucault à Austin* (2017).

⁶⁵ See Michel Foucault, “‘Introduction’ à *L’Archéologie du savoir*,” ed. Martin Rueff, *Les Études philosophiques*, 153:3 (2015), 327–351, sp. 349–351; David Simonetta, “L’archive de *L’Archéologie du savoir*. Les sources anglophones (positivisme logique, logique, philosophie analytique),” in Alain de Libera, *L’Archéologie philosophique* (2016), 253–258.

Should we be surprised? Of course not, if it simply comes to contextualizing the book. But in another sense we should indeed be surprised, for Foucault found the truth of confession in *parrhesia* – thus ending where the story began, with the Greeks. From a mere internal point of view, the problem of confession sheds light on a tension between Foucault's "genealogy of the self" on the one side and his "critical philosophy of veridictions" on the other. Once again, is it so surprising that critique and genealogy, the two Kantian and Nietzschean programmes, should eventually come to collide with each other – even in Foucault? The main problem, however, is that of confession, and Foucault actually *made* it a problem for philosophy.

Foucault as the thinker of confession – but not so much of *Christian* confession. This may sound paradoxical: but for whom, actually? We all should know that the study of early Christianity was no task *per se* for Foucault. Conversely, I am quite sure that the whole essence of confession cannot be reached now without Foucault.

References

- Balibar, Étienne, "Dire, contredire: Sur les formes de la *parrêsia* selon Foucault," in *Libre Parole*, 81–125. Paris: Galilée, 2018.
- Bernauer, James, "Confessions of the soul: Foucault and Theological Culture," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31:5–6 (2005), 557–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453705055489>
- Büttgen, Philippe, "Aveu et confession," in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021, 85–107.
- Büttgen, Philippe, "Formules de foi et d'attestation," *Philosophie* 145 (2020), 30–46. <https://doi.org/10.3917/philo.145.0030>
- Büttgen, Philippe, "Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62:5 (2009), 1129–1154.
- Courcelle, Pierre, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*. Paris: de Boccard, 1950.
- Dyrberg, Torsten Bech, *Foucault and the Politics of Parrhesia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- Elden, Stuart, "The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault's History of Sexuality," *Journal for Cultural Research* 9:1 (2005), 23–41.
- Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salamoni [1999]. London: Verso, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel, "Christianity and Confession," in *The Politic of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, 199–236 [1980]. New York: Semiotext, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, *Confessions of the Flesh (The History of Sexuality, Vol. 4)*, ed. Frédéric Gros [2018]. New York: Pantheon, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975]. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel, "'Introduction' à L'Archéologie du savoir," ed. Martin Rueff, *Les Études philosophiques*, 153:3 (2015), 327–351. <https://doi.org/10.3917/leph.153.0327>

- Foucault, Michel, "L'évolution de la notion d'individu dangereux' dans la psychiatrie légale du XIXe siècle" [1978], in *Dits et écrits*, Vol. 3, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 443-464. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures of the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, ed. Michel Senellart [2012]. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel, "Subjectivity and Truth," in *The Politic of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, 171–198 [1980]. New York: Semiotext, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction [=The Will to Knowledge]* [1976]. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.
- Foucault, Michel, "The Concern for Truth," in *Michel Foucault: Politic, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, 255–270 [1984]. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros [2008]. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel, *Théories et institutions pénales. Cours au Collège de France (1971-1972)*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt et alii. Paris: EHESS/Gallimard/Seuil, 2015.
- Foucault, Michel, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt [2012]. London and Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Gehring, Petra, and Andreas Gelhard (ed.), *Parrhesia: Foucault und der Mut zur Wahrheit*. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2012.
- Lorenzini, Daniele, "Foucault et la force des mots : de l'extralinguistique à la subjectivation," *Phantasia* 8 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.25518/0774-7136.944>
- Lorenzini, Daniele, *La Force du vrai: De Foucault à Austin*. Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2017.
- Lorenzini, Daniele, "Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force," *Critical Inquiry* 41:2 (2015), 254–268. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679074>
- Lorenzini, Daniele and Tazzioli, Martina, "Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth: Foucault, Fanon, and the Making of the Subject," *Theory, Culture and Society* 35:1 (2018), 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416678291>
- Landry, Jean-Michel, "Confession, Obedience, and Subjectivity: Michel Foucault's Unpublished Lectures *On the Government of the Living*," *Telos* 146 (2009), 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.3817/0309146111>
- Lynch, Thomas, "Confessions of the Self: Foucault and Augustine," *Telos* 146 (2009), 124–139. <https://doi.org/10.3817/0309146124>
- Martin, Craig, "Ideology and the Study of Religion: Marx, Althusser, and Foucault," *Religion Compass* 7:9 (2013), 402–411. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12062>
- Morlet, Sébastien, "L'exégèse d'une exégèse: Foucault, lecteur de Chrysostome," in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021, 139–158.

- Plant, Bob, "The Confessing Animal in Foucault and Wittgenstein," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34:4 (2006), 533–559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2006.00284.x>
- Ratzinger, Joseph, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der 'Confessio'," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 3/4 (1957), 376–392. <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.rea.5.103956>
- Simonetta, David, "L'archive de *L'Archéologie du savoir*. Les sources anglophones (positivisme logique, logique, philosophie analytique)," in Alain de Libera, *L'Archéologie philosophique: Séminaire du Collège de France 2013-2014*, 253–258. Paris: Vrin, 2016.
- Taylor, Chloë, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'*. London and New York, Routledge, 2009.

Author info

Philippe Büttgen

philippe.buettgen@univ-paris1.fr

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Institut des sciences juridiques et philosophiques de la Sorbonne

France

ARTICLE

Foucault's Queer Virgins: An Unfinished History in Fragments

LYNNE HUFFER

Emory University, USA

ABSTRACT. This essay attends to the place of virginity at the center of the fourth volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Confessions of the Flesh*. Reading virginity through a rhetorical lens, the essay argues for an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct in Foucault characterized by chiasmus, a rhetorical structure of inverted parallelism. That chiastic structure frames Foucault's *Confessions*, and all of his work, as a fragmented, self-hollowing speech haunted by death and the dissolution of the subject. The essay reads Foucault as apophatic speech that returns to us, no longer itself, made strange. In that deathly movement of eternal recurrence, Foucault's *Confessions* speak after death from the x'd out place of the queer virgin: on a threshold that separates life from death, in a movement of metanoia or ethical conversion. As an unfinished history in fragments, the essay's form brings attention to incompleteness as a crucial aspect of Foucault's work. The fragmentation that characterizes an unfinished history underscores poetic discontinuity as the hallmark of Foucault's genealogical method and thought.

Keywords: virginity, confession, Christianity, counter-conduct, sexuality, ethopoiesis.

1

A monk stops mid-letter, called to prayer. "His stylus lifts up abruptly and the letter it was shaping remains unfinished," Foucault writes in *Confessions of the Flesh*.¹ I imagine Foucault called away from his writing, his pen lifting, the tail of a q cut off mid-stroke. The *inachevé* is where Foucault's writing dwells, his pen still hovering over the unfinished parchment. Interrupted by death, Foucault is the monk, revenant. This is how Foucault wanted to be heard: without beginning or end, just a "slender gap"² in the path of speech.

Never finishing the last volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault slipped over the threshold of death. That threshold draws near as I read his *Confessions*. The monk called away returns as penitent. That threshold, "ce seuil," is the threshold of *metanoia*, or conversion, "when the soul does a complete turnaround, inverts all its values, and changes

¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 4: Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), 92.

² Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972), 215.

in every respect.”³ Reading Foucault’s *Confessions*, I lose myself in this experience of *metanoia*.

The experience is not always pleasant.

2

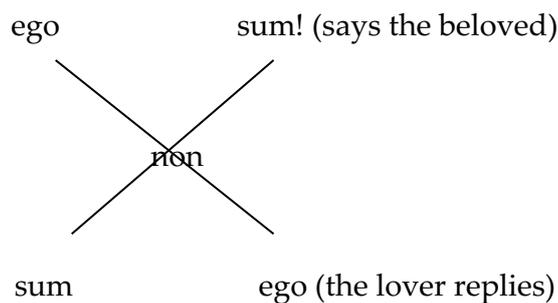
Foucault recounts a story, borrowed from Ambrose, where a young man returns home to his beloved after an absence of many years. His beloved greets him: *Ego sum*.⁴ It’s me, she says. And he, the wayward lover, replies: *Sed ego non sum ego*.⁵ But I am no longer me.

I open Foucault’s books again and again, teaching and writing about him, year after year. *History of Madness, Discipline and Punish, The Courage of Truth*. And finally this: *Confessions of the Flesh*.

Ego sum, I say. And something replies: *Sed ego non sum ego*.

3

Metanoia is the experience of chiasmus, from the Greek, “crossing,” from *chiazō*, a verb: “to shape like the letter X.”



The center of the X, *non*, is a pivot, inversion’s hinge, the disappearing center of *metanoia*’s movement. Chiasmus is apophatic: it says by unsaying. The rotation of chiastic inversion also describes what Bernard Harcourt calls “the *contre-* move”: “the movement of thought and practice” that impels what Foucault describes as counter-conduct.⁶ Counter-conduct functions as a counter-conductor, negation’s “bypass,”⁷ the conduit for a self-counteracting, pivoting movement. Chiasmus tracks its dizzying returns.

Reading Foucault is counter-conductive: I become a conduit for something bigger than I am. Some call that something God.

Ego non sum ego.

³ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 78

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bernard E. Harcourt, “*Contre-/Counter-*” (2020), 74.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1990), 13.

4

At the heart of the X there are virgins. In the middle chapter, "On the Arts of Virginité," virgins empty themselves into God. The virgin's purity is not the result of abstinence: "it comes from on high. It is a gift of God."⁸

For Foucault, early Christian virginity is not about the adoption of a severe, restrictive, and *repressive*⁹ code with regard to sexual acts. It "bypass[es], as it were, the repressive hypothesis"¹⁰ through the elaboration of subjectivity as a form. Virginity exemplifies early Christian forms of *askesis*: ethical practices of an "exercise of oneself upon oneself."¹¹ These practices organize themselves under a different sexual code than the regulatory system for marriage and procreation most often associated with Christianity. That marital-reproductive code, Foucault says, was adopted before, outside of, and to the side of Christianity.¹² Christianity is something new: its sexuality, epitomized by virginity, is a new *dispositif* formed through technologies for "la conduite des individus."¹³

"Understood in this way, virginity is something altogether different than a prohibition."¹⁴ Virginity is not about saying no to sex. Like chiasmus, as *metanoia* its purifying practices are recursive: restoration of "restoration of an original relation"¹⁵ through movements of "retournement"¹⁶ that transform individuals into conduits for God by bringing "light to one's innermost being."¹⁷ Virginity in this sense is "a singular *practice*"¹⁸ that constitutes a new form of experience. The elaboration of that experience is what Foucault calls "flesh." As a new form of experience, virgin "flesh" is new. This new, light-bringing "flesh" forms the ethical fabric of Foucault's confessions.

5

Paul said that marriage was good but virginity was better. "This notion became . . . the cornerstone for patristic discourses on the preferability of virginity" but also "a tool used against those who were thought to pursue their asceticism too rigorously."¹⁹ This too rigorous Christian asceticism can become a heretical counter-conduct. This is the threat of *metanoia*: chiasmus. Virginity forms an X with marriage. Foucault writes:

⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 13.

¹¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité vol. 4, Les Aveux de la chair* (2018), 167. "the new turn toward Paradise", *Confessions of the Flesh*, 127.

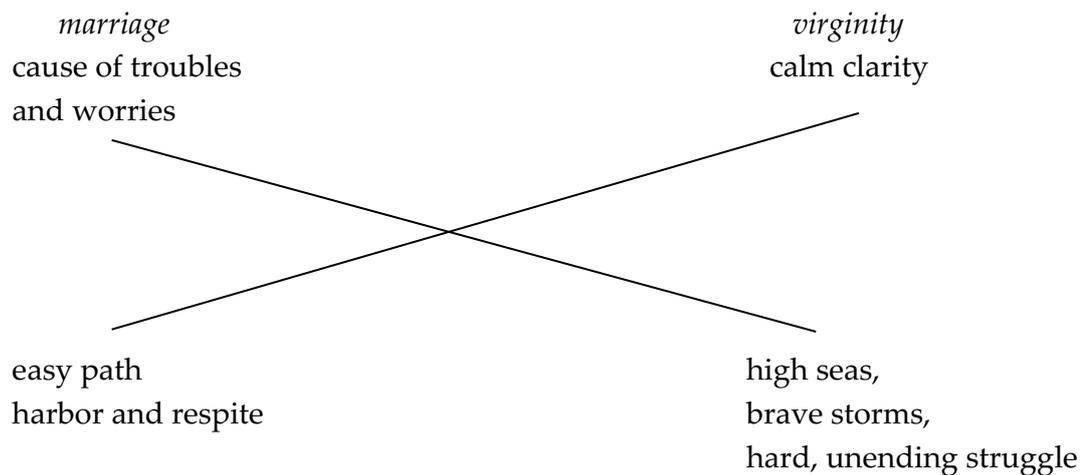
¹⁷ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116, original emphasis.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity" (1986), 68.

All through Chrysostom's treatise one can find a *chiastic* opposition: marriage is presented a cause of troubles and worries, whereas virginity brings a calm clarity to the soul; but virginity is a hard, unending struggle, while marriage is an easy path – harbor and respite, which the virgin, always on the high seas, braving storms, cannot know.²⁰

The chiasmus can be diagrammed like this:



Metanoia plunges the virgin into a storm on high seas. Her struggle there (with God) will be endless. Marriage, by contrast, turns out to be easy: “an easy path,” “harbor and respite.”²¹ Marriage is easy because it sets an earthly limit on desire and death: it is “juridical” and therefore “metahistorical.”²²

If marriage is metahistorical, that means we recognize ourselves in it. (Metahistorical history finds its “victory”²³ in us.) Virginity, on the other hand, is radically other: “other things and otherwise.”²⁴ Virginity names the strangeness of genealogical returns in which we fail to recognize ourselves: a “disturbing” heterotopia that “dessicate[s] speech.”²⁵ It stages the discontinuity of epistemic breakage: not knowing. “Discontinuity – the fact that within the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been up till then and begins to think another thing and otherwise.”²⁶ If marriage is rule-bound, virginity suspends the regulatory line that separates the ruly from the unruly. Virginity is transgressive rupture, a “caesura”²⁷ that repeats the great “caesura . . . between reason

²⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 155, translation modified.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 212-213.

²³ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (2006), xxviii.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1994), 50, translation modified. The original reads “autre chose et autrement.” Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), 64.

²⁵ Foucault, *Order of Things*, xviii. On the heterotopian mirror also see Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces” (1998).

²⁶ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

²⁷ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 154.

and non-reason,"²⁸ installing a "hollowed-out void,"²⁹ "a great space of murmurings,"³⁰ "an obscure, equivocal region."³¹ A storm on high seas, the virgin is "an agent of epistemic rupture;"³² her self-emptying practices open onto "an erosion of the outside."³³ This transgressive erosion of the outside marks virgin *metanoia* as Christian counter-conduct: Christian conduct hollowing itself out, turned against itself into an ascetic practice that recodes its rules and thereby suspends its own limits. This suspension is what Foucault calls transgression.

6

Why bother with this strange virgin genealogy? Reading Foucault's *Confessions* can be both tedious and disquieting. The Church fathers are a violent bunch, their writings sometimes dull but also frightening, condemning all things queer.

Why spend time with these traces from a distant past? Foucault's answer, in another book: "Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present."³⁴

This is how I read his *Confessions*: as a history of the present.

7

But what does this mean?

The epistemic rupture of not knowing. Virginity is strange: "other things and otherwise."³⁵ It emerges in the gap of an epistemic break, where a sexual code is recoded. Not quite knowing how to approach that void offers a way to read a past that is other to us.

Not knowing is chiasmic: the formation of an empty space where something new can happen.

8

"Taught by Nietzsche, Foucault takes up Christianity as a rhetorical provocation," Mark Jordan writes.³⁶ Chiasmus is one such provocation. But chiasmus is more than a rhetorical

²⁸ Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxviii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxix.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Judith Revel, *Foucault, Une pensée du discontinu* (2010), 132, translation mine.

³³ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified. The original reads "une érosion du dehors". Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 64. On the "outside" as a catalyst of epistemic rupture, see Judith Revel *Foucault, Une pensée du discontinu* 132. Also see Michel Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside", 147-170. For a book-length exploration of Foucault's thought of the outside see Lynne Huffer, *Foucault's Strange Eros* (2020).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

³⁵ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

³⁶ Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (2015).

trick. It is self-unsaying, apophatic: a heterotopian mirror that “destroy[s] ‘syntax,’” “stop[s] words in their tracks,” and “contest[s] the very possibility of grammar at its source.”³⁷ Chiasmus is an instance of *mise en abyme* (literally “placed in abyss”), a technical literary and aesthetic term for an interiorizing disposition of self-mirroring elements within a larger frame. André Gide offers *Hamlet’s* play within a play and Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* as examples of *mise en abyme*. Gide illustrates *mise en abyme* through the device of heraldry, where shields are embedded, in miniature, within increasingly larger shields. Chiasmus is lacunary: the segment of a work that mirrors the larger work is put *en abyme* in the act of return that is self-replication. Each repeated form “can only take on the form the previous shield prescribes for it by incorporating a new shield, which, in turn, makes a hole in it.”³⁸

Ontologically, chiasmus exposes the paradox of death as the foundation for life: “the laying of foundations”³⁹ reveals the impossibility of foundations; “a true foundation” is, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, a “foundation of foundation,” a ‘bottomless abyss’ or *mise en abyme*.⁴⁰ In the chiasmus that shapes virginity as apophatic *metanoia*—*ego sum/sum ego*—being dissolves into the abyss at the center of the X, the place of negation, life’s true foundation in self-hollowing death.

9

Chiasmus also structures Foucault’s genealogical method. From *History of Madness* to his last lecture course, *The Courage of Truth*, and here again, in *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault describes the crossing of subjectivity by a self-inverting temporal movement that empties the subject into the spiraling play of contingency. In the shift from *History of Madness* to *History of Sexuality Volume One*, for example, chiasmus is the form for what Foucault describes as the temporal shift that transforms “what was for many centuries thought of as madness” into “our [sexual] intelligibility.”⁴¹ In *The Order of Things*, in a reprise of Gide’s example of *mise en abyme* in *Las Meninas*, chiasmus appears in “that strange empirico-transcendental doublet called man,”⁴² who implodes, *en abyme*, into the “vacant space”⁴³ at the site of the X once occupied by the king. Chiasmus appears, again, in *Discipline and Punish*, when the greatest criminal of the nineteenth century reemerges as the chief of police, when the body of the king inverts itself into the “new political anatomy” of panopticism,⁴⁴ or when the Christian body-as-prison-of-the-soul becomes “the soul [as] the prison of the body.”⁴⁵ In the opening pages of *History of Sexuality Volume One*, chiasmus

³⁷ *Order of Things*, xviii.

³⁸ Lucien Dällenbach (1989), *The Mirror in the Text*, 111.

³⁹ Iddo Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed: The Ontological Significance of Mise en Abyme in Post-Heideggerian Thought* (2019), 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 156.

⁴² *Order of Things*, 318.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1995), 208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

describes what Foucault calls the "spiral" of modern sexual subjects incited to speak our sexual repression: thus we have come "to affirm that sex is negated."⁴⁶

As an ontological structure, chiasmus describes the phenomenological movement of lived experience: "Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed, and will ever run out again."⁴⁷ This is the experience of temporal inversion Nietzsche called eternal recurrence, where past, present, and future overtake the ego all at once, where horizontal time—beginning, middle, end—suddenly becomes vertical—the stacked time of the *revenant*.

10

Confessions of the Flesh. Virginité is flesh: "a singular *practice*"⁴⁸ whose elaboration forms "the Christian conception of the flesh."⁴⁹ Virgin flesh marks a moment in Foucault's life-long tracking of a "history of the confession of sexuality"⁵⁰ as "forced and obligatory confession."⁵¹ The first centuries of Christianity offer Foucault a sketch of what will become the West's nonreligious confessional technology of truth. By the 12th century, "the entire confession is structured and controlled by the priest's power,"⁵² and by the 16th century "in-depth Christianization" puts into place "an immense apparatus of discourse and examination, of analysis and control."⁵³ With the solidification of pastoral power, confession becomes generalized with a corresponding "intensification of the power of the confessor."⁵⁴ The result? "An immense discursive journey that is the continual passage of a life before a witness," "a constant discursive filter of life," "the practice of permanent autobiography."⁵⁵ Christianized flesh becomes "the correlate"⁵⁶ of this discursive system.

But this Christianized flesh also resists, "struggling, spitting, adopting negative attitudes, and uttering obscene, irreligious, blasphemous words,"⁵⁷ while "choking, breathlessness, and fainting" indicate the point where "the body is destroyed."⁵⁸ In the 16th and 17th centuries, in Loudon and other sites of collective possession, mysticism took the form of "convulsive flesh."⁵⁹ As in chiasmus, convulsion produces an effect of doubling and inversion. Resistance takes the form of a counter-conductive doubling of the nun's body penetrated by priestly technologies. Thus "the body penetrated by the right of

⁴⁶ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 9.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence*.

⁴⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* (2003), 170.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

examination and subject to the obligation of exhaustive confession" (body 1) is also "the body that bristles against this right and against this obligation" (body 2).⁶⁰ *Metanoia* transforms the body penetrated by pastoral power into "the body that opposes silence or the scream to the rule of complete discourse."⁶¹ At the height of pastoral power, that doubling of the possessed body produces "convulsive flesh" as both "the ultimate effect and the point of reversal" of Christianization.⁶²

11

The genealogy of convulsing nuns now includes queer virgins. In Foucault's *Confessions*, virgins "speak" as "the limit of speech,"⁶³ as self-doubling Christian flesh, as a too rigorous ascetic practice, as *metanoia* that changes Christianized flesh into "another thing and elsewhere."⁶⁴ That flesh speaks as counter-conduct, as part of a genealogy of mysticism that Foucault aligns with counter-Christian ascetic practices.

So too Foucault "speaks" as a virgin whose practices at the edge of speech produce a counter-conductive flesh; he "speaks" as a monk lifting his pen, as a penitent who returns as other to himself, as the cry of a convulsing nun.⁶⁵ This is Foucault's speech after death.⁶⁶ His confessions of the flesh bristle against a history of sexuality as forced confession, an incitement to speak always doubled, "like a shadow," by torture: "the dark twins."⁶⁷ Foucault's post-humous speech-as-flesh inverts the generalized "practice of permanent autobiography"⁶⁸ of "a singularly confessing society"⁶⁹ whose obligation to speak is "an internal ruse . . . so deeply ingrained in us, that . . . it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface."⁷⁰

Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* speak like a virgin after death. That counter-confessional speech queers the present: it empties it out, like a virgin, making it strange. Unfinished, these confessions speak in the space of interruption, the "caesura"⁷¹ of a stuttering speech: a speech called away from itself mid-breath. Virginity queered, again and again, *inachevée*. "a hard, unending struggle."⁷²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 22. Jordan writes that "the limit of speech is linked to convulsion".

⁶⁴ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

⁶⁵ Jordan asks: "What if philosophic writing—or philosophic writing so far as it is resistance—is more like a convulsed cry than voluntary speech?". Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 191.

⁶⁶ "For me," Foucault writes, speech begins after death, once that break has been established. For me, writing is a wandering after death." Michel Foucault, *Speech Begins after Death* (2013), 44.

⁶⁷ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 59.

⁶⁸ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 184.

⁶⁹ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁷¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 154.

⁷² Ibid., 155.

12

Here I anoint Foucault's virgins as queer. As counter-conductive speech that contradicts confessional truth-telling, queer virgins take their place among the deviants Foucault once called, in a rare moment of tenderness, "my little mad ones, my little excluded ones, my little abnormal."73 Virgins struggle endlessly in the movement of *metanoia* that is eternal recurrence: the time of the plunge, the time of unreason.74 As they spin they join Foucault's lunatics, hysterics, witches and prisoners, his delinquents, lepers, and convulsing nuns.

13

In *The Queer God*, the theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid refers to a "movement of emptiness" called kenosis, from the Greek verb κενόω (kenōō) "to empty."75 The verb appears in *Phillipians 2:7*, where Jesus "made himself nothing" by "emptying himself" into the will of God. This queerness is not the claiming of an identity but, rather, its dissolution. "Because of death," Linn Marie Tonstad writes, "all human projects, desires, and hopes are ultimately futile, ending in loss The only orientation of human existence that is not threatened by death is the orientation to . . . God."76 Tonstad goes on to explain that in early Christianity "one way of living out that orientation in daily life was virginity."77 Riffing on Althaus-Reid, Tonstad helps me to take up that virgin orientation in Foucault's *Aveux* as a queer kenosis, a self-emptying "'via rupta' [way of rupture] of previously unrecognized paths of praxis."78 This "queerness is God's," Tonstad writes. "We become queer by grace."79

Death haunts Foucault's *Confessions*. To approach that haunting is to touch a secular present shorn of the spiritual resources for metabolizing death. The 2nd-century monk interrupted mid-letter returns as a modern penitent who has crossed a threshold called the death of God. The conversions of a Christianized world promise rebirth into eternity after death. What does post-Christian eternal recurrence offer us?

I find one answer in a quote from René Char on the back cover of *Les Aveux de la chair*: "L'histoire des hommes est la longue succession des synonymes d'un même vocable. Y contredire est un devoir."80

Virgin kenosis inverts itself into the empty space left open by God's departure. The grace I find there counter-dicts the emptiness of a world without God. I live in that

73 Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Roger-Pol Droit," 9 cassettes (Paris: IMEC, June 1975), 319, translation mine ("mes petits fous, mes petits exclus, mes petits anormaux").

74 See especially *History of Madness*, 363-364 on unreason as "the untimely within the world" (363), where "the time of unreason" is "an unconditional return" and "an absolute plunge" (364).

75 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (2003).

76 Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (2018), 7.

77 Ibid.

78 Althaus-Reid in Tonstad, *The Queer God*, 92.

79 Ibid., original emphasis.

80 For commentary on this quote as discussed by Balibar, which also appears on the *quatrième de page* of *History of Sexuality* Volumes 2 and 3, see Harcourt, "Contre-/Counter-," 75-76.

counter-diction, finding light in secular practices of self-emptying flesh: counter-conductive reading, ethopoietic self-writing that unsays me. These experiments in self-undoing counter-dict the sameness of "l'histoire des hommes."

Sed ego non sum ego.

14

"To become other than what we are requires an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct."⁸¹ Ethics is a question that puts the moral subject into question. That question is virginity as counter-conduct, as *metanoia*, as *askesis*:⁸² an exercise of self on self in close combat with herself. This spiritual combat is the queer virgin's unending "hard struggle,"⁸³ after the death of God.

According to Arnold Davidson, ethical counter-conduct becomes political when Foucault "places conduct in a political field."⁸⁴ To govern is "to act on the possibilities of action of other individuals," as in the pastoral government of souls but also, today, as biopolitical governmentality. Those possibilities of action are structured by "force relations."⁸⁵ Thus "even apparently personal or individual forms of counter-conduct have a political dimension, that is, modify force relations between individuals, acting on the possibilities of action."⁸⁶

This makes ascetic counter-conduct both an ethics and a politics, what Davidson calls "a kind of freedom of conduct."⁸⁷ Virgin counter-conduct becomes something other than "the purely negative act of disobedience,"⁸⁸ something other than "les phénomènes en creux" of pastoral power.⁸⁹ Counter-conduct becomes "productive": "in order to resist one must activate something 'as inventive, as mobile, as productive' as power itself."⁹⁰

Davidson's reading is appealing. It harnesses force relations in the service of a positive freedom: not a freedom from, but a freedom to. But how is this freedom of counter-conduct different than biopolitical truth's disguise as liberation in the incitement to speak that drives confession as an inventive power?

15

Confessions of the Flesh reminds us that chiasmic counter-conduct is not the result of a subject's will but an experience of self-dissolving *metanoia*. The "spiritual" transformation of

⁸¹ Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," *History of the Human Sciences* 24:4 (2011), 37.

⁸² On *metanoia* as Foucauldian *askesis* see especially Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (2007), 111.

⁸³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 155.

⁸⁴ Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," 28.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

metanoia allows this virgin “flesh” to speak after death, converted in these *Confessions* by the experience of reading. This *metanoia* of the flesh is a mode of experience: “The ‘flesh’ should be understood as a mode of experience.”⁹¹ This “flesh” is not the flesh of a Christianized world but flesh doubled into another flesh: a flesh that can “speak” after death.

But how exactly does this flesh “speak”? It is not a voice: not the repetition of patristic rules and precepts, not “la longue succession des synonymes d’un même vocable” the poet Char describes on the back cover of Foucault’s confessions. In his *Confessions*, virgin flesh speaks as the “play of light”⁹²: the counter-conduction of *un jeu de lumière*.⁹³

16

In his course on Foucault, Gilles Deleuze describes panopticism as “a division of light and shadow.”⁹⁴ The panopticon’s “condition,” like that of painting, is light. Light traverses the panoptical prison: “the cells are traversed by light” so that prisoners are seen without being able to see each other. “Prison,” Deleuze says, “is a form of light, . . . a distribution of light and shadow before being a heap of stones.”⁹⁵

As a history of the present, virgin flesh counter-conducts this panoptical light, this condition of visibility for modern technologies of surveillance.

17

Foucault’s virgin flesh is the play of light as a counter-conductive mode of experience that returns. After death, his “flesh” speaks as self-emptying light that counter-conducts panoptical luminosity.

Virgin counter-conduction is not the same as dissidence. In his 1977-78 lecture course, *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault dismisses the word “dissidence” in favor of “counter-conduct,”⁹⁶ aligning counter-conduct with the “general field of politics”⁹⁷ and recruiting, as I have, “delinquents, mad people, and patients” into “this immense family of what could be called counter-conducts.”⁹⁸ Along with Foucault’s virgins in *Confessions of the Flesh*, we find here in *Security, Territory, Population* a link between Foucault’s ethics of *askesis* and the field of political action. Following Davidson, Bernard Harcourt and Etienne Balibar have pointed to the significance of counter-conduct as a political concept in Foucault’s work. As we’ve seen, for Davidson individual acts of counter-conduct have a political dimension because they “modify force relations between individuals.”⁹⁹ For

⁹¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 36.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 107, translation modified.

⁹³ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 142.

⁹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Course on Foucault* (1985-86), accessed August 31 2020, translation mine.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, translation mine.

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), 201.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 29.

Harcourt, the “*contre*-move” at the heart of counter-conduct is a “conceptual factory” with “generative” and even emancipatory potential.¹⁰⁰ For Balibar, counter-conduct leads to a “counter-politics” as “the central element of truth-telling in Foucault’s work;”¹⁰¹ Balibar links counter-conduct to *parrhesia* as a “form of ‘*contre*-diction’ and ‘*contre*-conduite’” that “has within it the seeds of a counter-democratic principle.”¹⁰² Harcourt emphasizes that the “*contre*-move” in Foucault differs both from the “anti-” move of direct opposition and the transformations of the dialectic. The “counter” move is “internal,” engaging “in a play, a movement, a dance with its object, using the force of the object against itself.”¹⁰³

Nuns and hysterics penetrated by patriarchy choke, convulse, spit, scream, writhe, go silent. Virgins empty themselves “too rigorously” into God. These resistant practices are “revolts of conduct”¹⁰⁴ that “short-circuit”¹⁰⁵ the *dispositifs* of sexualized power. To put it in Balibar’s terms, ascetic practices perform a kind of “parrhesiastic contradiction”¹⁰⁶ that turns patriarchal speech as veridiction into a virgin counter-conduct that counter-dicts this speech. As a practice of counter-conduct, virgin asceticism becomes “a sort of tactical element, an element of reversal”¹⁰⁷ within the historical gridding of power. Foucault highlights virginity’s counter-conductive force as “one of the first major revolts of conduct in the West.”¹⁰⁸ Another name for such revolts is chiasmus.

18

I reenter the text, *inachevé*, through the X of chiasmus: a reminder of incompleteness, the hollowing out of an oeuvre left unfinished with the author’s untimely death. What I find here are brackets.

19

]

]

]

¹⁰⁰ Harcourt, “*Contre-/Counter-*,” 74.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

¹⁰⁶ “*Contre-/Counter-*,” 76.

¹⁰⁷ “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 30.

¹⁰⁸ Foucault, in “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 31.

The bracket is a familiar editorial tool. The published text of Foucault's *Confessions* is stippled with them. I admire the labor and care they represent. But how do they work as diacritical marks? Do they shore up the scattering of virgin light?

Like chiasmus, the bracket is the mark of dissolution and death. Haunted by death, Foucault's writing is a *via rupta*—a poetic “way of rupture.” I have shown elsewhere how brackets signal Foucault's genealogical method as Sapphic. Brackets mark the Sapphic text as a patterning of absence. Like the Christian monk, interrupted mid-stroke, Sappho dwells in the *inachevé*. “Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete,” Anne Carson tells us. “All the rest are fragments.”¹⁰⁹

The bracket signals that self-emptying absence, a material trace of queer kenosis. Carson's translations of Sappho use open brackets to show the place where a line breaks off or a letter stops mid-stroke.

]
]
thought barefoot
]110

Foucault is a Sapphic poet of the incomplete. His genealogies perform a poetics of the bracket, signaling places in the archive that cannot speak. His writing is, again, *ethopoietic*, in this specific Sapphic sense; it gestures toward events “at the point of their lacunae,” at “the moment when they did not take place.”¹¹¹

Confessions of the Flesh is one such self-emptying, virgin event. As a published book it speaks through letters, words, and graphic signs organized and printed onto white pages. But if reading is *metanoia*, can we read the book in some other way, as Sapphic?

In Foucault's *Confessions*, virginity “speaks” through the “slender gap”¹¹² of its brackets. Here is an example: on page 42, there is a note which refers to Tertullian's writings on baptism. The reference reads: “19. [Empty note.]”¹¹³ Here is another, in a note which refers to the conduct of souls as *ars artium*, the art of arts: “32. Thus, as examples: [note incomplete].”¹¹⁴

As in Carson's translations of Sappho, these brackets are not the author's own. They are editorial embellishments that orient the reader, a graphic rendering of an attempt to both mark and contain, with open then closed brackets, the rupture that is loss: the monk called away mid-letter.

We could say, somewhat critically, that as an organizing structure with an eye toward publication, marketing, and distribution, the editorial apparatus papers over Foucault's poetry of the incomplete, shoring up genealogical fragmentation by closing off the bracket

¹⁰⁹ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002), ix.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1998), 369, translation modified.

¹¹² Michel Foucault, “Discourse on Language”, 215.

¹¹³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 42, 337.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87, 348.

left open by the monk. Or we could say, as we flip the pages, that the bracket is a death mask. We could adopt the attitude of *metanoia*, allowing those brackets to open again.

21

These post-humous confessions of virgin flesh do not bring a series on the history of sexuality to completion. Rather, the linear sequence of volumes 1, 2, 3, and 4 is inverted by the chiasmic *metanoia* that is reading. The monk *revenant*, the wandering penitent, criss-crosses the reader in a queer, self-unsaying conversion. In that crossing, the line of the series, *en abyme*, doubles back on itself to form an X: undone by the incompleteness of its final volume, the series called *History of Sexuality* becomes a spiral that also undoes me as I read. *Ego sum* undone by reading: *Sed ego non sum ego*.

This essay in fragments, *inachevé*, returns here, interrupted, to Ambrose. The lover returns no longer himself. *Sed ego non sum ego*. Return is the temporal movement of doubling: the leper becomes plague victim, the criminal becomes the chief of police, the sodomite at the stake becomes an openly gay man talking on TV. In their confessions of the flesh, Foucault's queer virgins exemplify counter-conductive practices—instances of “faire vrai” (*do the truth*)¹¹⁵—that traverse an entire life. “Flesh...runs through one's whole life,”¹¹⁶ Foucault writes. This ethical retraversal—a traversal of virgin flesh—“changes in every respect” (*change du tout au tout*).¹¹⁷

My fragments end here, for now. Foucault inhabits the *inachevé*: an empty space, a gap in speech, a pause where new relations can appear. Virginité is that pause, a suspension of limits that converts the values of life and death. Like Diogenes in *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault's queer virgins change the value of the currency of our time: the value of bios, of “life itself.”

But unlike Diogenes, Foucault's queer virgins engage this “conversion” as “collective practice”¹¹⁸: “it did exist, especially among women, in circles.”¹¹⁹ In *Confessions of the Flesh*, virginité happens among circles of women. An individual technology of counter-conduct becomes “other things and otherwise”¹²⁰: a counter-communal relation to others. After God's death, how might we be moved by those virgin circles in their self-emptying circling toward God? This is our question, here, now: how to practice this virginité as what Foucault calls “une mutation actuelle d'existence”: a “revolution.”¹²¹

References

Althaus-Reid, Marcella, *The Queer God*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 77; *Les Aveux de la chair*, 104.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁰ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

¹²¹ Ibid., 192.

- Carson, Anne, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- Castelli, Elizabeth, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:1 (1986), 61-88.
- Dällenbach, Lucien, *The Mirror in the Text*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Davidson Arnold, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," *History of the Human Sciences* 24:4 (2011), 25-41.
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Course on Foucault* [1985-86]. La voix de Gilles Deleuze en ligne, Université de Paris 8. http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=403
- Dickmann, Iddo, *The Little Crystalline Seed: The Ontological Significance of Mise en Abyme in Post-Heideggerian Thought*. New York: SUNY Press, 2019.
- Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel, "Different Spaces," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 2, ed. Paul Rabinow, 175-186. New York: New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel, "Entretien avec Roger-Pol Droit," 9 cassettes. Paris: IMEC, June 1975.
- Foucault, Michel, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, 135-140. New York: New Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Madness*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality Vol. 4: Confessions of the Flesh*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité Vol. 4: Les Aveux de la chair*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel, *Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
- Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 2, ed. Paul Rabinow, 369-392. New York: New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Foucault, Michel, *Speech Begins after Death*, ed. Philippe Artières. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 215-237. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel, "The Thought of the Outside," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 2, ed. Paul Rabinow, 147-170. New York: New Press, 1998.
- Harcourt, Bernard E., "Contre-/Counter-," in *Thinking with Balibar: A Lexicon of Conceptual Practice*, ed. Laura Ann Stoler, Stathis Gourgouris and Jacques Lezra, 71-84. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823288519.003.0006>
- Huffer, Lynne, *Foucault's Strange Eros*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

- Jordan, Mark, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- McGushin, Edward, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
- Revel, Judith, *Foucault, Une pensée du discontinu*. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010.
- Tonstad, Linn Marie, *Queer Theology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.

Author info

Lynne Huffer

lhuffer@emory.edu

Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor

Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Emory University

USA

Lynne Huffer is Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory University. She is the author of a trilogy on Foucault's ethics of eros: *Foucault's Strange Eros* (2020); *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (2013); and *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (2010). She is also the author of *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of Difference* (1998) and *Another Colette: The Question of Gendered Writing* (1992). She has published academic articles on feminist theory, queer theory, Foucault, ethics, and the Anthropocene, as well as personal essays, creative nonfiction, and opinion pieces in mass media venues. She is also the author, with Jennifer Yorke, of *Wading Pool*, a collaborative artists book: <http://www.vampandtramp.com/fine-press/h/Lynne-Huffer-Jennifer-Yorke.html>. Her current book project is *Respite: 99 Anthropocene Fragments*.

ARTICLE

Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault

JAMES BERNAUER

Boston College, USA

ABSTRACT. The Catholic dimension in Foucault's examination of the Church Fathers is featured because neglect of it may misrepresent the very notions of virginity and of flesh in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Failure to appreciate the tension between a seditious flesh and an incarnational flesh implicitly confines the Patristic vision to the limited modern field of "sexuality." The fourth volume might be best interpreted against the background of the investigations that prompted Foucault to immerse himself in religious texts and spiritual experiences: his early writings on literature; the later interest of his lectures in pastoral technologies; and his witnessing of the political-spiritual movements both in Islam (the Iranian revolution) and in Catholicism (the anti-military protests in South America and the anti-Communism denunciations of Pope John Paul II).

Keywords: anti-pastoral struggle, Catholic, incarnate flesh, seditious flesh, virginity.

Three memories guide my approach to Michel Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. There is the arresting opening of his *Discipline and Punish* with its dramatic contrast between a public execution and the prison's time-table: the shock of discontinuity that is also embedded in this fourth volume of his history of sexuality. Originally its themes were to be determined by the second volume in this series, *La chair et le corps (Flesh and Body)*, and the early Christian architects and architecture of this "new experience" would have provided a dramatic contrast to the modern perspectives of the introductory text. A second memory is his playful introduction to *The Order of Things*, where he recalls his laughter and wonderment at the Borges quotation from a certain Chinese encyclopedia that gives a bizarre taxonomy of animals that shatter the familiar landmarks of the thought that "bears the stamp of our age" and that should demonstrate the "stark impossibility of thinking *that*" classification.¹ Does our own reading of *Confessions of the Flesh* ever evoke

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1973), xv.

wonderment or at points even laughter at trying to think some of what Foucault is reporting from the era of the Church Fathers? The effect of that scholarly reporting is to subvert the very project of a “history of sexuality” and certainly to put yet another nail in the coffin of the anachronistic thesis of the repressive hypothesis. But perhaps it also manifests Foucault’s own inability to fully think out the experience of the flesh in early Christianity, his very understandable confusion in grasping the dynamic interaction of a flesh that is both incarnational (witnessing to godly presence) and seditious (reminding us of our fallen state). In the light of that incapacity, is it surprising that Greek and Roman practices of the self would come to lure him into a more customary, less challenging philosophical study than his study of Christianity’s dealings with the flesh might have opened? The third memory is from his 1980 lectures at the Collège de France, *Du gouvernement des vivants* (*On the Government of the Living*),² which I attended and where at one point he introduced the writings of the fourth century monk John Cassian: the lecture hall soon filled with bewilderment and the murmur of a common question, “Cassian, qui est-ce?” “Qui est-ce?” “Cassian, who is that?” This was particularly amusing to me because, as a novice in the Jesuit order, I had to suffer reading large excerpts from Cassian’s conferences and I found it astonishing that the avant-garde Foucault, whom I came to Paris to learn from, was echoing the interests of my pious novice master. In fact, I thought there must be some other Cassian to whom Foucault was making reference. Although we may be familiar now with the name Cassian, the bewilderment of that 1980 audience may still be beneficial for us to share. Many of us who are dedicated readers of Foucault are also very ignorant of the spiritual continents Foucault is exploring in *Confessions of the Flesh*, and perhaps we are far too eager to locate its insights within his earlier concerns with institutionalized confessional technologies.

Let me give two examples of this ignorance: When I was a student in Paris, Foucault asked me to arrange for a private meeting with some theologians with whom he could discuss his study of Christian texts. We met at the beginning of May, 1980 in the Jesuit community where I lived at the time. The very first question he posed to the theologians (one of whom was a distinguished Patristics scholar) concerned the notion of *ophelé, debitum*, “debt” in Christian understandings of marriage relations. It was clear that Foucault was disappointed with their all too predictable replies, but the conversation then moved on to other topics. I was pleased to see that he elaborated this notion in *Confessions of the Flesh*.³ A second, more striking example of our limited knowledge: Perhaps the single most prominent encyclopedic volume published in English that treats Michel Foucault was released at the end of 2014 by Cambridge University Press as *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*.⁴ Its almost 800 pages contain 91 articles by 72 authors from many different academic faculties. Among the themes treated there are only four brief entries that directly

² Michel Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants* (2012); Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* (2014).

³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol.4, Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), 218-220.

⁴ Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (ed.), *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* (2014). A rather comprehensive review by Colin Gordon may be found in “Cambridge Foucault Lexicon,” *The History of the Human Sciences* 29:3 (2016).

touch theological issues: “Christianity,” “Confession,” “Religion,” and “Spirituality.” I am the author of the first three and Edward McGushin composed the last. Despite the wide range of themes examined in the *Lexicon*, there is no reference to such important topics as the “pastorate” or “pastoral theology” in general; its index has no mention of “virginity” or even “flesh.” Of the 25 thinkers who have essays dedicated to them in the volume, not a single figure who appears in *Confessions of the Flesh* is included. It may be understandable that Foucault’s concern with some lesser known Christian writers might not have been appreciated: one even thinks, for example, of Clement of Alexandria, Cyprien, Gregory of Nyssa or Tertullian. But the Cambridge *Lexicon* has no article even on Augustine or Cassian, who had been important in Foucault’s work for many years. And these omissions despite the fact that over the years, before and after his death, there have been many publications in English either by Foucault himself or by others on his relation to religion, spirituality and to Christianity in particular.⁵

The neglect by this volume is also striking in its omission of explicitly Catholic themes, and that omission is a standard practice in commentary on Foucault. Although there has been a growing appreciation of Foucault’s interest in such Christian practices as confession and such religious figures as Cassian, this general recognition of concern with Christian culture has rarely reached the sophisticated level of grasping the specific Catholic dimension in Foucault’s examination. This neglect would be a significant liability in detecting unique accents in his treatment of sexuality in *Confessions of the Flesh*. While sexual matters came to be developed at greater length in the four volumes of the history of sexuality, they emerged with perhaps most arresting force in some of his early writings on literature. This is how he opened his 1963 essay on Georges Bataille:

We like to believe that sexuality has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature, a truth which has long been lingering in the shadows and hiding under various disguises—until now, that is, when our positive awareness allows us to decipher it so that it may at last emerge in the clear light of language. Yet never did sexuality enjoy a more immediate natural understanding and never did it know a greater “felicity of expression” than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin.⁶

But it is not just a world of fallen bodies and sin, as he continues in the essay, because that world is not separable from traditions of mysticism and spirituality. And it is there

⁵ For example, there were David Galston, *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology* (2011); Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (2011); James Bernauer & Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (2004); Henrique Pinto, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue* (2003); Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (2000); Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (1999). Among the numerous articles devoted to Foucault and Religion, the essay by John McSweeney should be noted as particularly worthwhile: “Theology ‘after’ Foucault?” *Milltown Studies* 52 (2003), 117-151.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” [1963], in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (1977), 29.

that the complex set of negotiations with oneself making up Christian experience “lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.”⁷ In this network of erotic events, we touch enduring Catholic encounters with “flesh.” It has almost never been noted that Foucault’s literary interlocutors in that early period had, as he himself did, a traditional Catholic formation. Bataille, Pierre Klossowski and Maurice Blanchot were all Catholics, and the first two actually spent time exploring religious vocations.⁸ The cover of volume IV’s English translation genuflects to this Catholic dimension by its inclusion of a drawing of rosary beads.

Still, there may be a possible bewilderment in reaction to the fact that such a Catholic theme as virginity occupies almost one hundred pages of *Confessions of the Flesh*, but it is important to recognize that for Foucault virginity is sexually significant and confirms his Catholic sources. And we should not be surprised by that because as Peter Brown has pointed out: “From an early period, in some sectors, and universally after around 300 C.E., the ideal of virginity, practiced equally by men and women, enjoyed a moral and cultural supremacy in the Christian church that remained unchallenged until the Reformation.”⁹ Is an understanding of virginity and the modern reduction of it to mere physical intactness not essential to what later came to be designated “sex” and that category’s facile association with repression?

A hypothesis: It is crucial to appreciate that the inquiries of Volume 4 emerge from the work of what was to be volume 2 in the original plan of his history of sexuality: *La chair et le corps (Flesh and Body)*. My view is that Foucault initially thought that he would be able to draw this distinction with relative ease: a differentiation between the pre-modern Christian culpabilisation of the body as the flesh versus the spirit (“the moral physiology of the flesh”¹⁰) on the one hand and the modern materialistic approach to the sexual body on the other. If these were clearly differentiated, the road would be opened to the research of his original project: a volume 3 (*The Children’s Crusade*) 4 (*Woman, Mother, and Hysteric*), 5 (*Perverts*), and 6 (*Populations and Races*).¹¹ What happened to this original project? Did the theme of virginity in the thinking of the early Fathers and its concomitant experience of the flesh generate a more complex field than Foucault had originally expected? Did virginity find itself enfleshed in a mystical ecstatic elevation as rich as any threat of subversion of the spirit? This realization would certainly have created fresh complexity for Foucault and his original plan. I believe it did.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Philippe Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011), 244-245. Chevallier is unique in the examination of this Catholic literary milieu.

⁹ Peter Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (1987), 427.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* (2003), 189.

¹¹ Foucault had already reminded us of one example in the conflict between Christian approaches and modern approaches to sexuality in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite* (1980).

In general contemporary discussion, virginity is most often associated with loss in descriptions such as one loses one's virginity or one forfeits one's innocence; with women we hear of a "deflowering" and the "taking or stealing of virginity"; with men it is most often different: the loss of a childhood innocence that is regarded as a door into maturity. There are certainly numerous current perceptions of how virginity is in fact lost and loss does seem to provide the basic context for how virginity is approached. And this is even the case when discussing certain cultures that regard virginity as a "valuable commodity" that may be exchanged for other goods. The cultures of the Church Fathers certainly grasp this reality of loss because it opens out to the post-virginal rebellious state of a flesh that is dominated by a struggle with spirit; this seditious flesh invites both the development of disciplines which manage the flesh as well as the creation of systems of discernment which interpret the struggles between angelic and demonic movements within individual souls. These discernments of consolations and desolations cry out for the wisdom of an interpreter to whom obedience is rightfully owed. This is a very familiar story in discourse on Foucault. Technologically, this is the achievement of the practices fashioned by Cassian; theologically, this is the complementary system of Augustine. Recall Foucault's earlier remark in "Sexuality and Solitude": Adam was ashamed of his sexual organs because they were moving by themselves without his consent. "Sex in erection is the image of man revolted against God. The arrogance of sex is the punishment and consequence of the arrogance of man."¹² This is the story that Foucault's interlocutors often encouraged him to develop and augment. And this is what he largely did. And my expectation is that most commentators on this volume will focus with variations on the story of spirit versus flesh, a story that is a familiar path into kindred categories of sexual activity, disciplines of sexual repression as well as foreshadowings of modern sexuality and the will to truth and knowledge about it. But that approach, as tempting as it would be for contemporary secularized commentators, would not do justice to the complexity of what Foucault studied in this volume, namely, the interaction of incarnate flesh and seditious flesh.

Pagan and Christian ascetical traditions are separated by a wall, often breeched, from the mystical Christian tradition of virginity. This mystical tradition guards in an ineffable way the pre-Fall kingdom of life which was once intended for all men and women, and which was inaugurated again in even more splendid fashion in God's second great moment of Creation, the Incarnation of God, the Word becoming flesh. This cosmic Incarnation, this return to the pre-Fall possibility, is concretized in the waters of baptism and in the art of virginal existence. As Foucault writes, within this is a conception of the very history of the world.¹³ And how does virginity celebrate the flesh? By the refusal of death, by removing oneself from that struggle between life and death that concluded volume one in his history; death was far more menacing to that Patristic age than sexual lust, and Foucault cites Gregory of Nyssa's joyful acclamation of death's defeat by vir-

¹² Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" (1997), 175-184.

¹³ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 153-154, 134.

ginity.¹⁴ Virginity escapes regular comprehension; it overcomes nature and history and all Law, and dwells in eternity. The state of virginity is not lost through physical actions but through an ignorance that starves the soul. Inspired by God and God's Love, the Virgin man and the Virgin woman are new creations. How may this new creation, this glorified flesh, be understood? Certainly not through the categories of sexual asceticism or renunciation. Virgins are not masters and mistresses of renunciation but rather witnesses of the spiritual marriage that unites them with the God who is both fully divine and fully human. This witness is also to one's personal unity of body and soul. The sin that needs to be confessed, as Augustine saw, is not the pains of human embodiment as such but rather the fracturing of the human person into conflicts of body and soul, spirit and flesh.¹⁵ And, as Foucault points out, this participation leads them to an incarnate art of living that embraces the most refined pagan aesthetics. There is the example he gives of Clement of Alexandria, who traces this culture of the self not from the pagan philosophers with whom Clement was very familiar but from the inspired Biblical authors.¹⁶ And Clement affirms, "There is nothing meritorious about abstinence from marriage unless it arises from love to God." And virginity itself may be reclaimed after marriage in Christian discipleship.¹⁷

So what has happened to eclipse for many the mystical art of virginity by physical acts of sex? Is it but another example of the simplification of erotic life which mirrors that displacement of rigorous spiritual discernment by the establishment of rote confessional practices and eventual universal mandates that Foucault examined in volume I? Does Christian faith in an Incarnate God demand a more robust and nuanced grasp of flesh than contemporary sexual understandings make available for both Christians and non-Christians? Will that vital belief solicit what Foucault imagined in his 1978 course, namely a "counter-conduct," an "anti-pastoral struggle" ("la lutte antipastorale").¹⁸ This struggle is novel—Foucault said that "while there have been anti-feudal revolutions; there has never been an anti-pastoral revolution."¹⁹ In today's Catholicism, however, some do claim that there is a pastoral schism regarding sexual matters. But the Middle Ages produced not only types of pastoral power but also a theological repertoire of counter-conducts, "all of which tend to redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power in the systems of salvation, obedience and truth": there are five forms he features: asceticism, communities, mysticism, Scripture and eschatological beliefs.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid., 146-147, 149-150 (*On Virginity*).

¹⁵ David G. Hunter, "Augustine on the Body," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (2012), 353-364.

¹⁶ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 3-11.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," (*Stromateis III*) #51; "On Spiritual Perfection," (*Stromateis VII*) #72 in *Alexandrian Christianity*, ed. John Oulton and Henry Chadwick (1954), 64, 139.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), 215; Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population* (2004), 219.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 204-214.

²⁰ Ibid.

Confessions of the Flesh is in alliance with this novel anti-pastoral struggle in two striking ways. The first was the still inchoate, for Foucault, insight that religious affirmation might proclaim a robust, incarnational activity rather than display any slavish dependence upon a weakened subversive presence. At the same time that he was immersing himself in religious texts, he was also witnessing the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979. In an interview about his impressions of that, Foucault recalled the frequency with which Karl Marx's remark on religion as the opium of the people is cited, but then he points to the previous sentence of Marx and continues, "religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let's say, then, that Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit."²¹

Catholicism was also engaged in a spiritual combat that Foucault recognized in Poland when he lived there (1958-1959) and later when he followed with intense interest Pope John Paul II's 1979 pilgrimage there that became the catalyst for the Solidarity movement which Foucault publicly supported. Even earlier in Brazil, Foucault witnessed a Catholic incarnate presence in its combat with the right-wing government. To give one example: in 1975, a prominent Jewish journalist, Vladimir Herzog, was killed while in police custody, an event that intimidated the Jewish community there. The Archbishop of São Paulo decided to organize an inter-denominational memorial service for the murdered journalist, and this is Foucault's impression of the event:

(The service) drew thousands and thousands of people into the church, on to the square and so on, and the cardinal in red robes presided over the ceremony, and he came forward at the end of the ceremony, in front of the faithful, and he greeted them shouting: 'Shalom, shalom.' And there was all around the square armed police and there were plain clothes policemen in the church. The police pulled back; there was nothing the police could do against that. I have to say, that had a grandeur of strength, there was a gigantic historical weight there.²²

This grandeur of strength was the spiritual-political power unleashed by that incarnational flesh that Foucault glimpsed on occasion in examining Patristic texts.

More frequently on display though was Catholic attachment to the subversive effect of flesh, and this dimension also had significant political consequence. And that consequence was certainly evident in the triumph of fascism and that ideology's utilization of modern sexuality, a phenomenon that Foucault frequently recognized and which provided the conclusion to his introductory volume in the history of sexuality series. Geoff Eley has justification in canonizing Foucault as the "patron saint" for the study of Nazism, and my own work in this area has attempted to draw attention to the sexual dynamics of the Nazi movement.²³ Even a resister who came to be executed, Helmuth James von Moltke, could write to his wife in 1940 that he found one thing to praise in

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit," in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (2005), 255.

²² Michel Foucault, "On Religion," in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy Carrette (1999), 107.

²³ Geoff Eley, "Scholarship Serving the Nazi State I," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12:4 (1990), 576; James Bernauer, "Sexuality in the Nazi War Against Jewish and Gay People," *Budhi* 2:3 (1998), 149-168.

Nazi culture: it taught, he said, a reverence for what is below us--"blood, ancestry, our bodies".²⁴ During this period of decisive change in German culture, we find an obsessive series of Catholic statements denouncing the social permissiveness of co-education and its supposed lack of concern for the lust in children and adolescents; regularly denounced was the immodesty intrinsic to public swimming pools; and then there were the many warnings about the dangers of nudity and male friendships. Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, wrote a 1929 report on the general situation of the German Church which called for campaigns against the cult of nudity, the mixing of sexes in gymnastic exercises, the provocative clothing women wore in sports and the widespread immorality in literature, film and theatre.²⁵ This ecclesiastical tone, promoted in many Christian approaches to eroticism and sexuality, was all too often an education into a self-contempt and is an excellent example of the political consequence of taking flesh only as a subversive reality. Although these political implications are not put forward in *Les Aveux de la chair*, they form the broader context for his investigation of Christian writers, especially when it was conceived as the second volume of the series.

In conclusion, let us recall a remark Peter Brown made: he wrote that such notions as "virgin life" have come to carry with them "icy overtones" for us, and even today they still crowd in upon us as "pale, forbidding presences." When historical study gives them, he continues, their "due measure of warm, red blood," the "chill shades may speak to us again, and perhaps more gently than we had thought they might, in the strange tongue of a long-lost Christianity."²⁶ Has the prejudice that identifies Catholic Christianity as intrinsically tied to the repression of the erotic and sexual spheres blinded us to its celebration of the flesh? And certainly that state of blindness to incarnational reality includes Catholics themselves no less than other Christians, as well as disciples of other faiths or of no faith. Few have demonstrated the fact of that blindness and challenged it as successfully as did the art historian Leo Steinberg in his *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*.²⁷ If the redeemed sexual reality of Jesus could be ignored for so long in Western culture, as Steinberg argues it was, should there be surprise that our own fleshy reality could be misinterpreted? Even by ourselves. And not fully recognized by Foucault either. Still, perhaps unintentionally, Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* will contribute to that warming of icy notions and make more problematic that neglect and misinterpretation.

References

Bernaer, James, "Sexuality in the Nazi War Against Jewish and Gay People," *Budhi* 2:3 (1998), 149-168. <https://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/budhi/article/view/695/691>.

²⁴ Helmuth James von Moltke, *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945* (1990), 110.

²⁵ Hubert Wolf and Klaus Unterburger, *Eugenio Pacelli: Die Lage der Kirche in Deutschland 1929* (2006), 131-139.

²⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1998), 446-447.

²⁷ Leo Steinberg in his *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983).

- Bernauser J. & Carrette J. (ed.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.
- Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Brown, Peter, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, 427-443. New York: Crossroad, 1987.
- Carrette, Jeremy, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*. London, New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Carrette, Jeremy (ed.), *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Chevallier, Philippe, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme*. Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011.
- Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage" (*Stromateis III*) #51, in *Alexandrian Christianity*, ed. John Oulton and Henry Chadwick. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954.
- Clement of Alexandria, "On Spiritual Perfection" 1 (*Stromateis VII*) #72, *Alexandrian Christianity*, ed. John Oulton and Henry Chadwick. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954.
- Eley, Geoff, "Scholarship Serving the Nazi State I," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12:4 (1989), 574-581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1989.9993654>
- Von Moltke, Helmuth James, *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel, "A Preface to Transgression" [1963], in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, 29-52. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Foucault, Michel, *Du gouvernement des vivants*. Paris: Editions du Seuil/Gallimard, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel, introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Foucault, Michel, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit: Foucault's Conversation with Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet," in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, 250-260. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel, "On Religion," in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy Carrette, 106-109. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Foucault, Michel, *On the Government of the Living*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*, ed. Michel Senellart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Foucault, Michel, "Sexuality and Solitude" in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, I: Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 175-184. New York: The New Press, 1997.

- Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- Galston, David, *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology*. Montreal, Ithaca, NY: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2011.
- Gordon, Colin, "Cambridge Foucault Lexicon," *History of the Human Sciences* 29:3 (2016), 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695116653948>
- Hunter, David G., "Augustine on the Body," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2012.
- Lawlor, Leonard, and John Nale (ed.), *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- McSweeney, John, "Theology 'after' Foucault?" *Milltown Studies* 52 (2003), 117-151.
- Pinto, Henrique, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Tran, Jonathan, *Foucault and Theology*. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2011.
- Wolf, Hubert, and Klaus Unterburger, *Eugenio Pacelli: Die Lage der Kirche in Deutschland 1929*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006.

Author info

James Bernauer

james.bernauer@bc.edu

Kraft Family Professor of Philosophy Emeritus

Boston College

USA

James Bernauer is Kraft Family Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Boston College. He is the author of *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics of Thought* (Humanities, 1990) and *Jesuit Kaddish: Jesuits, Jews and Holocaust Remembrance* (Notre Dame University, 2020). He is co-editor with David Rasmussen of *The Final Foucault* (MIT, 1988) and with Jeremy Carrette of *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Ashgate, 2004). Professor Bernauer attended Foucault's 1980 lectures at the Collège and this course was the foundation of *Les aveux de la chair*.

ARTICLE

Foucault's Keystone: *Confessions of the Flesh*

How the Fourth and Final Volume of *The History of Sexuality* Completes Foucault's Critique of Modern Western Societies

BERNARD E. HARCOURT
Columbia University, USA

ABSTRACT. The fourth and final volume of *The History of Sexuality* offers the keystone to Michel Foucault's critique of Western neoliberal societies. *Confessions of the Flesh* provides the heretofore missing link that ties Foucault's late writings on subjectivity to his earlier critique of power. Foucault identifies in Augustine's treatment of marital sexual relations the moment of birth of the modern legal actor and of the legalization of social relations. With the appearance of the modern legal subject, Foucault's critique of modern Western societies is complete: it is now possible to see how the later emergence of an all-knowing *homo œconomicus* strips the State of knowledge and thus deals a fatal blow to its legitimacy. The appearance of both the modern legal actor and *homo œconomicus* makes it possible to fold the entire four-volume *History of Sexuality* back into Foucault's earlier critique of punitive and biopolitical power. And it now challenges us to interrogate how we, contemporary subjects, are shaped in such a way as to implicate ourselves—both willingly and unwittingly—in the social order within which we find ourselves and that, through the interaction of knowledge-power-subjectivity, we reproduce.

Keywords: Augustine, consent, legalization, modern legal subject, *homo œconomicus*, critique of neoliberalism.

In the final pages of the now-final volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 4: *Les Aveux de la chair* (*Confessions of the Flesh*), Foucault's intellectual project achieves its long-awaited completion. In those final pages, dedicated to Augustine's writings on marital sexual relations, Foucault reveals the heretofore missing link that now binds his four-volume history of sexuality to his critique of Western forms of governing. Foucault discovers in Augustine the birth of the modern legal actor and legalization of social relations. Foucault identifies the moment when, in Western Christian societies, the mechanisms of social ordering gave rise to what Foucault calls "the subject of law" (« *le sujet de droit* »): the modern

rights-bearing and responsible individual inscribed in a legal framework of accountability, responsibility, and autonomy.

Like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle, the appearance of the modern legal actor completes Foucault's overarching critical project. With *Confessions of the Flesh*, the genetic make-up of the modern legal subject is decoded. It is now possible to fold the four-volume series of *The History of Sexuality* back into Foucault's critique of power and neoliberal governance, from whence it originated.

With that missing piece now firmly in place in a book that was intended to be published—and it is of the utmost importance to distinguish his published monographs, all ten of them now, from his other productions, whether lectures, conferences, essays, or interviews—it is finally possible to fully articulate Foucault's critique of contemporary neoliberal forms of governing in the full three-dimensionality that Foucault had promised—the three-dimensionality of *savoir-pouvoir-sujet*, of knowledge, power, and subjectivity (or, as others had proposed earlier, of epistemology, politics, and ethics).

Foucault's critique of Western societies, specifically the neoliberal forms of governance at the turn of the 1980s, can now be articulated and summarized as follows:

The modern legal subject—*le sujet de droit*—begins to appear with Augustine's writings on consent, will, responsibility, accountability, and autonomy in the context of marital sexual relations in works such as *De bono conjugali* and *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*. The legal actor who emerges in Augustine's writings flourishes in the modern political theories of sovereignty of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (which are often discussed under the rubric of "reason of state" or *raison d'État*). The modern legal subject ends up placing certain limits on sovereign power and gives rise to the ideas of checks and balances, of divided power, of limits on governing, and ultimately, to the paradigm of mid-twentieth-century liberal democracy.

As against that model of liberal democratic governance, there emerges a competing figure of *homo œconomicus*, with origins in Locke and the writings of the Physiocrats and liberal economists of the eighteenth century, but then in more concentrated form in the theories of neoliberal economists after World War II. As the experience, practices, and subjectivity of *homo œconomicus* begin to supplant that of the modern legal actor, the economic subject gradually delegitimizes and deposes the state in a far more sweeping way. It strips the state of all possible knowledge, rendering government entirely impotent: only the neoliberal subject can know his own interests; the government and the collectivity, by contrast, have no access and no way to know anyone's best interests. As a result, the state and collectivity are stripped of knowledge; they are ignorant and helpless. Whereas the modern legal subject only placed limits on the state, *homo œconomicus* now divests the state and collectivity of all knowledge and legitimacy, thereby doing away with the need for government entirely.

But—and this is the locus of Foucault's critique—the premise that *homo œconomicus* knows his self-interest best, and that the government and collectivity are ignorant on this score, is itself simply an assumption and a bald assertion. It is an unfounded belief, a mere assertion of truth. Yet it is baked into the theory of neoclassical economics, from François

Quesnay and Adam Smith to Friedrich Hayek and Gary Becker. As a result, the entire framework of neoliberalism rests on an illusion, a sleight of hand: all of the theories, practices, institutions, and structures of neoliberal governance are themselves baked into the initial imagination of an all-knowing *homo œconomicus*.

Confessions of the Flesh provides the missing piece to Foucault's critique by locating, in Augustine's writings on consent and responsibility in marital sexual relations, the key transformation from the subject of lust of early Christian thought to the modern legal subject who limits state sovereignty. As Foucault writes, "Consent – and this is the reason for the central role it plays in Augustine and will play later – makes it possible to designate the subject of concupiscence as a subject of law."¹ The appearance of the modern legal subject in Augustine's theoretical framework is what makes possible the ensuing transformation of the subject of law into the *homo œconomicus* of neoclassical economic and neoliberal thought – the form of subjectivity that then radically strips the government and collectivity of all knowledge and legitimacy.

As Foucault emphasized in 1979 in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, in order to understand the contemporary moment, the neoliberal economic subject had to be distinguished from the modern legal actor. The distinction was key: "*homo œconomicus et sujet de droit n'étaient donc pas superposables*,"² Foucault emphasized. "In the eighteenth century," Foucault lectured, "the figure of *homo œconomicus* and the figure of what we would call *homo juridicus* or *homo legalis* are absolutely heterogeneous and cannot be superimposed on each other."³ But in order to understand and analyze *homo œconomicus*, Foucault had to trace the transformation of subjectivity – what he called "the history of desiring man," what we might rename "the history of the desiring subject" – from ancient Greece, through the Greco-Roman philosophers and practices of the first centuries, to the patristic period and Augustine, in order to discover the birth and genetic make-up of the modern legal subject. *Confessions of the Flesh*, in this sense, lays the final stone, the keystone, to the full edifice of Foucault's critique of neoliberalism.

When Foucault originally began his examination of biopolitical forms of power in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in 1976, he was openly dissatisfied with the explanatory force of disciplinary power, which he had set forth a year earlier in his magnum opus *Discipline and Punish*. Neither the model of political sovereignty, which Foucault neatly encapsulated in the formulation "to take life or let live," nor the paradigm of surveillance, discipline, and the punitive society, seemed fully adequate to the task of critiquing the emerging softer forms of social governance and management associated with the budding neoliberalism of the 1970s – reflected in the election in France of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974. Foucault sketched in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, *The Will to Know*, the contours of a new model of power: the biopolitical form of power. Foucault famously reversed that earlier formulation to read "to make live or let die" and focused now on the management of populations, rather than the discipline of individuals.

¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), 280.

² Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979* (2004), 295.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (2008), 276.

At that time in 1976, Foucault outlined how his analysis would proceed, listing on the back cover the five volumes that would appear next: *La chair et le corps*; *La croisade des enfants*; *La femme, la mère et l'hystérique*; *Les pervers*; and *Population et races*.⁴ Those five books were intended to trace how the experience of what was called “sexuality” since the nineteenth century came into being and how it shaped the modern subject.⁵

The aim, all along, was to explore the regulation of sexual relations—one of the richest domains of moralization in human history⁶—in order to understand better and critique “modern Western societies,” in Foucault’s words.⁷ In other words, the goal all along was to seize better the form of power relations that Foucault would christen biopolitical power. But this, Foucault realized, first required a better understanding of liberalism and neoliberalism. Foucault explained this clearly to his audience at the Collège de France on January 10, 1979, in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*. As he indicated, he had intended to focus those lectures on the core question of biopolitics but needed first to better understand the modern legal subject and the emergence of neoliberalism:

I thought I could do a course on biopolitics this year, but it seems to me that the analysis of biopolitics can only get under way when we have understood the general regime of this governmental reason I have talked about [...] Consequently, it seems to me that it is only when we understand what is at stake in this regime of liberalism opposed to *raison d’État* ... only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism was, will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is.⁸

A couple of months later, Foucault gave the title *On the Government of the Living* for the following year’s Collège de France lectures, reflecting his intention to continue the work on biopolitics as a form of governing.⁹ However, just as his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* did not return directly to biopolitics but focused instead on neoliberal discourse in France, the history of Ordoliberalism in Germany, and American neoliberal thought, Foucault’s lectures *On the Government of the Living* did not centrally engage biopolitics but instead went further back in history to an earlier archive—namely Sophocles, the Stoics,

⁴ Draft manuscript versions of the first two are now in the Fonds Foucault at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. See “Foreword” of Frédéric Gros, *Confessions of the Flesh*, vii.

⁵ The concept of “experience” is central to Foucault’s project and, as Henri-Paul Fruchaud has highlighted, traces back to Foucault’s work on Binswanger. As Fruchaud reminds us, Foucault wrote, in a draft “Preface” originally destined for the English translation of *The Use of Pleasures*, that his thoughts on experience related back to his work on Binswanger. This important reference will be discussed in the critical apparatus of the forthcoming publication of Foucault’s manuscript on Binswanger, which was written shortly after his Introduction to Binswanger’s *Rêve et existence*, published in 1954. See forthcoming volume in *Cours et travaux avant le Collège de France, Binswanger et l’analyse existentielle*, edited by Elisabetta Basso, due out in May 2021.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (1990), 10.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2. L’usage des plaisirs* (1984), 10; Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 3-4 (“My aim was [...] to analyze the theoretical and practical context with which it [that quite recent and banal notion of ‘sexuality’] has been associated. In short, it was a matter of seeing how an ‘experience’ came to be constituted in modern Western societies...”).

⁸ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 21-22.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980* (2014), Course Context, 327.

and the early Christian pastoral—in order to reexamine the genealogy of our contemporary neoliberal forms of rationality.

Surprisingly, Foucault had eschewed the ancients as a source of governmental reasoning two years earlier. On February 8, 1978, in his lectures *Security, Territory, Population*, after discussing *Œdipus Rex*, Foucault observed that: “I do not think that the idea that one could govern men, or that one did govern men, was a Greek idea. If I have the time and courage I will come back to this problem, either at the end of these lectures or in the next series of lectures...”¹⁰ But by 1980, Foucault had decidedly changed his mind. And precisely where Foucault left off in 1978 is where he picks up in the 1980 lectures *On the Government of the Living*. On his return to these texts in 1980—specifically to *Œdipus Rex* and the early Greco-Roman philosophers—Foucault locates the origins of a genealogy of the modern subject. The 1980 lectures represent both a corrective, in which he casts doubt on his earlier statement about Greek antiquity, and a return to the search for our modern governmentality.

As he drafted *La chair et le corps*—the intended second volume to *The History of Sexuality* on Christian conceptions of sexual relations after the Lateran Council, the volume that would have been closest to *Confessions of the Flesh*¹¹—Foucault refined his theory of subject creation and reached further back in history. He did so publicly in the first four lectures of *On the Government of the Living* at the Collège de France, reinterpreting *Œdipus Rex* through the lens of truth-telling and the manifestation of self, and he provided, in effect, a curative to his earlier claim about the lack of any art of governing in ancient Greece. This launched his investigation into the pre-Christian East and moved the genealogy of the modern subject back, opening new vistas and reorienting the project from the couple knowledge-power to the trinity knowledge-power-subject. The reorientation led Foucault to study the avowal, the examination of conscience, the direction of others, forms of truth-telling—in sum, the work on subjectivity and subject creation that would first come together in his lectures at Louvain in 1981, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, and later produced the second, third, and now fourth and final published volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.¹²

Confessions of the Flesh thus provides the missing jigsaw piece in the now fully-published book series: the emergence of the modern legal subject. This completes Foucault's overall argument and does so, as I mentioned earlier, in the full three-dimensionality of knowledge-power-subjectivity to which Foucault aspired. Foucault did not, however, have the time, given his illness, to reframe Volume 4 after he had published Volumes 2

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (2007), 123. It is at this point in 1978 that Foucault turns to the pre-Christian East, spiritual direction, and the pastoral.

¹¹ See “Foreword” of Frédéric Gros, *Confessions of the Flesh*, viii-ix.

¹² Interestingly, the step-wise sequence of his return to ancient Greece is reflected as well in the drafting of the three final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*: Foucault began with Volume 4 on the patristic thinkers, writing it sometime between 1980 and 1982, and put it aside after having sent the manuscript to Gallimard in the Fall of 1982; he then proceeded to draft Volumes 2 and 3 (which were intended to be one volume on the ancients) and published them in April and May 1984, shortly before his untimely death in June of that year.

and 3. Precisely for this reason, the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* in its present unfinished condition presents the reader with the opportunity to complete the task that Foucault had left incomplete: namely, to reintegrate the work on subjectivity back into the overarching framework of knowledge-power-subject. That was the task that was cut short by Foucault's untimely death; however, the fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality* offers a blueprint of how to complete that final task: it reveals how to fold back the study of subject creation and subjectification into the knowledge-power-subject framework.

I strongly suspect that Foucault would have performed this integrative work in the process of editing the manuscript of *Les Aveux de la chair* for final publication.¹³ I believe this integrative work would have formed the crux of a conclusion to the volume, which is clearly missing, at least on my reading.¹⁴ Foucault did not have the opportunity, because of his untimely death. What we are reading is the manuscript draft that reflects his thinking in about 1980-82, at the time that he returned to the Ancients.¹⁵ But with the appearance of the modern legal subject at the tail end of Volume 4, I trust Foucault would have done the work of folding his history of the desiring subject into his critique of power in modern Western societies. The publication of the volume in 2018, thirty-four years later, reveals the path forward—and in that alone, it is a remarkable contribution to contemporary critical thought.

Many readers of Foucault have complained that the turn to subjectivity, to care of the self, and to truth-telling at the end of Foucault's intellectual journey undermines the political force of his philosophy and has pushed contemporary critical thought into a complacent apolitical direction. Ella Myers argues, for instance, in her book, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Duke 2013),¹⁶ that Foucault's turn in the early 1980s away from the study of power and toward the practices of the self is ultimately

¹³ I should emphasize this is a speculative claim. I make it on the basis of Foucault's full theoretical and intellectual trajectory, and not on any written indications or reports from his contemporaneous friends and associates, or from Daniel Defert's chronology. The existence and placement of the material published as Appendix 2 at pages 291-314 of *Confessions of the Flesh* provides some corroborating evidence for this speculation, although my argument does not rest in any way on those materials but on the broader arc of Foucault's work. Those materials in Appendix 2 include developments that Foucault expressly made in his lectures on governmentality in his Tanner lectures and in *Security, Territory, Population*—precisely the moment of integration that I am proposing; and those materials from Appendix 2 were located in a folder physically located at the end of the first part of the manuscript of *Les Aveux de la chair*. See "Foreword" of Frédéric Gros, *Confessions of the flesh*, xii-xiii; Stuart Elden, "Review: Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*," *Theory, Culture & Society* March 20 (2018) (discussing Appendix 2 and how it "shows ever more clearly how the projects on governmentality and sexuality were mutually constitutive"). So there is corroborating evidence; but again, my argument here rests on the broader theoretical and structural aspects of Foucault's critical intellectual journey.

¹⁴ See also Sverre Raffnsøe, "Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. The fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*," *Foucault Studies*, No. 25 (October 2018), 415 (noting that "the volume ends rather abruptly"). Although the Introduction to Volume 2 may have served as an introduction to Volume 4, as it did to Volume 3, I nevertheless feel that *Les Aveux de la chair* starts abruptly and that there may have been an opportunity, in a preface or introduction, for Foucault to perform some of the integrative work I am suggesting.

¹⁵ See "Foreword" of Frédéric Gros, *Confessions of the flesh*, xi; Sverre Raffnsøe, "Review: Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*," *Foucault Studies*, No. 25 (October 2018), 395-396 (describing and dating this to 1976).

¹⁶ Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (2013).

depoliticizing and undemocratic. Some scholars go even further and argue that Foucault himself actually favored neoliberalism.

Confessions of the Flesh should dispel those complaints and misreading, and open the way to integrate Foucault's projects on knowledge-power and subjectivity. As Foucault underscored in the section titled "Modifications" in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasures* (Volume 2) when he resumed publication of *The History of Sexuality* in 1984—one of the single-most important passages in Foucault's writings post *Discipline and Punish*—the turn to subjectivity in Volumes 2, 3, and now 4, had to be understood as a complement to the critique of power. Foucault's critical project, as he emphasized in "Modifications," was three-dimensional and involved, in his own words, first "the formation of sciences (*savoirs*)," second "the systems of power," and third "the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects."¹⁷ Foucault observed that his previous research on the archaeology of knowledge and the genealogy of power served well to study the first two dimensions,¹⁸ but that he fell behind in elaborating the third dimension, namely subjectivity.¹⁹ And whereas the study of knowledge had required a first shift in the critical method toward archeology, and the study of power had required a second shift in the critical method toward genealogy, to get at the third dimension of his project Foucault needed to make another shift in his approach to study the history of the desiring subject.²⁰ The reason being that we intuitively tend to take desire as static, constant, essential, atemporal, almost universal—as if subjects have always had the same sexual desire—whereas, as Foucault argued, desire must be studied genealogically, a task that he described as both historical and critical, "*un travail historique et critique*."²¹ The critical

¹⁷ *The Use of Pleasure*, 4 ("To speak of 'sexuality' as a historically singular experience also presupposed the availability of tools capable of analyzing the peculiar characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that constitute it: (1) the formation of sciences (*savoirs*) that refer to it, (2) the systems of power that regulate its practice, (3) the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of this sexuality.")

¹⁸ *The Use of Pleasure*, 5 ("Now, as to the first two points, the work I had undertaken previously—having to do first with medicine and psychiatry, and then with punitive power and disciplinary practices—provided me with the tools I needed. The analysis of discursive practices made it possible to trace the formation of disciplines (*savoirs*) while escaping the dilemma of science versus ideology. And the analysis of power relations and their technologies made it possible to view them as open strategies, while escaping the alternative of a power conceived of as domination or exposed as a simulacrum.")

¹⁹ *The Use of Pleasure*, 5-6 ("But when I came to study the modes according to which individuals are given to recognize themselves as sexual subjects, the problems were much greater. [...] Thus, in order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of a "sexuality," it was essential first to determine how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire.")

²⁰ *The Use of Pleasure*, 6 ("It appeared that I now had to undertake a third shift, in order to analyze what is termed "the subject." It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject. After first studying the games of truth (*jeux de vérité*) in their interplay with one another, as exemplified by certain empirical sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then studying their interaction with power relations, as exemplified by punitive practices—I felt obliged to study the games of truth in the relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject, taking as my domain of reference and field of investigation what might be called "the history of desiring man.")

²¹ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 12.

dimension is key: It is the critical historical study of the subject of desire that would call for “*toute l'étude autour de la lente formation, pendant l'antiquité, d'une herméneutique de soi.*”²²

It would be an impoverished reading of *Confessions of the Flesh*—or, for that matter, of the other two volumes from 1984, or his Collège de France lectures after 1980—to view Foucault’s work on subjectivity as *displacing* his earlier problematization of knowledge-power. It does not “scrap” nor “defer his analysis of modern society” but rather completes it.²³ It does not represent a break from the earlier critical intervention but rather a fulfillment of it. It adds a necessary dimension.

Foucault expressly stated, in his last lectures in 1984, *The Courage of Truth*, that it would be an impoverished reading of his theory of knowledge-power to set aside the subject: “to depict this kind of research as an attempt to reduce knowledge (*savoir*) to power, to make it the mask of power in structures, where there is no place for a subject, is purely and simply a caricature.”²⁴ Foucault did not need to state the inverse at that moment, but it is fully implicit in what he said: It would be an impoverished reading of Foucault’s work on subjectivity not to integrate it back into the critique of knowledge and power. In this sense, it is essential to read Volumes 2, 3, and now 4 *back into* Volume 1. It is crucial now to integrate all three dimensions of Foucault’s thought — knowledge-power-subject — in order to understand his full critique of modern forms of governance.²⁵

With the birth of the modern legal subject in *Confessions of the Flesh*, it is now possible to do precisely that. It is possible to integrate the full *History of Sexuality* back into his critique of modern Western societies. As I have suggested, I believe that is what Foucault would have done in a revised introduction and conclusion to the fourth and final volume of this series—but was cut off by his illness. That is our greatest task and challenge today: to explore how we have been shaped as subjects in such a way as to implicate ourselves—both willingly and unwittingly—in the social order within which we find ourselves and that, through the interaction of knowledge-power-subjectivity, we reproduce and

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ Joseph Tanke, “The Final ‘Final Foucault’?” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 1 (2018). Tanke’s essay on Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh* is brilliant and insightful, but in this one respect, I disagree—especially where he writes that “As a result, the emergence of this ethical axis compelled Foucault to scrap, or at least to defer, his analysis of modern society in terms of ‘bio-power’—his designation for the configuration of power and knowledge responsible for managing human life by treating individuals as members of a population, subjecting them to probabilistic calculations regarding health, sanitation, life-expectancy, birthrate, and race—in order to undertake a genealogy of ‘desiring man.’”

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1938-1984* (2011), 10.

²⁵ As Stuart Elden emphasizes, “the projects on governmentality and sexuality were mutually constitutive.” Stuart Elden, “Review: Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 20 (2018). Daniele Lorenzini contributes importantly to the task of repoliticizing Foucault’s final lectures and volumes of *The History of Sexuality* by interpreting them as constituting “a political history of the will” and as contributing to Foucault’s genealogy of neoliberalism. See Daniele Lorenzini, “The Emergence of Desire: Notes Toward a Political History of the Will,” *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019); Daniele Lorenzini, “La politique du paradis. Foucault, *Les Aveux de la chair* et la généalogie du néolibéralisme,” in *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault*, ed. Boehringer Sandra & Laufer Laurie (2020), 249-261.

reestablish.²⁶ With *Confessions of the Flesh*, it is finally possible to see Foucault's full critical project and, now, to give it life.

I. A NOVEL LEGAL THEORY

Let us begin here by framing Foucault's critical project, as evidenced in the newly published Volume 4, and tracing the continuities and differences. What will become apparent is that *Confessions of the Flesh* articulates a novel legal theory.

A. Continuities

The fourth and final volume of *The History of Sexuality* prolongs Foucault's meticulous, painstaking archival project to analyze and expose the manner in which social, cultural, religious, and ethical practices have shaped humans during different historical periods. The volume completes, chronologically, the second and third volumes, pushing the analysis from Greek antiquity and the early Common Era philosophers to the early Christian thinkers of the first to fifth centuries. Foucault's archive, in this fourth volume, is the discourse of those early Church scholars and ascetics, or what are called the early Christian fathers, from early Greek thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), Origen (c. 184-253), and John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), to the early Latin fathers such as Tertullian (c. 155-222), Ambrose (c. 337-397), and John Cassian (c. 360-435), through the great Church father, Saint Augustine (354-430).

We are all familiar, by now, with the broad stroke of his analysis: whereas the ancient Greeks (circa the fifth and fourth centuries BCE) understood sexual relations primarily through the framework of *aphrodisia*, a philosophical understanding that focused on the idea of an ethical self-mastery intended to prevent the subject from getting consumed by the pleasures of sexual relations (Volume 2, *L'usage des plaisirs, The Use of Pleasures*)²⁷; whereas the Greek and Roman philosophers of the early Common Era (circa the first two centuries CE), especially the Stoics, conceptualized sexual relations primarily through the *techniques of the self*, such as the examination of conscience, the memorization of rules of austerity, and practices of penitence (Volume 3, *Le Souci de soi, The Care of the Self*)²⁸; and by contrast to us moderns, who invented psychoanalytic, medical, and legal frameworks to regulate our *sexuality* (Volume 1, *La Volonté de savoir, The Will to Know*)²⁹; the early

²⁶ This is the challenge posed today when digital subjects expose and implicate themselves daily in the construction of our new expository society in the digital age, or get enmeshed in the counter-insurgency warfare paradigm of governing post 9/11. Daniele Lorenzini explores this as well in his chapter, "La politique du paradis. Foucault, *Les Aveux de la chair* et la généalogie du néolibéralisme" (2020).

²⁷ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs; The Use of Pleasure*. See also Lorenzini, "The Emergence of Desire," 453; Stuart Elden, "Review: Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*," *Theory, Culture & Society* March 20 (2018) (describing the transition from *aphrodisia* to flesh to sexuality); Lynne Huffer, *Foucault's Strange Eros* (2020).

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* 3. *Le Souci de soi* (1984); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self* (1988).

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* 1. *La Volonté de savoir* (1976); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (1990).

Christian thinkers deployed the framework of *lust*, *flesh*, and *sin* as a way to curb and regulate sexual relations. Stuart Elden, Daniele Lorenzini, Nancy Luxon, Sverre Raffnsøe, Joseph Tanke and others have laid this out elegantly in important reviews of the fourth volume.³⁰

But—and this is one of the surprising discoveries in *Confessions of the Flesh*—the patristic tradition was far closer to the Greeks than had previously been imagined. The relation of the fathers to the ancients is far more continuous than it is to the moderns. Pace Nietzsche, Foucault dispels the idea that Christianity radically transformed the relation to sex or invented the suspicion of pleasure.³¹ In most respects, he proposes, it drew on the earlier writings and merely reframed the precepts of Stoic or pagan ethics. So, referring to the ancient Greek framework of *aphrodisia*, Foucault notes on the very first page of what might have been the first chapter: “One finds this same regime, essentially unmodified, in the doctrine of the second-century Fathers... These principles would have migrated, as it were, into Christian thought and practice, from pagan milieus...”.³² Or, referring to the first text analyzed, *Paedagogus* of Clement of Alexandria, written at the end of the second century CE, Foucault underscores “a great continuity with the texts of pagan philosophy and morality of the same epoch, or the period immediately preceding.”³³ Throughout Volume 4, Foucault stresses first the continuity, before then refining the analysis to uncover the subtle transformations.

B. Difference

In the course of presenting the continuities and subtle shifts, there is one transformation that eclipses all others. It is the emergence of the subject of rights and responsibilities in Augustine’s writings. It is the juridical turn in Augustine that would prefigure modernity. As Foucault explains:

³⁰ Elden, “Review: Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*,” *Theory, Culture & Society* March 20 (2018); Alexandre Gefen, *Critical Inquiry* 22 August (2018); Lorenzini, “The Emergence of Desire”; Nancy Luxon, “Review: *Les Aveux de la chair*,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 19:S3 (2020), S192-S196; Sverre Raffnsøe, “Review: Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*,” *Foucault Studies* No. 25 (2018), 393-421; Joseph Tanke, “The Final ‘Final Foucault’?” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 1 (2018).

³¹ As Lorenzini notes, the foil here is Nietzsche. Foucault’s history of the subject of desire, he writes, “questions Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim that ‘it was Christianity with its fundamental *ressentiment* against life that first made sexuality into something unclean.” Daniele Lorenzini, “The Emergence of Desire: Notes Toward a Political History of the Will,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, 452 (quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, in “*The Anti-Christ*,” “*Ecce Homo*,” “*Twilight of the Idols*,” and *Other Writings* (2005), 228. See also Raffnsøe, “Review: Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*,” *Foucault Studies* No. 25 (2018), 400. Although Nietzsche is more absent in Volume 4 than he is in earlier work, it is nevertheless interesting to think of the place of Nietzsche in this genealogy of the desiring subject and of the modern subject of law. As François Ewald reminded me, the definition of the subject of law through the concept of responsibility is present in Nietzsche, in the second essay to the *Genealogy of Morals*, which rests as well on the historians of Roman law, especially on their work regarding the birth of the subject capable of contracting; so Nietzsche casts a shadow over this final volume as well.

³² Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

The effects and consequences of the Augustinian theory of concupiscence have obviously been considerable. I would just like to underscore an aspect of it that concerns the government of souls and the sexual conduct of spouses in particular. This government involved their "juridification" or rather the insertion of elements that would have given a juridical type of formalization to practices, rules, prescriptions, and recommendations that had previously been reflected primarily in the forms of spiritual asceticism and the techniques of purification of the soul.³⁴

In this respect, *Confessions of the Flesh* sets forth a unique theory of law: legal norms are not imposed on humans by lawmakers or on high. No, by contrast to theories of law that imagine the imposition of legal norms, Foucault proposes that humans have to be *shaped* into rights-bearing subjects first, and that this work is performed in the ethical and moral sphere of the regulation of social relations. This process of anterior subject creation, Foucault traces primarily to Augustine: it is in Augustine's introduction of the notion of *consensus*, of consent, into the framework of lust in the context of marriage and marital sex, Foucault argues, that subjects begin to be thought as capable of being responsabilized and responsabilizable subjects—as subjects who can be assigned responsibility and culpability for their sexual acts through a process of self-examination of one's relation to God. In effect, the notion of consent that emerges in Augustine is *the condition of possibility* of thinking of ourselves as subjects of rights within a juridical framework not only within but also beyond the domain of sexual relations.

It is here that *Confessions of the Flesh* differs from the other set of lectures that treat the same archive, the 1981 Louvain lectures, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*. But the difference is telling. The distinction helps us close in on the unique contribution of Volume 4.

To be sure, the series that now constitutes *The History of Sexuality* practically parallels, in its breadth and scope, Foucault's lectures at Louvain, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. The role of avowal in Volume 4 echoes the centrality of avowal at Louvain. The breadth of history, now, with the final three volumes, comes close to that of the Louvain lectures. Both texts are centrally about law. *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* focused on the relation between veridiction (telling truth, the diction of *veritas*) and jurisdiction (declaring justice, the diction of *juris*). *Confessions of the Flesh* is centrally about law as well, as evidenced by the very last and weighty sentence: "*In this analytic [the analytic of the subject of concupiscence], sex, truth, and law are bundled together, by ties that our culture has tended to draw closer rather than loosen.*"³⁵

But the differences between the two are worth noting because they reveal different theories of law and the unique contribution of Volume 4. *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* studied the avowal in order to see how the subject implicates himself in his own subjugation. In those lectures, the focus is on the relation between avowal and social order. It is on how the subject implicates himself when he tells truth in processes that produce social order: How, for instance, Antiochus implicates himself in the construction of the social

³⁴ Ibid., 276-277.

³⁵ Ibid., 285.

hierarchy of ancient Greece through his quasi-avowal to Menelaus. In *Confessions of the Flesh*, of course, the analysis also focuses on how the discourse of flesh and lust produces a truth about oneself. In this sense, *The History of Sexuality* is also about sexual avowal and truth. That was, recall, the original intended title of the series: *Sexe et vérité*. But in *Confessions of the Flesh*, another key dimension is the relation to law and juridification; not just in the sense of *Wrong-Doing*, the relation between veridiction and jurisdiction, but in the sense of the emergence of a modern legal subject. So what *Confessions of the Flesh* offers, in addition to *Wrong-Doing*, *Truth-Telling*, is the genealogy of the rights-bearing individual that is the foil to neoliberal thought. It thus offers the groundwork for Foucault's critique of neoliberalism.

C. The Subject of Law

Foucault's point is not that legal proscriptions emerge only in early Christian thought. Nor that a juridical framework first arises there. Of course not. That would be preposterous. There was the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. There were proscriptions on adultery and sodomy throughout the Jewish Torah. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone": surely, under Hebraic law, there was already a conception of rights and duties, and of law, in the context of sexual relations. Foucault himself references throughout *Confessions of the Flesh*, in his words, a "classic" codification³⁶ that includes "the same prohibitions (adultery, debauchery, defilement of children, relations between men), and the same obligations (having procreation in mind when one marries and when one has sexual relations), with the same references to nature and its lessons."³⁷ Similarly, there are mentions of "law" far earlier in time in the historical analysis in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Listen to the discussion of Clement of Alexandria (an early father of the end of the second century CE) in his treatise, *Paedagogus*. Foucault writes there that, as *logos*, "As the Word, it [the pedagogue] teaches God's law; and the commandments it formulates are the universal and living reason."³⁸ There was law before and there is law in the early Christian fathers. There are also elements of will, of *volonté*. Read here too the continuation of the discussion of Clement: "in these right actions which are in keeping with the Logos, we must recognize a will united with God and with Christ."³⁹

So Foucault's argument, naturally, is not that Augustine's discourse on lust, consent, and marriage created for the first time legal duties in the context of sexual relations. Moreover his claim also is not that legal prohibitions are what shaped us as subjects. Foucault had already been clear about this in *L'usage des plaisirs*: "c'est donner là comme solution la question elle-même . . ."⁴⁰ No, the continuous cycles of legal prohibitions do not explain how we were shaped. They are rather the product of it.

³⁶ Ibid., 33.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 16.

Rather, Foucault's argument is that Augustine's writings solidified and justified, and legitimated, the conception of humans as rights-and-responsibility-bearing subjects in the field of sexual relations and, through its expansion, across human experience. In other words, it is only through the continual expansion of the justifiability and legitimacy of thinking of humans as legal subjects—here, through the further juridification of the field of marital sexual practices—that the modern liberal subject of rights and responsibilities, and of possessive individualism, would emerge. The modern political theory of individualism—from the Lockean notion of individual rights, through MacPherson's theory of possessive individualism, to Gary Becker's conception of human capital—depends on and derives from this expansion of the legitimate field of the juridical. Augustine is just one phase in this genealogy and evolution, but a pivotal one because of the emerging centrality of consent in sexual relations.

D. The Main Thread of Volume 4

The overarching project of *Confessions of the Flesh* is to show that, although early Christian thought had significant continuities with Stoic practices, and although there were some differences regarding, for instance, the severity of the regulations,⁴¹ those differences pale in comparison to the more important point that Christian thought shaped differently our relation to ourselves. The penitential discipline of the second half of the second century CE and the monastic ascetic practices of the end of the third century CE create a whole new relation toward the self and between wrong-doing and truth. There is a striking parallel to *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, which Foucault emphasizes in the opening pages of the fourth volume:

The practice of penance and the exercises of the ascetic life organize relations between "wrong-doing" and "truth-telling"; they bundle together relations to oneself, to evil and to truth, in a way that it is doubtless much more innovative and much more determinant than this or that degree of severity added or subtracted from the code.⁴²

Foucault argues that the patristic tradition formed the subject around the notion of "flesh" as a mode of experience, as a mode of knowing oneself, as a way of achieving truth. It is a new mode of subjectivation: in a telling passage struck by Foucault, he writes, "The flesh is a mode of subjectification."⁴³ In this sense, baptism represents, for Foucault, the creation of what he calls "a certain relation between a nullification of evil and manifestation of truth"⁴⁴ and which he describes meticulously in the second part of Chapter 1, developing

⁴¹ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 34-36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 35; Foucault develops these themes of "dire vrai" throughout the first chapter, referring, for instance, to the avowal in medieval penitence as a form of truth-telling, by contrast to the early Christian penitence itself entirely constituting a truth-telling. Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 77-78.

⁴³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 36 n.*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36

“the laborious baptism”⁴⁵ and relying on the texts of Tertullian, especially *De paenitentia*.⁴⁶ It involves rituals of interrogatories, exorcisms (placing of the hands, blowing on the face), and confession or *exomologesis* that constitute a new mode of subject creation.⁴⁷

In early patristic thought, Foucault maintains, subjectivation takes place in novel ways. So, for instance, Foucault compares the Stoic examination of conscience, as reflected in Seneca’s essay *On Anger*,⁴⁸ with the examinations of self in the writings of Clement, Hilary of Poitiers, or Ambrose, in order to demonstrate a shift. For Seneca, it is a question of reviewing one’s daily actions in order to remind oneself or program oneself to follow the proper rules of conduct and not to make the same mistakes again. By contrast, for Clement or Hilary, there is a different relation to the self that is mediated through God: “Here self-knowledge is not in any way a spiritual examination, or a plunge into the depths of oneself; it involves an ascent toward God, at the urging of a soul that is able to rise toward him.”⁴⁹ And if we turn to the writings of John Cassian on early spiritual direction, we see another set of metaphors and pathways.⁵⁰ Here, the Christian fathers speak of examining oneself as the miller or the money-changer might distinguish the good from the bad. The examination and direction are intended to weed good from bad thoughts and to test the purity of one’s thoughts; to determine whether the thoughts one is having are honest and faithful, or the product of deceit.⁵¹ The contrast between the approaches is sharp—and it is precisely the subtle transformations in the ways in which we speak truth about ourselves, reveal our truths, manifest ourselves, and in the process shape our subjectivity, that Foucault unearths in their most minute details.

But *the main thread of the book* concerns, within that broader arc, the emergence of the modern subject of law. At every step of the analysis in *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37-57.

⁴⁶ See Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 41 et seq.

⁴⁷ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 49-53.

⁴⁸ See *Confessions of the Flesh*, 82-84. Foucault had developed this analysis of the examination of conscience in Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (2014), 97-103; as well as *The Government of the Living*, 241 (“When the light is lowered and my [partner], familiar with my habit, has become silent, I examine with myself my whole day [...] and I take the measure again of my words and deeds, I measure them anew. [...] I leave nothing out. [...]’ Thus, in that discussion, Seneca says, ‘you spoke too aggressively, you reproached someone with too little reserve and you did not correct him. On the contrary, instead of correcting him, you offended him. See to it that in the future what you say is not only true, but that the person whom you speak can bear the truth you tell him.’”

⁴⁹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 85; see also Foucault, *The Government of the Living*, 253 (“One knows oneself so that one can have access to knowledge of God, that is to say so that one can recognize what is divine in oneself, so that one can recognize the part or element in the soul that is of divine form, principle, origin, or at any rate in contact with God.”)

⁵⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 102-105.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103-104; see also Foucault, *The Government of the Living*, 301 (“What in fact does the money-changer do?” Foucault asks. “Cassian says the money-changer is someone who checks the metal of the coin, who checks its nature, its purity, and also the image stamped on it, someone who questions the coin’s origin. [...] [First possibility: an idea comes to mind with all the brilliance of philosophical language], one thinks it pure gold—and God knows how philosophers can gild their ideas—but they are only the ideas of philosophers and not truly Christian. So they must be rejected. False metal.”)

carefully lays the groundwork for the argument that Augustine alone juridified sexual relations. At every stage, Foucault makes sure to lay a foundation for his thesis—which reflects the centrality of that intervention. At every step of the way before he gets to Augustine, Foucault underscores that, even if there were earlier elements that resembled the juridical, they were not central, and that the subject of law only emerges with Augustine.

1. *The Juridical Is Only a Minor Dimension of the Penitential*

So, to begin with, Foucault analyses the rise of penitence in the second century CE (fully detailed in section III of Chapter 1) and emphasizes that, although there is a juridical dimension to the new penitential practices, that juridical dimension is *not* central. Foucault notes that there are certainly medical and juridical dimensions to penitence. Medical, in the sense that the model is often that of injuries and remedies, of the sick and the healer, with the priest taking the role of the doctor.⁵² Juridical, in the sense that the model is also often of the wrongdoer and the jury, taking place in the tribunal of truth, with the priest as judge.⁵³ But despite this, and the fact that both the medical and the juridical models will increase in importance later with the penitential avowal (*exagoreusis*), Foucault maintains that they only have an “accessory role.”⁵⁴ What is really determinative is the model of martyrdom, because it is more connected to the conduct of truth, Foucault states.⁵⁵ Foucault goes out of his way to stress that, in penitential practices, the juridical element that is there is of no importance, and that there is no creation of a subject of law.

2. *Juridical Not a Part of the Monastic*

Foucault then provides a lengthy discussion of monastic obedience, reading John Cassian who described intimately the rules of monastic life.⁵⁶ But here too, it is not a juridical model but rather one of absolute submission. The permanent examination and confession of the self as well—what is called *exagoreusis*—is not modeled on the juridical for Foucault.⁵⁷ In fact, Foucault specifically emphasizes that it is not modeled on a juridical confession.⁵⁸ “Exagoreusis is not like an admission in court. It does not take place within an apparatus of jurisdiction; it is not a way for someone who has violated a law to recognize his responsibility in order to lessen the punishment.”⁵⁹

⁵² *Confessions of the Flesh*, 75.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 90 et seq.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 100 et seq.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

3. *Not a Part of the Regulation of Virginit*

The unique practice of virginity in Christianity — which both continued, but differed from, the pagan practices of continence — has a productive dimension, namely it contributes to the unique way of being that characterizes the Christian ethos: a special relationship “of the individual to himself, his thought, his soul, and his body.”⁶⁰ By contrast to ancient Greek notions of continence and abstinence that are merely repressive, the idea of chastity is a positive force that gives rise to the concepts of the soul and body, and relations to self.⁶¹

But the techniques of self-care associated with virginity do not amount to a law, Foucault stresses. It is not regulated as law; other features are more important. “It is not a law,” Foucault affirms.⁶² It does not form a proscription. Foucault writes:

It is a mode of relation between God and man; it marks that moment in the history of the world and in the movement of salvation where God and his creature no longer communicate through the Law and obedience to Law. [...] It is an exercise of the soul upon itself, which carries it as far as the immortalization of the body. It is a relation of the soul to itself in which the unending life of the body is at stake.⁶³

Elsewhere, Foucault simply writes of virginity: “A choice, and not a law.”⁶⁴ Once again, we are not yet at the juridification of sexual relations.

Foucault develops the productivity of virginity at pages 154-155 of *Confessions of the Flesh*, where it becomes clear that, as a form of relation to the body — one that involves infinite labor (and the concept of labor and of the laboriousness of these practices is key)⁶⁵ — these practices ground the importance of sex in Western life. “The central place of sex in Western subjectivity is clearly marked by the formation of this mystique of virginity.”⁶⁶ Foucault elaborates, at pages 188-89, on the productivity of virginity, on the surveillance that it produces and the mode of subjectivation: it is the opening of a new domain, he argues, not repression. But here to, he emphasizes, it is *not* juridical.

4. *Marriage: Consent at the Source of the Subject of Law*

Foucault begins his analysis of what he calls “the arts of matrimonial life” at the end of the fourth century CE proposing a similar theoretical structure of similarities and differences — with the major difference here being that sexual relations between husband and wife are no longer viewed as primarily important for purposes of procreation.⁶⁷ With Christianity, it is as if a whole new panel of a triptych opens up: marital sexual relations

⁶⁰ Ibid., 116.

⁶¹ Ibid., 167.

⁶² Ibid., 134.

⁶³ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 154, 37.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 197.

are not valued simply to have children but to calm lust and avoid the sins of fornication.⁶⁸ In effect, marriage is not just for procreation but for the enjoyment of consensual sex that is not blameworthy.⁶⁹

But even here, in this pre-Augustinian moment, Foucault makes sure to emphasize that the juridical element associated with marriage at that time—in creating obligations and in being itself “a law”⁷⁰—is not primordial and that what still takes precedence is the relationship to oneself.⁷¹ The paradigm remains the relation of self to self. As he explains

Even in the dual form of marriage, the basic problem is what to do with one's own concupiscence; hence it is the relation of oneself to oneself. And the internal law of marital sex was first organized as a way of managing through the other this fundamental self-to-self relation.⁷²

It is only with Augustine that there emerges, first, the notion of pacts or contracts,⁷³ and then a jurisprudence of sexual relations that, Foucault claims, will take considerable importance in the second half of the Middle Ages and into the eighteenth century.⁷⁴ Through notions of consent, free will, and lack of culpability, Augustine transforms the earlier lines of demarcation and effectively constructs a juridical model.⁷⁵ Foucault explains:

In centering his analysis of concupiscence not on the problem of the pure and the impure, of the soul and the body, of matter and spirit, of passion and self-control, but on that of the voluntary and the involuntary, or more exactly on the very structure of the will, it is clear that he was inscribing it in a system of juridical references. He undertook the task [...]: positing the sinner as a subject of law; or, as we would say in other vocabulary, positing the subject of desire and the subject of law as existing simultaneously and in a single form. The two most important notions, no doubt, for this juridification were those of consent (consensus) and usage (usus).⁷⁶

This is precisely the passage that gives rise to a juridico-physical relationship between the subject of lust and the subject of law—and the emergence of this figure of the rights-and-responsibilities-bearing individual who will play such an important role in the religious and political theories for so many centuries, through and beyond the Reformation.⁷⁷ The central idea here is of an intertwining of the juridical and the physical, of the institutional

⁶⁸Ibid., 209.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 209-210; see also Nancy Luxon, “Review: *Les Aveux de la chair*,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 19:S3 (2020), S194 (noting that *Les Aveux de la chair* “opens up (for a readerly audience if not those of early Christianity) the space of a spiritual subject not yet soldered to a juridical one – a claim radical in its time, but now more familiar from the intervening years of speculation.”)

⁷⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 213.

⁷¹ Ibid., 220.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. 244.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 259.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 277.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 276-277 (Foucault extends this period to the Reformation), 280 (discussion of the “juridico-physical”).

and of the corporeal. As Foucault provocatively writes: “one made use of a right in making use of a body.”⁷⁸

II. FOUCAULT’S CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Confessions of the Flesh thus provides the missing genealogical link to the rights-and-responsibility-bearing modern legal subject who represents the foil to the neoliberal economic subject. And Foucault’s critique of neoliberalism hinges on that distinction.

As Foucault made clear in his lectures in 1979 on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the central actor of neoclassical economic thought and of neoliberal practice, *homo oeconomicus*, can only be understood properly in contradistinction to the modern subject of law.⁷⁹ Foucault traces the emergence of the economic subject back to the writings of English empiricist philosophy from Locke onwards: the appearance of what he calls “a subject of interest,” and which he defines as “a subject as the source of interest, the starting point of an interest, or the site of a mechanism of interests.”⁸⁰ He distinguishes this emerging subject of interest from the modern legal subject of, say, Blackstone, and shows how it develops eventually into the subject of *laissez-faire* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, into the subject of rational choice in the twentieth century, and into the neoliberal subject at the end of the twentieth century. This economic subject is directly contrasted with the subject of lust and the subject of law who emerges in the final pages of *Confessions of the Flesh*. The foil animates Foucault’s argument. As he writes in 1979:

[...] the theory of the subject in English empiricism probably represents one of the most important mutations, one of the most important theoretical transformations in Western thought since the Middle Ages.

What English empiricism introduces—let’s say, roughly, with Locke—and doubtless for the first time in Western philosophy, is a subject who is *not so much defined by his freedom, or by the opposition of soul and body, or by the presence of a source or core of concupiscence marked to a greater or lesser degree by the Fall or sin*, but who appears in the form of a subject of individual choices which are both irreducible and non-transferrable.⁸¹

It is on the basis of that distinction that Foucault identifies the logic of neoliberal thought: What is so powerful about classical liberalism and reinforced in neoliberalism is that, by contrast to the subject of rights who can limit the power of the state, the idea of the economic subject strips the state of all knowledge. It completely disarms the state. In this sense, the theory of *homo oeconomicus* outdoes the theory of the subject of law and, in the process, strips the state and all collective authority of any and all legitimacy because they have no knowledge and no possibility of knowledge.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁷⁹ Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 295 (lecture of April 4, 1979).

⁸⁰ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 273.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 271-272 (emphasis added).

Foucault's central critique of neoliberalism can be located in his lecture of March 28, 1979—I refer to it elsewhere as his “third critique” because there are two others in *The Birth of Biopolitics*.⁸² This third critique argues that the very ideal of a deregulated government is baked into the cake of neoliberalism because of the underlying theory of the subject in the rational actor model. In other words, the political outcomes are inserted from the get-go and inscribed in the notion of the rational, self-interested subject that founds the very approach. The original theory of the self-interested and self-knowing subject, assumed by these thinkers, automatically disqualifies the knowledge of the political sovereign or the collectivity.

In other words, neoliberalism assumes from the outset a subject who alone is the knowing subject, and, as a result, there is no question that the political body must ultimately be disqualified. Foucault explains this in the following passage:

Economic rationality is not only surrounded by, but founded on the unknowability of the totality of the process. *Homo œconomicus* is the one island of rationality possible within an economic process whose uncontrollable nature does not challenge, but instead founds the rationality of the atomistic behavior of *homo œconomicus*. Thus the economic world is naturally opaque and naturally non-totalizable. [...] Liberalism acquired its modern shape precisely with the formulation of this essential incompatibility between the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest and the totalizing unity of the juridical sovereign.

[...] *Homo œconomicus* ... tells the sovereign: You must not. But why must he not? You must not because you cannot. And you cannot in the sense that “you are powerless.” And why are you powerless, why can't you? You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know.

[...] The basic function or role of the theory of the invisible hand is to disqualify the political sovereign.⁸³

⁸² This central critique can be located on pages 282-283 of the English edition and pages 285-286 of the original French edition of *The Birth of Biopolitics*. I discuss the other two critiques in my essay on Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* at Foucault 13/13 here: <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/foucault1313/2016/03/30/foucault-813-some-questions-for-nancy-fraser-richard-brooks-and-kendall-thomas/>.

⁸³ *Birth of Biopolitics*, 282-283; *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 285-286. This (third) critique can also be discerned in two other places. First on page 271 of the English, page 275 of the French edition, when Foucault begins the discussion, rhetorically:

Is *homo œconomicus* [...] not already a certain type of subject who precisely enabled an art of government to be determined according to the principle of economy, both in the sense of political economy and in the sense of the restriction, self-limitation, and frugality of government?

Second, on page 292 on April 4, 1979, in the last lecture, where Foucault is discussing the fact that “*Homo œconomicus* strips the sovereign of power inasmuch as he reveals an essential, fundamental, and major incapacity of the sovereign, that is to say, an inability to master the totality of the economic field. The sovereign cannot fail to be blind vis-a-vis the economic domain or field as a whole.” (*Birth of Biopolitics*, 292; *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 296).

In effect, the epistemological *assumptions* regarding the economic subject are entirely responsible for the theoretical *outcomes*: neoliberal economic theory rests on an illusion, an unfounded belief.

I would argue that this critique of neoliberalism was confirmed during a seminar with Gary Becker and François Ewald at the University of Chicago in 2013, when Becker read and responded to Foucault's discussion of his work. During the course of that seminar, when Becker was pushed on the empirical foundation for certain of his assertions, Becker spontaneously exclaimed that "I believe there's a lot of risk of government overregulating society with too many laws, and *that's why I've always been a small government person.*"⁸⁴ Becker returned to this statement a few moments later, and elaborated:

It comes from a belief that the government usually makes things worse, rather than making them better, for the bulk of the population. It's an analysis—it may be a wrong analysis, but that's the analysis. [...] When I say I'm a small government person, I am making the judgment that whatever the imperfection when the private sector operates, the effects are worse when I see the government operating. Now, other people may say that the evidence for that is not so clear, that in other sectors it is different. I recognize that. But that is what it would be based on.⁸⁵

That exchange with Becker instantiates Foucault's critique. It lays bare the epistemological assumption underlying neoliberal thought—a bare, unfounded assumption—that itself produces the political outcomes favoring a purportedly limited government. (I say "purportedly" because the neoliberal conception of a small government is joined at the hip by a massive domestic and international police state that serves to maintain the appearance of free markets.⁸⁶) In any event, the subjectivity assumed by neoliberal theory animates the political outcomes.

In thus completing the genealogy of the subject of concupiscence and the subject of law, *Confessions of the Flesh* provides the final building block necessary for the critique of Becker and American neoliberalism. Volume 4 demonstrates, in detail, how Augustine's conception of consent in the context of marital sexual relations forms the final and formerly missing link in the chain: the modern legal subject.

CONCLUSION

In the public seminar at Columbia University *Critique 13/13*, we took on the challenge of returning to classical texts of critical theory to diagnose our contemporary crisis and

⁸⁴ See Gary S. Becker, François Ewald, and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Becker and Foucault on Crime and Punishment," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 9: *Neoliberalism (cont'd)* (2013), 32 (emphasis added); see also generally Gary S. Becker, François Ewald, and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker': American Neoliberalism and Michel Foucault's 1979 *Birth of Biopolitics* Lectures," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 7: *Neoliberalism and Risk* (2011).

⁸⁵ Becker, Ewald, and Harcourt, "Becker and Foucault on Crime and Punishment," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 9: *Neoliberalism (cont'd)*, 37-38.

⁸⁶ See Bernard E. Harcourt, *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (2011).

reorient our political struggles.⁸⁷ I would argue that the challenge with regard to *Confessions of the Flesh*—as well as *The Use of Pleasures* and *The Care of Self*—is to fold the history of the desiring subject back into the overarching critical project, to integrate the work on subjectivity into the earlier theory of knowledge-power, in order to produce a more robust three-dimensional critique of the present. And then, perhaps even more importantly, to confront the full history of the present against our contemporary modes of critical praxis and resistance.

More concretely, the challenge is to better understand how we, contemporary subjects, have been shaped, understand ourselves, experience and reproduce relations of power in this period of crisis marked by hegemonic neoliberal practice, new digital technologies, post-9/11 counterrevolution, global climate change, and pandemic; and how this interacts with and against our ongoing forms of resistance and revolt. In bridging the philosophical work on subject creation and the earlier critique of power, and placing Foucault's critical project squarely under the tri-partite structure of knowledge-power-subjectivity, *Confessions of the Flesh* offers one of the most promising models for a way forward.

References

- Becker, Gary S., François Ewald and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Becker and Foucault on Crime and Punishment," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 9: *Neoliberalism (cont'd)*. New York: U.S. Lithograph, Inc., 2013.
http://www.thecarceral.org/cn9/cn9_Becker_et_al_Published_Final.pdf
- Becker, Gary S., François Ewald and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker': American Neoliberalism and Michel Foucault's 1979 *Birth of Biopolitics* Lectures," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 7: *Neoliberalism and Risk*. New York: U.S. Lithograph, Inc., 2011.
http://www.thecarceral.org/cn7_Becker_Ewald_Conversation.pdf
- Elden, Stuart, "Review: Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20 (2018).
<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/review-michel-foucault-confessions-of-the-flesh>
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité* 1. *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité* 2. *L'usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité* 3. *Le Souci de soi*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité* 4. *Les Aveux de la chair*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*, ed. Michel Senellart. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*, ed. Michel Senellart. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

⁸⁷ See *Critique 13/13*, Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, Columbia University, <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/>.

- Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1938-1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 4: *Confessions of the Flesh*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Harcourt, Bernard E., *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Huffer, Lynne, *Foucault's Strange Eros*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
- Lorenzini, Daniele, "La politique du paradis. Foucault, *Les Aveux de la chair* et la généalogie du néolibéralisme," in *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault*, ed. Boehringer Sandra and Laufer Laurie, 249-261. Paris: EPEL, 2020.
- Lorenzini, Daniele, "The Emergence of Desire: Notes Toward a Political History of the Will," *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019), 448-470. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700997>
- Luxon, Nancy, "Review: *Les Aveux de la chair*," *Contemporary Political Theory* 19:S3 (2020), S192-S196. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-019-00333-z>
- Myers, Ella, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Raffnsøe, Sverre, "Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. The fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 393-421. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v25i2.5593>
- Tanke, Joseph, "The Final 'Final Foucault'?" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 1 (2018), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-final-final-foucault/>

Author info

Bernard E. Harcourt

beh2139@columbia.edu

Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought

Columbia University

USA

Bernard E. Harcourt is the Isidor and Seville Sulzbacher Professor of Law and Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and a chaired professor at the École des Hautes

Études en Sciences Sociales. He is the author most recently of [*Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Value, and Action*](#) (2020).

ARTICLE

What Is a Desiring Man?

AGUSTÍN COLOMBO

Fonds de la recherche scientifique F.R.S – FNRS

Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

ABSTRACT: This article investigates Foucault’s account of desiring man by drawing upon *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*. In order to do so, the article focuses on Foucault’s diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of “the analytic of the subject of concupiscence” that closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. As the article shows, “the analytic of the subject of concupiscence” inspires Foucault’s account of desiring man. However, Foucault’s diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of “the analytic of concupiscence” proves to be debatable as it relies on a problematic interplay between Cassian’s and Saint Augustine’s account of concupiscence. The article exposes the problems that such interplay supposes by addressing the contrast between Cassian’s and Augustine’s perspective on both concupiscence and the human condition. Despite this problematic aspect of Foucault’s investigation of Christianity, the article argues that the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* is central to understanding Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. By providing new elements of analysis, the book reopens Foucault’s genealogical diagnosis of the formation of the medical account of sexuality and allows us to problematise new avenues for developing Foucault’s investigation in depth.

Keywords: Confessions of the Flesh, desiring man, History of Sexuality, Christianity, Saint Augustine, John Cassian.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of “desiring man” lies at the heart of Foucault’s project *History of Sexuality*. While it does not appear in *History of Sexuality vol. 1* – even if Foucault had already employed it previously¹ – the syntagma “desiring man” acquires all its significance in the “modifications” introduced by *History of Sexuality vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure*. The relevance that this text assigns to the aforementioned syntagma is twofold. First, the historical formation of the “principle of desiring man” is conceived as a crucial milestone in the genealogy of the modern medical account of sexuality.² Secondly, the principle of desiring man

¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (1988), 20.

² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 2. The Use of Pleasure* (1990), 5.

constitutes a notion that combines two of the main domains of analysis addressed by Foucault's inquiry into sexuality: truth and subjectivity. The genealogy of the desiring man aims "to analyse the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognise, 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".³

Drawing upon Foucault's *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*, this article aims to analyse the conceptual scope of the "principle of desiring man" and to investigate the role that it plays in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Dedicated to analysing the sexual ethics elaborated by the Church Fathers, *Confessions of the Flesh* plays a major role in Foucault's reflection on the "principle of desiring man". This is because Foucault tends to assign to early Christianity the formation of this principle. However, this diagnosis seems to be problematic and shows the extent to which Foucault's investigation of desiring man was left unfinished as a consequence of Foucault's early death. The problems entailed by Foucault's historical diagnosis of the shaping of the "principle of desiring man" seems to be particularly related to the interplay between Cassian's ascetic techniques of truth-telling and Augustine's account of concupiscence.⁴ Such interplay is the basis on which Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies and which constitutes the embryonic definition of what will be defined later as the "principle of desiring man". The main problem of the interplay between Cassian and Augustine proposed by Foucault is that it does not take into account Cassian's and St. Augustine's different perspectives on both concupiscence and the human condition. In fact, the monk and the bishop of Hippo had quite diverse approaches to these two topics. Despite these difficulties, Foucault's reflections on the historical shaping of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" contained in *Confessions of the Flesh* have a crucial value. The *History of Sexuality vol. 4* not only allows us to grasp the status of Foucault's research on *History of Sexuality* better by making available new material, in particular about St. Augustine, but also because the book opens new avenues for developing Foucault's research in depth.

The first section focuses on the modifications introduced by the notion of desiring man to the genealogical diagnosis of *History of Sexuality vol. 1*, which already conceived Christianity as the historical focal point of the formation of the modern medical account of sexuality. The second section is devoted to analysing Foucault's hypothesis on the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" that closes the last section of *Confessions of the Flesh*. The third part addresses the contrast between Cassian's and

³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 5. Foucault defines subjectivity as "the mode of relation of self to self"; Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980* (2014), 225.

⁴ Even if he does not mention the question of desiring man, Alessandro Pandolfi had already pointed out, well before *Confessions of the flesh* was published, the problematic aspects of the interplay between Cassian and Augustine proposed by Foucault. Alessandro Pandolfi, *Tre studi su Foucault* (2000), 354, quoted in Michel-Yves Perrin, "Lectures foucauldienne d'Augustin. Entre histoire et historiographie" in Büttgen Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini (ed.), *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, in press.

Augustine's accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition. The conclusions focus on the problems that the said contrast involves, and suggest new avenues for developing Foucault's investigation of desiring man.

Through a critical analysis of Foucault's account of desiring man based on *Confessions of the Flesh*, I aim to provide both a new insight into one of the main genealogical hypotheses that structures Foucault's *History of Sexuality* – i.e., the Christian historical origin of modern sexuality – and to enrich the ongoing reception of Foucault's *History of Sexuality vol. 4*.⁵ In this endeavour, I also aim to enrich both the research conducted in the wake of Foucault's reflexion on “desiring man”⁶ and the investigation focused on Foucault's research on Christianity.⁷

FROM CONFESSION TO DESIRING MAN

Since the beginning of the investigation devoted to the *History of Sexuality* project, Foucault assigns Christianity a crucial genealogical relevance in the formation of the modern medical account of sexuality. According to the original “periodisation” proposed by *History of Sexuality vol. 1*, “the traditional technology of the flesh” developed in the wake of Counter-Reformation constitutes the focal point of the formation of the techniques upon which the organisation of the modern medical disciplines of sexuality relies. At the heart

⁵ Sandra Boehringer et Laurie Laufer (dir.), *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault* (2020); Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo et Arianna Sforzini (dir.), *Foucault, les Pères, sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair* (in press); Agustín Colombo, “L'expérience des Pères : Les Aveux de la chair de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair”, *Revue théologique de Louvain* (in press); Agustín Colombo, “Michel Foucault y el hombre de deseo. Las Confesiones de la carne y los límites de la Historia de la sexualidad”, *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 37:1 (2020), 123-135; Daniele Lorenzini, “The emergence of desire : notes toward a political history of the will”, *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Winter 2019), 448-470; Orazio Irrera, “L'empire de l'involontaire et la volonté de n'être pas gouverné” *Revista de Filosofía Aurora* 31:52 (2019), 224-256.

⁶ Miguel de Beistegui, *The government of desire: a genealogy of the liberal subject* (2018).

⁷ In France, the work of Michel Senellart and Philippe Chevallier has been crucial for the reception of Foucault's investigation on Christianity. Senellart edited Foucault's lectures at Collège de France that were devoted to studying Christianity, such as *Security, Territory, Population* (2009) and *On the Government of the Living* (2014). An important part of his book *Les Arts de gouverner. Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement* (1995) draws upon Foucault's research on governmentality to investigate the account of government developed by the Church Fathers. Senellart has also written many journal articles and book chapters devoted to analysing Foucault's approach to Christianity – e.g., “Paradossi e attualità della soggettivazione cristiana”, E De Conciliis (ed.), *Dopo Foucault. Genealogie del postmoderno* (2007). Philippe Chevallier is the author of *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011) and of many journal articles and book chapters focused on Foucault's research on Christianity – e.g., “Michel Foucault et le ‘soi’ chrétien”, *Astérion* (2013). Elizabeth Clark's pioneer work “Foucault, the Fathers, and the sex” *Journal of the American Academy of religion* (1988) and the research conducted by James Bernauer, Jeremy Carette – e.g., *Michel Foucault and Theology* (2004) – and Mark Jordan – e.g., *Convulsing Bodies* (2014) have played a crucial role in the reception of Foucault's investigation on Christianity in English speaking countries. The work of Santiago Castro Gómez – e.g., *Historia de la gubernamentalidad II. Filosofía, cristianismo y sexualidad en Michel Foucault* (2016), José Luis Villacañas – *Neoliberalismo como teología política. Habermas, Foucault, Dardot, Laval y la historia del capitalismo contemporáneo* (2020) and Cesar Candiotti and Pedro de Souza – *Foucault e o cristianismo* (2012) has been capital for the reception of Foucault's research on Christianity in Latin America and Spain.

of such diagnosis, desire plays a preeminent epistemological role because it constitutes the object of knowledge of those techniques. In Foucault's view, despite the rupture of the Church caused by the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Catholic and Protestant methods of examination of conscience and pastoral direction established "procedures for analysing 'concupiscence' and transforming it into discourse".⁸ Consequently, the investigation of the formation and development of these Christian techniques has always been pivotal for the questions that, since the beginning, organise Foucault's *History of Sexuality* project: how "a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are to sex"? And more precisely, why desire serves as "our master key" "whenever there is a question of knowing who we are"?⁹

In the wake of the research conducted in *Abnormal*¹⁰, *History of Sexuality vol. 1* investigates the Christian origin of the modern account of sexuality through confession. In fact, in *History of Sexuality vol.1*, confession (*aveu*) works as that which explains the formation of *scientia sexualis*, namely the "procedures to telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power"¹¹ that characterise the approach to sexuality in western societies. More precisely, confession is conceived as "the general standard (*matrice*) governing the production of the true discourse on sex".¹² The genealogical dimension of confession is clearly illustrated by the five procedures through which confession may "come to be constituted in scientific terms".¹³ The notion of "desiring man", on which the "modifications" of *The Use of Pleasure* pivot, picks up the genealogical perspective proposed in *History of Sexuality vol.1*. However, by drawing upon the notion of "desiring man", Foucault introduces a twofold displacement. First, the analysis of the formation of the principle of desiring man becomes the cornerstone on which *History of Sexuality's* new periodisation relies. As Foucault explains, the investigation into the genealogy of desiring man led him to reorganise "the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self".¹⁴ Second, by putting the emphasis on "hermeneutics", the epistemological status of desire as a key dimension of Foucault's investigation gets reinforced and clarified. The genealogy of the "principle of desiring man" aims to investigate the formation of a "hermeneutics of desire" – a term often used by Foucault as a synonym of the "hermeneutics of the self" – which is focused, as already mentioned, on the practices through which individuals were led to bring into play between themselves and themselves "a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being".¹⁵ In other words, the diagnosis of the constitution of desire as an "object of

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1* (1978), 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰ The seventh lesson of *Abnormal* is dedicated to sketching out a "little history" of confession. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975* (2003), 170.

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ 1. The clinical codification for the inducement to speak; 2. The postulate of the general and diffuse causality; 3. The principal of latency intrinsic to sexuality; 4. The method of interpretation; 5. The medicalisation of the effects of confession (*History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, 65-67).

¹⁴ *The Use of Pleasure*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

veridiction” of subjectivity – i.e., an object capable of declaring “true or false”¹⁶ about subjectivity – acquires a clearer priority in Foucault’s investigation. This is because, even if *History of Sexuality vol. 1* was already eloquent about the epistemological role of desire – “the master key” that serves to know who we are –, desire remained too attached to the genealogical pre-eminence that the book accords to confession. While confession still plays a pivotal role in Foucault’s investigation, with *The Use of Pleasure*, the diagnosis of the historical conditions of the problematisation of desire as an element susceptible of revealing the truth of individuals acquires a thematical autonomy and a clearer independent genealogical relevance. Certainly, such displacement is provoked by the general theoretical perspective on subjectivity that henceforth dominates *History of Sexuality*. In fact, even if the dimension of subjectivity was already present in *History of Sexuality vol. 1* – according to which confession involves “an immense labour to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce (...) men’s subjection: their constitutions as subjects in both senses of the word”¹⁷ – the first volume of Foucault’s project was mainly devoted to analysing the development of the medical disciplines that characterise the modern account of sexuality. The “modifications” introduced by *The Use of Pleasure* do not change the stated goal of Foucault’s investigation. However, the diagnosis of the shaping of the modern medical account of sexuality, which is now defined by Foucault in terms of the “experience of sexuality”,¹⁸ henceforth relies on the analysis of the role that desire plays within the historical dynamics that organise the relations between subjectivity and truth.

Written before *The Use of Pleasure*¹⁹ but published in 2018 almost 35 years after Foucault’s death, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Les Aveux de la chair* is devoted to studying the sexual ethics elaborated by the Church Fathers. The last section of the book, “the libidinalisation of sex” contains crucial elements that allow a better understanding of Foucault’s hypothesis regarding the elaboration of the notion of “desiring man” by Christianity. Actually, Foucault’s account of desiring man seems to be inspired by the diagnosis that closes the main part of the book²⁰ on the emergence of “the analytic of the subject of concupiscence” at the time of St. Augustine and his contemporaries.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “Foucault” [1994], in *Essential Works 2: Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, ed. Faubion James (1998), 460.

¹⁷ *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, 60. *History of Sexuality, vol. 1* does not clarify what “both senses of the word subject” are. For a possible explanation, Michel Foucault, “The subject and power” (1982), 212: “There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and [subject] tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subjects to”.

¹⁸ *The Use of Pleasure*, 5.

¹⁹ According to the editor of *Les Aveux de la chair*, Frédéric Gros, Foucault completed the manuscript of *Les Aveux de la chair* between 1981 and 1982 (Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), x). Michel Senellart affirms that Foucault started to work on the manuscript at the beginning of 1979. According to him, “it is likely” that the writing of the manuscript accompanied the development of the lectures at the Collège de France *On the Government of the Living* (Foucault, *On the Government of the Living, “Situation du cours”*, 343).

²⁰ The book also includes four appendices; *Confessions of the Flesh*, 292-323.

THE ANALYTICS OF THE SUBJECT OF CONCUPISCENCE

According to Foucault, at the time of St. Augustine and his contemporaries ("In Augustine and his time"), Christianity developed an account of concupiscence as "evil" through which it was possible to combine, under the "same theme of spiritual combat (*combat spirituel*)", the exercise of virginity and the practice of marriage. This is because individuals, in both virginity and marriage, have to deal with the same kind of evil. Therefore, both conditions – i.e., virginity and marriage – require the "same renunciation of the concupiscent form of the will (*Dans les deux états c'est au même mal qu'on a affaire, c'est le même renoncement à la forme concupiscente de la volonté qui est exigé*)".²¹ As a consequence, Foucault affirms, the regulation of all sexual conduct relies on the relationship that individuals have with their own concupiscence. Such a relationship is twofold. On the one hand, it concerns individuals' relation with their own truth because such truth "can be discovered only by the subject itself in its innermost being." Foucault does not explain whether, in order to discover their own truth, individuals need to focus on their own desire. However, as his conclusions show, this seems to be Foucault's opinion. On the other hand, the relation that individuals have with their own concupiscence works as the basis that determines which sexual acts are allowed or forbidden. Accordingly, this aspect of individuals' relation with their own concupiscence results in a juridical organisation of sexual activity based on which individuals' actions will be defined and divided in terms of good or wrong.²²

In terms of Foucault's investigation of Christianity, the diagnosis regarding the aforementioned twofold dynamic of the relation that individuals have with their own concupiscence relies on the possibility of connecting two different fields of analysis. On the one hand, there is the truth-telling ascetic techniques developed by Cassian's account of chastity – i.e., techniques that allow the discovery of the truth of the subject built up by the monastic reflection on virginity. On the other hand, there is the juridical dimension of Augustine's ethics of marriage. As Foucault affirms, the connection between these two fields would be grounded on a similar account of concupiscence developed at the time of Augustine and his contemporaries – like Augustine, Cassian was born in the fourth century and died in the fifth century. Based on the interplay between Cassian's truth-telling ascetic techniques and Augustine's ethics of marriage, Foucault affirms that Christianity builds up an "analytic of the subject of concupiscence", which *Confessions of the Flesh* does not define in detail. In fact, the book only mentions that "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" consists in an analysis performed either "in the form of theory and speculation" or "in the practical form of individual examination".²³ Nonetheless, the terms of the concept are clear: the "analytic of the subject of concupiscence" consists in an analysis

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 284. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4, Les Aveux de la chair* (2018), 360.

²² *Confessions of the Flesh*, 284-285. This twofold dimension of the relationship between subjectivity and desire developed by Christianity results in the possibility to conceive the subject as both a desiring subject and a juridical subject simultaneously (*Confessions of the Flesh*, 277).

²³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285.

focalised on the subject's desire. The conceptual echoes with the "principle of desiring man" are evident: what is at stake in both notions is the analysis of desire as an element susceptible to bringing to light individuals' truth.

As I will show, the interplay between Cassian and Augustine on which Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies constitutes one of the most problematic aspects of Foucault's investigation into Christianity and, therefore, on his reflections on the principle of desiring man. Prior to focusing on Foucault's analysis of Cassian and Augustine, it is worth considering the genealogical relevance that Foucault assigns to the perspective on desire elaborated by Christianity in late antiquity.

In Foucault's view, the sexual ethics that resulted from the Christian account of concupiscence dislocated the Pagan account of sexual ethics, which constituted a "paroxysmal bloc"; a "convulsional event (*unité*)" where individuals "would lose themselves in the pleasure of their interaction with the other, to the point of mimicking death".²⁴ By undoing this block through "rules of living, arts of conducting oneself and others, techniques of examination or procedures of confession, a general doctrine of desire, of the fall, transgression (*faute*)",²⁵ Christianity reorganised this ethical unity. However, in doing so, the new Christian ethical block no longer pivoted on pleasure and the relationship to others. Rather, it was organised by centring "on desire and the subject."²⁶ This reorganisation of the sexual ethics gave rise to "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence", which, as mentioned, could take either the form of the "theory or speculation" or the mandatory practice of "self-examination". Focused on the sexual ethics developed by the Church Fathers, *History of Sexuality vol. 4* does not examine the dislocation of Pagan sexual ethics. However, it is possible to grasp Foucault's hypothesis regarding such dislocation better by drawing upon *History of Sexuality vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure* and Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France *Subjectivity and Truth*.

While Foucault generally defines *aphrodisia*, namely the Pagan account of sexual ethics, as "acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure",²⁷ he particularly insists on the idea that what characterises *aphrodisia* is their dynamics instead of their form. In his view, *aphrodisia*'s dynamics are defined by the "movement that linked *aphrodisia* to the pleasure that was associated with them and to the desire to which they gave rise".²⁸ More precisely, "the attraction exerted by pleasure and the force of the desire that was directed toward it constituted, together with the action of the *aphrodisia* itself, a solid unity".²⁹ Even if, from both a conceptual and an analytical point of view, pleasure, desire, and *aphrodisia* could be considered as different elements in the Pagan "experience of *aphrodisia*", they were "closely bound to one another".³⁰ Accordingly, the object of the moral

²⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 360.

²⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285.

²⁶ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 361. Passage not included in the English translation.

²⁷ *The Use of Pleasure*, 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

reflection of Greeks in matters of sexual conduct was the dynamics, in particular the “force” that joined all pleasure, desire, and the sexual acts (*aphrodisia*) “in a circular fashion”.³¹ Therefore, in such a perspective on sexual activity, desire could be conceived neither as an isolated element nor as a preeminent dimension of sexual ethics. In *Confessions of the Flesh*, the development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence by Christianity leads to the dislocation of the block of *aphrodisia*, even if it actually seems, according to Foucault’s own research, that such a process was provoked by a displacement that took place within the Pagan account of sexual ethics.

As Foucault argues in the last lecture of the series of lectures at the Collège de France, *Subjectivity and Truth*, Stoics introduced a crucial discontinuity in the sexual ethics of Antiquity. Through such modifications, desire is conceived as an isolated element of man’s ethical conduct and becomes a preeminent dimension of the self which has to be managed and controlled. These modifications engaged a process of “objectivation” through which desire is problematised in terms of “the very root of the sexual activity that has to be constituted within oneself as the object of a control, of a permanent observation”.³² Foucault’s analysis of the principle of symmetrical conjugality developed by Musonius Rufus illustrates well this new account of desire. According to that principle, “only marriage can constitute the naturally legitimate tie for sexual relations”.³³ In Musonius Rufus’ view, Foucault argues, the prohibition to commit adultery does not rely on the juridical equality between man and wife, which could be allowed by Stoic doctrine. Rather, it was grounded on a moral inequality between them. In the conjugal relationship, the husband has to play a pedagogical role: his real role is to be “the wife’s guide, it is for him to show the right way, to show how to live, to give the living example of the way of living”.³⁴ In order to be able to play such a role, the husband must master himself. According to this principle, in the event he commits adultery, the husband would show that “the desire for sexual relations is so intense and violent in him that he cannot control it, that he is not master of himself”.³⁵ Therefore, having control of his own desire is central to the ethical position that the husband has in the couple. Accordingly, desire (*epithumia*) is conceived as the element that “I must check and master, that I must observe and take into account at its source in order to assure myself that I will be able to establish, maintain, and renew throughout my behaviour the caesura necessary to the relation I have to my own sex”.³⁶ Therefore, the technologies of the self developed by Stoics through the reflection on sexual ethics “extract” “the element of desire from *aphrodisia*” and grant it a privileged role.³⁷ By means of this extraction, the block of *aphrodisia* is “dismantled (*disloqué*)” and “the whole problem of *aphrodisia*” is recentred “around desire”.³⁸

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth* (2017), 284-85.

³³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 3, The Care of the Self* (1986), 172.

³⁴ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth*, 264.

³⁵ Ibid.; Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 173.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth*, 286.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 287; Michel Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité* (2014), 291.

Based on research probably conducted after the manuscript today published as *Confessions of the Flesh* was written,³⁹ these remarks about the Stoics' sexual ethics made by Foucault in *Subjectivity and Truth* allow a more comprehensive perspective on Foucault's hypothesis regarding the consequences of the historical emergence of Christian sexual ethics described in the last pages of today's *History of Sexuality vol. 4*: Christianity itself would not have caused the dismantlement of *aphrodisia*. Rather, Christianity would have contributed to an ongoing process of dismantlement of *aphrodisia* by reorganising the whole architecture of sexual ethics, which henceforth pivots on the analysis of individuals' desire.

As I mentioned previously, Foucault's hypothesis on the development of the Christian sexual ethics based on "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies on the interplay between two main domains of Foucault's investigation on Christianity: St. Augustine's account of libido and Cassian's spiritual techniques of examination of thoughts.

The last section of the third part of *History of Sexuality vol. 4*, "The libidinalisation of sex," is dedicated to analysing St. Augustine's account of libido. As Foucault explains, in St. Augustine's view, the emergence of libido in the world – i.e., "the involuntary form of the urge (*mouvement*)" that characterises sexual intercourse,⁴⁰ particularly illustrated by the image of the male erection – is a consequence of the Fall provoked by human action. According to Augustine, in Paradise, prior to the Fall, all the elements which took part in the sexual act were under the absolute and complete control of the human will. Human disobedience to God provoked the alteration of human will that characterises libido.⁴¹ As a consequence of eating the forbidden fruit, God punished Adam and Eve by reproducing in them the attitude of disobedience that they have previously had towards him. In doing so, God's punishment was located neither between the body and the soul nor between the matter and the spirit. Rather, it affected the whole subject.⁴² As Foucault explains, the change provoked by the Fall affects "the materiality of the body through the structure of the subject in terms of the relation of the will to itself (*la matérialité du corps à travers la structure du sujet comme volonté de soi sur soi*)"⁴³: the human will is therefore internally split, devised, and turned against itself.

St. Augustine's account of libido therefore engages a deep anthropological reflexion. This is because the emergence of libido modifies the human condition as it was initially

³⁹ As I have shown, Foucault probably gave the lectures *Subjectivity and truth* after writing the typescript of *Les Aveux de la chair*. Agustín Colombo, « L'expérience des Pères: *Les Aveux de la chair* de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair », *Revue théologique de Louvain* (in press).

⁴⁰ *Confessions of the flesh*, 262, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333.

⁴¹ As Elizabeth Clark has pointed out, in the course of his debate with Julian of Eclanum, St. Augustine admits the existence of human concupiscence before the Fall. He will also develop a conceptual difference between the *concupiscentia nuptiarum*, which could have existed in Paradise and the *concupiscentia carnis*, which was necessary absent from Paradise. Clark Elizabeth, "L'Augustin de Foucault au risque de l'œuvre augustiniennne" in Büttgen Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini (ed.), *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe*, in press. Cf. *Confessions of the Flesh*, 262, note 18, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333, note 2.

⁴² As Alain de Libera argues, the use of the term "subject" referred to Augustine implies several problems (Alain de Libera, *L'invention du sujet moderne* (2015), 40-46). De Libera particularly criticises the term "desiring man" (*sujet désirant*), although he does not mention Foucault directly. In order to maintain the coherence, I use the term subject as Foucault utilises it in his analysis of Augustine's account of libido.

⁴³ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333. Passage not included in the English translation.

conceived by God, even if human action – i.e., human disobedience – was not able to undo God's creation. In fact, as Foucault points out well, in Augustine's view, the modification of the human condition engaged by libido constitutes a "degradation of the being" that humans hold from God and not an alteration of God's creation: "By turning away from God, and by refusing to obey him, man thought he was becoming the master of himself: he believed he was emancipating his being. He is only falling away from a being that only sustains itself through the will of God".⁴⁴

The anthropological shift caused by St. Augustine's account of libido was considerable. As Albercht Dihle argues, St. Augustine introduced an anthropological account of will which displayed a strong contrast with the Roman legal approach to will.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, it is the account of the human condition – and not only the approach to human will – entailed by St. Augustine's account of libido that seems to have provoked a real turning point. As Peter Brown explains, "Augustine's handling of the history of the creation of Adam and Eve, and of their fall, made plain the extent to which he was prepared to shift the center of gravity of Christian thought on the human person".⁴⁶ Unlike contemporary Christian writers like Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome, who would agree in affirming that marriage and creation of the family were a "result of a sad decline, by which Adam and Eve had lapsed from an 'angelic' state into physicality, and so into death",⁴⁷ what remains a dark enigma for the bishop of Hippo "was the distortion of the will of those who now made up society": for him "the twisted human will (...) was what was new in the human condition after Adam's Fall".⁴⁸

As far as Foucault's research on *History of sexuality* is concerned, the discontinuity introduced by St. Augustine's account of libido constitutes a crucial turning point, too. If for the Stoics desire was a privileged element of male individuals on which the sexual activity had to pivot, with St. Augustine desire becomes a specific trait of human nature. Henceforth, desire is not conceived as an isolated element of the individual that has to be controlled. Rather, desire is what characterizes and defines the human condition. The juridical dimension of Augustine's ethics of marriage that, in Foucault's view, constitutes a distinctive feature of the Christian account of desire is a consequence of the perspective on desire elaborated by the bishop of Hippo. Two notions organise such a juridical approach to the sexual ethics of the married couple: *consensus* and *usus*.

On the one hand, *consensus* allows one to assign the responsibility of the sin involved in the sexual act. In Augustine's view, concupiscence remains a constitutive part of the subject even after baptism. Nonetheless, after baptism, concupiscence is not always at work but it is part of individuals as a "quality". As Augustine points it out in *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, after baptism concupiscence does not remain in individuals as a substance, such as a body or a spirit. Rather, concupiscence remains in individuals as a "bad

⁴⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 269.

⁴⁵ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (1982), 143.

⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (1988), 399.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 404.

disposition" which affects them "as a languor or weakness" (*Non enim substantialiter manet, sicut aliquod corpus, aut spiritus: sed affectio est quaedam malae qualitatis, sicut languor*).⁴⁹ *Consensus* is the free act through which individuals put concupiscence to work. Consequently, through *consensus*, concupiscence ceases to be only a languor. However, *consensus* is not only the transformation of desire into a real act. *Consensus* is, above all, an act through which the human will takes itself as its own object and both accepts and wants to have the fallen form of concupiscence. This attitude of the will towards its own self is a condition of the sinful act because, even if concupiscence remains in the subject as a "quality", it never dominates the soul entirely, and therefore it cannot drive the subject to commit a sin. Consequently, *consensus* constitutes the necessary "supplement" through which "one wills what concupiscence wants".⁵⁰ By affirming the concupiscent form of the will through such supplement, the subject becomes responsible for his or her concupiscent acts. So, *consensus* plays a key role in Augustine's juridical approach to the ethics of marriage because it is an indispensable element for establishing individuals' responsibility of sinful acts. On the other hand, the notion of *usus* opens the way for the individual to utilise his or her concupiscence without committing a forbidden act. Conjugal sexual activity inevitably involves the involuntary movements of concupiscence. Through *usus* it is possible to attain certain objectives which do not imply individuals' consent to concupiscence at the moment the sexual act takes place. These legitimate objectives are procreation and helping a spouse avoid fornication.⁵¹ These two objectives work as the basis that establishes under which circumstances the sexual activity of the couple is forbidden or not. In Foucault's view, the interplay between *consensus* and *usus* developed through Augustine's approach to the sexual ethics of marriage is crucial because it opened the way for a meticulous codification of sexual ethics. In fact, as Foucault argues, the reflections of the bishop of Hippo on concupiscence constitute the "theoretical matrix" of the "endless rules and developed casuistry" of sexual activity of the married couple built up by medieval Christianity.⁵²

John Cassian's truth-telling ascetism completes Foucault's diagnosis of the emergence of the Christian sexual ethics in late antiquity. As described in the last section "virginity and self-knowledge (*virginité et connaissance*)" of the second part "Being virgin (*Être vierge*)" of *Confessions of the Flesh*, Cassian develops such techniques through a reflexion on chastity. However, the general framework for understanding what is at stake in these techniques is Cassian's approach to *exagoreusis* analysed in the last section "The art of arts (*L'art des arts*)" of the first part of *Confessions of the Flesh*, "The formation of a new experience (*La formation d'une expérience nouvelle*)".

Monastic *exagoreusis* consists in an intimate interplay between the examination of thoughts (*cogitationes, logismoi*) and confession. The aim of *exagoreusis* is to obtain the conditions needed to make the flow or the movements of individuals' thoughts as orderly

⁴⁹ Saint Augustine, PL 44, 430.

⁵⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 278

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 283-284.

and pure as possible. This is because the thoughts may be distressing and therefore able to perturb the soul's quest of God's contemplation.⁵³ Accordingly, individuals need to identify the kind of thoughts that come to their mind and separate true thoughts from illusions. This is a crucial task because in Cassian's view, Foucault argues, since the Fall Satan has been able to penetrate the human body, weaken the human soul, and send it "suggestions, images, thoughts, whose origin is hard to determine".⁵⁴ Such a task can only be accomplished if combined to confession to an elder monk, because humans, particularly novice monks, are unable to determine the origin of their thoughts by their own means given that Satan could always mislead them. The simple fact of expressing one's soul's inner secrets to others through words gives confession its own "performative force (*force opératoire*)": confession has the ability to tell, show, expel, and free from sin.⁵⁵ Purity of heart (*puritate* or *puritas cordis*) and spiritual combat are two specific dimensions of Cassian's asceticism of chastity that illustrate in depth the dynamics of truth-telling elaborated by the monk.

Purity of heart constitutes both the condition and the effect sought through chastity in order to attain God's contemplation. As Columba Stewart explains, purity of heart "is the centrepiece of Cassian's monastic theology, the term he uses to describe monastic perfection".⁵⁶ Developed in the wake of Evagrius Ponticus' (345-399) approach to *apatheia* – i.e., passionlessness –, Cassian, like Evagrius, "thought of purity of heart as progressive and consisting of degrees of achievement", even if Cassian "does not define the different degrees of purity of heart as the same way Evagrius did the stages of *apatheia*".⁵⁷ In practical and experimental terms, "purity of heart means freedom from domination by sin and the possession of a deep inner peace".⁵⁸ Foucault's analysis, focused on the relationship between chastity and self-knowledge, emphasises a twofold aspect of purity of heart. On the one hand, purity of heart is the indispensable condition of spiritual science and therefore of the correct comprehension of Scriptures.⁵⁹ As Owen Chadwick points out, in Cassian's view the *spiritualis scientia* "proves to be the deeper understanding of the Scriptures and ceaseless meditation upon them".⁶⁰ Consequently, in Cassian's perspective, "meditation upon scripture is equated with gnosis, and is thus an indispensable background to contemplation".⁶¹ On the other hand, purity of heart constitutes both the condition and the result of the individual's ascetic process of self-knowledge. In order to reach the purity of heart (the result), the soul has to "watch attentively over itself, on the lookout for the impulses produced within it and blotting out everything that might divert it from

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 108, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 142. Foucault also remarks that the elder monk plays an important role in the monastic practice of confession, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 100-101.

⁵⁶ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (1998), 41-42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 170-171.

⁶⁰ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (1950), 151.

⁶¹ Ibid., 151.

contemplation".⁶² Such a result can only be attained if, by grounding on the purity of heart (condition), the interior gaze penetrates the "heart's secrets, shining the light there and dispelling its obscurity".⁶³ However, through purity of heart, Cassian elaborates a circular ascetic dynamic of self-knowledge drawn upon self-examination and confession, in which impurity is not completely eliminated. Given that circularity, "the purer one is, the more light one has for knowing oneself better (...) the more one recognises how impure one is, and therefore "the more important it is to shine the light on one's deepest recesses and dispel the darkness of the soul".⁶⁴

As for the spiritual combat, it is what characterises monk's everyday life before achieving the life of contemplation. Such combat is twofold. On the one hand, it constitutes an athletic challenge with oneself through which the monk aims to improve himself constantly based on exercises and training. On the other hand, the spiritual combat entails a permanent "war against an adversary",⁶⁵ namely Satan. As Foucault explains, for Cassian there are eight different forms of combat, each of them against different adversaries: gluttony, fornication, greed, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride. Inspired by Evagrius' typology of general "thoughts" (*logismoi*), such a typology illustrates the different combats against the thoughts that threaten the soul in the quest of contemplation.⁶⁶ The last part of the section "Virginity and self-knowledge" focuses on the combat against fornication. This text was published well before *Confessions of the Flesh*, when Foucault was still alive, even if the version of the text included in today's *History of Sexuality vol. 4* is slightly different to the one published previously.⁶⁷

Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" both supposes and relies on the interplay between Cassian's truth-telling ascetic techniques and Augustine's account of concupiscence. In Cassian, Foucault finds the dimension of the ascetics techniques through which individuals are able to perform a self-examination, whereas in Augustine he locates an account of desire as that which constitutes the distinguishing feature of the human condition. In the wake of such a diagnosis, Foucault seems to have elaborated the notion of desiring man. In fact, the notion of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" introduced by *Confessions of the Flesh* supposes the interplay of exactly the same elements that define the "principle of desiring man": the need for both expressing and deciphering the subject's inner truth – i.e., the "hermeneutics of the self" – by focusing on the subject's desire. However, *Confessions of the Flesh* does not explain how these two elements interplay.⁶⁸ Hence, the question that needs to be

⁶² *Confessions of the Flesh*, 171.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See Michel Senellart. "Le combat de la chasteté", notice in Michel Foucault *Œuvres* (2015), 1644-1648.

⁶⁸ The conclusions of the conference "Sexuality and solitude" rely on the same interplay between Cassian's ascetics techniques and Augustine's account of desire, which, however, is not explained (Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and solitude" in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), 182-183).

addressed seems to be as obvious as it is substantial: is such interplay between Cassian's asceticism and Augustine's account of desire possible?

A TWOFOLD CONTRAST BETWEEN AUGUSTINE AND CASSIAN: CONCUPISCENCE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

In order to better analyse Foucault's hypothesis regarding the Christian development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence, I will focus on the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's different approaches to both concupiscence and the human condition.⁶⁹ This twofold contrast exposes some of the problems involved in the crucial diagnosis that closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. In doing so, it will be possible to seize the extent to which Foucault's death prematurely interrupted the research on *History of Sexuality* and, consequently, left capital questions open.

As Foucault notes, Cassian's and Augustine's perspectives on desire are quite close. Nonetheless, they are not exactly the same. In particular, they do not seem to give a univocal account of desire as "evil", as Foucault suggests.

Columba Stewart argues that Cassian uses the word "concupiscence" "for an array of desires".⁷⁰ As Stewart explains, "Cassian's understanding of human desire has two perspectives: that which is *original* nature, that is, as God intended for us to be, and that which has *become* natural as a result of the Fall (*post ruinam, Conf. 4.7.1*)".⁷¹ Accordingly, most of Cassian's descriptions of the body and its natural needs "fall somewhere between these two poles".⁷² These twofold perspective on desire explain the apparent dichotomy in Cassian's anthropology. Sometimes Cassian shares the optimism characteristic of much of eastern Christian theology, as reflected in his discussion on grace and free will: humans seek assistance in God to recover both the natural desire for good and the natural knowledge of God's moral ordering of the universe that humans have been given. However, when he focuses on asceticism and the power of the vices, Cassian takes a pessimistic tone: "What has *become* natural is the war between the flesh and the spirit, each with its own lust (*concupiscentia*) utterly opposed to that of the other".⁷³ Conference 4 "On concupiscence" illustrates well the twofold aspect of Cassian's approach to concupiscence. According to this Conference, humans are affected by two kinds of concupiscence, namely the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the spirit. The interplay between these two forms of concupiscence results in "an interior battle" "daily waged within us (*Quae cum utraque, id est desideria carnis et spiritus in uno eodemque sint homine, intestinum cotidie intra nos geritur bellum*)".⁷⁴ This is for the concupiscence of the flesh "swiftly

⁶⁹ In a recently published book inspired by Foucault's work, Niki Kasumi Clements analyses in depth the contrasts between Cassian and Augustine. Niki Kasumi Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self* (2020), chapter 3 "Cassian on human effort", 65-88.

⁷⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 65. Italics according to the original text.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ John Cassian, *The Conferences* (1997), 161; Jean Cassien, *Conférences* (1955), IV, 11, p. 175.

descends into vice, rejoices in those delights which pertain to present repose”, whereas the concupiscence of the spirit “yearns to be entirely absorbed in spiritual pursuits [to such an extent] that it is even willing to exclude the necessities of the flesh, and so much does it long to be constantly taken up with these pursuits that it does not want to pay any attention at all to the frailty of the flesh”.⁷⁵ Therefore, unlike Augustine, Cassian does not conceive human desire as an internal dislocation of the will which expresses the fallen condition of man. Actually, in Cassian’s view the human condition is not characterised by a univocal form of desire which explains the disobedient movements of the will. Rather, for Cassian, humans are constantly affected by an inner and complex battle between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit. The opposition of these two kinds of desire is what actually explains why humans may not do what they want to do (*ut non quaecumque uultis illa faciatis*).⁷⁶ Such opposition functions as the most diligent school master (*paedagogus*) “to remind the monk that only by grace can the gift of purity be attained”.⁷⁷

These remarks on the contrast between Cassian’s and Augustine’s accounts of concupiscence lead us to the second point of the opposition that I would like to consider, namely the different conceptions that they have of the human condition.

Peter Brown, echoing the previous remarks on Cassian’s account of desire, argues that Cassian’s writings could be conceived as “the most discreet and authoritative rebuttal” of Augustine’s view on concupiscence.⁷⁸ Brown notes that, for Cassian, sexuality and sexual desire do not speak “of one single, decisive event within the soul” which echoes “in the body the unalterable consequence of mankind’s first sin”.⁷⁹ As a loyal follower of the Desert Fathers and a distant heir of the thought of Origen (185-254) (a tradition of thought that Augustine never absorbed),⁸⁰ Cassian “was convinced that the very depths of the person could shift”.⁸¹ Even if they are not fully available to the individual’s consciousness, the forces within him or her “lay within the power of free will to master, in vigilant collaboration with the grace of God”.⁸² Consequently, “the inner world of the monk could be transformed, slowly but surely”.⁸³ In short, unlike Augustine, Cassian does not consider that “the human will has descended wholly upon the side of the flesh”.⁸⁴

This contrast between Cassian’s and Augustine’s approach to human free will and grace animated one of the most fascinating controversies in the history of Christianity. In the fifth century, Cassian’s perspective on free will was the target of the critiques of Prosper of Aquitaine. In his *Contra Collatorem* published in 432, two years after Augustine’s death, Prosper accuses Cassian of teaching that “in Adam the human race did not fall; that

⁷⁵ Cassian, *The Conferences*, 161.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; Jean Cassien, *Conf. IV*, 11, p. 175.

⁷⁷ *Cassian the Monk*, 77.

⁷⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 420.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁸⁰ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (1967), 398.

⁸¹ *The Body and Society*, 422.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 123.

the will of man is healthy; that grace is given according to merit".⁸⁵ Cassian was, therefore, seen as a defender of the doctrine of Pelagius⁸⁶, which was refuted by Augustine.⁸⁷ Hence, to Prosper, who was an admirer of Augustine, Cassian represented a dangerous opposing view to Augustine's conception of grace, in particular because the monks from Lérins and Marseille, two places where Cassian's influence was considerable,⁸⁸ "were already becoming bishops", and, therefore, in Prosper's view, "the quality of Christianity in Gaul was at stake".⁸⁹ However, Cassian's conception of free will and human grace did not aim to refute Augustine. As Chadwick points out, "in Cassian, grace possesses its full Augustinian meaning" because it "is an interior working of God within the soul" without which the ascetic practices and spiritual progress are impossible.⁹⁰ However, for the monk there is no room for predestination, because "God's mercy and grace are bestowed only upon those who labour and exert themselves".⁹¹ In short, in Cassian's view, the human activity, particularly illustrated by ascetism and prayer, is necessary but does not suffice to achieve the life of contemplation and salvation which could only be granted by divine grace.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition brings to light a problematic aspect of Foucault's hypothesis about the Christian development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence. As the second section of the article shows, such a hypothesis relies on the idea that Cassian and Augustine share the same perspective on concupiscence. It follows that "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" conceptualises the interplay between Cassian's ascetic truth-telling techniques and Augustine's account of libido. However, as we saw in the previous section, the monk and the bishop of Hippo not only have a different perspective on desire; they also differ in how they conceive the human condition. Furthermore, these do not seem to be the only differences between Cassian and Augustine, as far as the diagnostic about the formation of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" is concerned. As Foucault's research shows, Cassian's techniques of self-examination are not focused

⁸⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 365-367; 372-375.

⁸⁷ During the Pelagian controversy, Augustine developed his theory of grace and predestination (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, "Predestination", 398-407). Owen Chadwick summarises Augustine's account of grace in these terms: "Augustine's doctrine is well known and may be briefly summarised: original sin, transmitted concupiscence resulting from the Fall, has changed the human race into a 'lump of damnation'. If the justice of God means anything, this sinfulness demands and should receive the severest punishment; all humanity ought, rightly, to be consigned to hell for eternity. But his divine mercy is such that from the lump he selects souls – not a few, but in large numbers though not so large as the damned – whom, without taking into account their future merits, he predestines to salvation" (Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 110).

⁸⁸ *Cassian the Monk*, 16-18.

⁸⁹ *Augustine of Hippo*, 401.

⁹⁰ *John Cassian*, 122.

⁹¹ John Cassian, *De Institutis Coenobiorum* XII.14, translated by Gibson cited in Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 122.

on desire but on thoughts (*cogitationes/logismoi*).⁹² In other words, the object of the analysis of Cassian's ascetics techniques is not exactly desire.

The differences between Cassian's and Augustine's accounts of desire show to what extent Foucault's research was interrupted by his early death. If "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" constitutes an embryonic definition of the "principle of desiring man", what is at stake is therefore the possibility of conceiving Christianity as the historical focal point of the formation of the modern account of sexuality. Consequently, the genealogical hypothesis that organises *History of Sexuality* is suddenly re-opened: if Christianity, or at least late antiquity Christianity, did not elaborate the obligation of seeking the truth of the subject in the subject's desire, when did desire become the object of the subject's veridiction? Did Christianity elaborate such an epistemological perspective on desire? Or was it built up by the modern medical account of sexuality? The answer to that question particularly concerns the development of psychoanalysis given that, since the first volume of his project, Foucault affirms that the history of the *dispositif* of sexuality "can serve as an archaeology of psychoanalysis";⁹³ but the heuristic value of *Confessions of the Flesh* vis-à-vis the reflection on the "principle of the desire man" is not limited to shedding a new light only on the questions that guide the diagnosis about the constitution of desire as the object of subject's veridiction.

Foucault's research into Augustine's account of desire included in *Confessions of the Flesh* provides new avenues to investigate; what could be defined, within Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, as the constitution of desire as "the instance of individuals' identity", namely the development of a perspective through which desire is conceived as a pre-eminent dimension of individuals being able to determine what individuals are. The anthropological reflection involved in Augustine's account of libido seems to engage a significant moment in the development of a perspective that assigns such a role to desire. As Foucault shows, in Augustine's view, libido is what characterises humans' fallen condition. Therefore, desire is, according to Augustine's reflection on the human condition, the distinguishing sign of individuals: the libido is both the consequence and that which expresses the fact that the human condition consists in a "degradation of the being" that humans hold from God.⁹⁴ As I have observed, scholars of late antiquity Christianity, like Peter Brown, also highlight the novelty of the anthropological reflection entailed by Augustine's approach to libido. Within Foucault's research, the discontinuity introduced by Augustine becomes particularly clear through the contrast with Foucault's investigation of the Stoics conducted in *Subjectivity and Truth*: it seems that, since Augustine, desire is not an element of individuals that needs to be controlled. Rather, desire is what defines individuals as such. If this diagnosis is correct, Augustine's account of desire becomes crucial to problematising the shaping of the modern medical account of sexuality. If within the latter, desire is conceived as the "master key" that defines who we are, this is

⁹² For a specific analysis about *logismoi* see: García Colombás, *El monacato primitivo* (2004), 625-629; William Harmless, *Desert Christians* (2004), 229.

⁹³ *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 130.

⁹⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 269.

because desire is able to reveal individuals' identity. In doing so, desire seems to constitute a major machinery of the *dispositif* of sexuality's way of working because desire anchors individuals to their own identity, namely to what they already are, therefore avoiding the liberation promised by the *dispositif* of sexuality itself. Hence, Augustine becomes crucial to a better understanding of the "irony"⁹⁵ of the *dispositif* of sexuality, which tries to make us believe that it is able to liberate us through the analysis of our sex.⁹⁶

References

- Beistegui, Miguel, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Bernauer, James, and Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002.
- Boehringer, Sandra, and Laurie Laufer (ed.), *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault*. Paris: Epel, 2020.
- Brown, Peter, *Augustine of Hippo, a Biography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967.
- Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Büttgen, Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini (ed.), *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*. Paris: Éditions de La Sorbonne (in press).
- Cassian, John, *The Conferences*. New York: Paulist, 1997.
- Cassien, Jean, *Les conférences*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, « sources chrétiennes », 1955.
- Castro Gómez, Santiago, *Historia de la gubernamentalidad II. Filosofía, cristianismo y sexualidad en Michel Foucault*. Bogotá: Siglo del hombre Editores, 2016.
- Candiotto, Cesar, and Pedro De Souza (ed.), *Foucault e o cristianismo*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2012.
- Chadwick, Owen, *John Cassian, a Study in Primitive Monasticism*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1950.
- Chevallier, Philippe, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme*. Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011.
- Chevallier, Philippe, "Michel Foucault et le 'soi' chrétien", *Astériorion* [en ligne (online)], 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4000/asterion.2403>
- Clark, Elizabeth, "Foucault, the Fathers, and the sex," *Journal of the American Academy of religion*, 56:4 (1988), 619-641.

⁹⁵ *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 159.

⁹⁶ The fact of addressing such a line of analysis – i.e., the possible role of Augustine in the development of an account of desire as an "instance of individuals' identity" – would obviously have to face key arguments related to the history of philosophy; for instance the anachronism of applying terms such as "individual" and "identity" to Augustine's thought. On this point, see Alain de Libera's *L'invention du sujet moderne*, 40-41 and *Archéologie du sujet II. La quête de l'identité* (2008).

- Clark, Elizabeth, "L'Augustin de Foucault au risque de l'œuvre augustiniennne", in *Foucault, les Pères et le sexe*, ed. Büttgen Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini. Paris: Éditions de La Sorbonne, in press.
- Colombo, Agustín, "L'expérience des Pères: *Les Aveux de la chair de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair*," *Revue théologique de Louvain* (in press).
- Colombo, Agustín, "Michel Foucault y el hombre de deseo. *Las Confesiones de la carne y los límites de la Historia de la sexualidad*," *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 37:1 (2020), 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.5209/ashf.66164>
- Dilhe, Albrecht, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.
- Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. London: Verso, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel, "Foucault," in *Essential Works 2: Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, 459-463. New York: New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality vol. 1. An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality, vol. 2. The Use of Pleasure* [1985]. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality, vol. 3. The Care of the Self*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
- Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality, vol. 4. Confessions of the Flesh*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 4. Les Aveux de la chair*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel, *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage books, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel, "Sexuality and solitude," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: New Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, *Subjectivity and Truth. Lectures at the Collège de France 1980-1981*. London: Palgrave MacMillan UK, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel, *Subjectivité et vérité. Cours au Collège de France 1980-1981*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel, "The subject and the power," in *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [1982], ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 208-226. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Colombás, García M., *El monacato primitivo*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2004.
- Harmless, William, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Jordan, Mark, *Convulsing Bodies. Religion and Resistance in Foucault*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Kasumi Clements, Niki, *Sites of the Ascetic Self. John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2020.

- Libera, Alain, *L'invention du sujet moderne. Cours du Collège de France 2013-2014*. Paris: Librairie philosophique Vrin, 2015.
- Libera, Alain, *Archéologie du sujet II. La quête de l'identité* [2008]. Paris: Librairie philosophique Vrin, 2016.
- Lorenzini, Daniele, "The emergence of desire: notes toward a political history of the will," *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019), 448-470. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700997>
- Irrera, Orazio, "L'empire de l'involontaire et la volonté de n'être pas gouverné," *Revista de Filosofia Aurora* 31:52 (2019), 224-256.
- Pandolfi, Alessandro, *Tre studi su Foucault*. Napoli: Terzo Millennio, 2000.
- Saint Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, Patrologia Latina 44.
- Senellart, Michel, "Le combat de la chasteté," notice in *Œuvres*, Michel Foucault, 1644-1648. Paris: Gallimard "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade," 2015.
- Senellart, Michel, *Les Arts de gouverner. Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement*. Paris: Seuil, 1995.
- Senellart, Michel, "Paradossi e attualità della soggettivazione cristiana," in *Dopo Foucault. Genealogie del postmoderno*, ed. Eleonora De Conciliis, 33-51. Milano: Mimesis, 2007.
- Stewart, Columba, *Cassian the Monk*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Villacañas Berlanga, José Luis, *Neoliberalismo como teología política. Habermas, Foucault, Dardot, Laval y la historia del capitalismo contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Ned Ediciones, 2020.

Author info

Agustin Colombo

acolombo@mailfence.com

Post-doctoral Researcher of the F.R.S – FNRS

Institut supérieur de philosophie/Centre d'études et de recherches en
philosophies contemporaines
Université catholique de Louvain
Belgium

Agustín Colombo is a Postdoctoral researcher of the Fonds de la recherche scientifique F.R.S – FNRS at the Institut supérieur de philosophie of the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. Through Michel Foucault's and Michel Henry's investigation of Christianity, his research develops the critique of subjectivity built up by contemporary French philosophy. His recent publications include "L'expérience des Pères: Les Aveux de la chair de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair" (*Revue théologique de Louvain* 52, 2021), "Michel Foucault e a obediência da carne crista" (*Aurora*, v. 32, n. 55, 2020). He is the editor of several books on the thought of Michel Foucault, most recently *Foucault, Les Pères et le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair* (Éditions de la Sorbonne, forthcoming), and *The Politics of Desire. Foucault, Deleuze, and Psychoanalysis* (Rowman & Littlefield International, forthcoming).