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## **The Subject of Desire and the Hermeneutics of Thoughts: Foucault's Reading of Augustine and Cassian in *Confessions of the Flesh***

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**ABSTRACT.** Although Foucault presented *History of Sexuality Vol. 4: Confessions of the Flesh* as a crucial part in the study of the genealogy of the subject of desire, Foucault's analyses of early Christian doctrine and pastoral technologies do not support the claim that an analytic of the subject of desire was established in early Christianity. This can be shown through a reconstruction of his readings of Augustine and Cassian. Augustine's doctrinal views of the human condition and the association of *libido* and disobedience to law are not accompanied by the production of technologies for the hermeneutics of desire. Cassian's pastoral technologies of obedience and subjection to the will of the spiritual director are organized around the hermeneutics of thoughts, and they aim at establishing an inner detachment from misleading thoughts through examination of conscience. This reconstruction opens new trajectories for a genealogy of the subject of desire and for a genealogy of pastoral power and governmentality.

**Keywords:** Confessions of the Flesh, obedience, law, desire, subject, hermeneutics

### INTRODUCTION

At the time of the publication of *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* in April and May 1984, Foucault had a "Please insert" slipped into the volumes. In this insert sheet it is stated that these volumes are part of a series of three books that together complete the series *History of Sexuality*. He writes that these three volumes "form a whole" as they all concern the "vast study of the genealogy of desiring man, from classical antiquity to the first centuries of Christianity". On the announced third volume, *Confessions of the Flesh*, he remarks that it will deal "with the experience of the flesh in the first centuries of Christianity, and with the role played in it by the hermeneutics, and purifying decipherment, of

desire”.<sup>1</sup> In the introductory chapter in *The Use of Pleasure*, we find a similar statement on the three volumes as study of the genealogy of desiring man from classical antiquity to the first centuries of Christianity. Foucault adds that *The Confessions of the Flesh* “deals with the formation of the doctrine (*doctrine*) and ministry (*pastorale*) concerning the flesh”.<sup>2</sup>

These statements give the impression that the eventually posthumously published *Confessions of the Flesh* (in 2018) is a coherent body of texts in which several issues (flesh, hermeneutics, desire) are analyzed in their mutual interactions and determinations. We know since its publication that this is not really the case. *Confessions of the Flesh* is reconstructed on the basis of manuscripts and typescripts, with four separate manuscripts added as appendices, and without an introductory chapter and proper conclusions. More importantly, the book offers neither a thorough integration of the various components of the text in one “genealogy of desiring man” nor an analysis of the experience of the flesh in which the doctrinal and pastoral aspects are integrated.

In the final pages of *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault concludes that in early Christianity a new “unity reconstituted itself” around “the analytic of the subject of concupiscence”.<sup>3</sup> But does this conclusion follow from the main sources Foucault studied? Do the readings of the contemporaries John Cassian and Augustine justify the conclusion that at the heart of their pastoral models and doctrines one finds the subject of desire? Was the interplay between a doctrine of desire and pastoral truth-telling techniques of confession fully established in early Christianity? In some other texts, one comes across the same problem. In the article “Sexuality and Solitude” from 1980, Foucault tries to bring together Augustine’s “libidization of sex” and its “huge influence on Western technologies of the self” on the one hand, and a monastic literature concerned “with the stream of thoughts flowing into consciousness”, the decipherment of these thoughts, and to obligation of permanent confession on the other hand. Yet, in the final section of this article, Foucault writes that these “different and eventually contradictory” developments only in the long run produced “a common effect”, namely the linking together of sexuality, subjectivity and truth.<sup>4</sup> The question thus arises how and in what context the subject’s desire became the object of truth-telling procedures.<sup>5</sup> It is exactly on this point that *Confessions of the Flesh* is an unfinished project leaving unanswered the question as to how and when a full-blown analytic of the subject of desire was developed and became operational. Was it in the era of John Cassian and Augustine? Or was it in fact much later, after the Council of Lateran in 1215,<sup>6</sup> or in the period of Reformation and Counter-Reformation,<sup>7</sup> or even in the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Frédéric Gros, “Foreword to *Confessions of the Flesh*,” in *Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), viii.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality 2* (1992), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh. The History of Sexuality 4* (2021), 285.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” in *Religion and Culture*, ed. J.R. Carrette (1999), 187.

<sup>5</sup> Agustin Colombo has rightfully argued that *Confessions of the Flesh* as a reflection on “the principle of desiring man” is an unfinished project since Foucault does not convincingly show how Cassian’s anthropology and pastoral ideas can be harmonized with Augustine’s anthropology and doctrine. Agustin Colombo, “What is a Desiring Man?,” *Foucault Studies* 29 (2021), 86-87.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality 1* (1998), 58, 61.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 116.

medical sciences and in psychoanalysis as “institutionalized practices for the confession of sexuality”?<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I want to further explore the question as to whether *Confessions of the Flesh* can be read as a study of the genealogy of desiring man in which the interplay of pastoral and doctrinal elements is examined and convincingly shown or whether this text is in fact much more a study of different and even contradictory pastoral and doctrinal components that nevertheless establish conditions for a variety of later developments, notably in the early modern in-depth Christianization processes and the subsequent developments in medical sciences, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Does Foucault convincingly argue that in early Christianity an analytic of the subject of desire was established, i.e., a systematic interaction between the obligation to examine and articulate the truth about oneself, and the conceptualizations of the subject of desire as simultaneously the juridical subject? I will argue that in *Confessions of the Flesh* Foucault attempts to map the various and distinct theories and practices that originate in different contexts in early Christianity but fails to provide convincing arguments for a unity constituted around the analytic of the subject of desire. To be clear, I do not claim that Foucault’s readings of the writings of Cassian and Augustine should be seen as misreadings. My main claim is that Foucault, within the overarching project of the genealogy of desiring man, on a conceptual level insufficiently differentiates between the hermeneutics of thoughts in Cassian’s writings on the purification of the soul through the battle against the vices on the one hand, and the emergence of a hermeneutics of desire from Augustine’s views of the libido as the fundamental principle that defines subjectivity on the other. In addition, I will argue that because of his focus on Cassian’s role in the establishment of Christian pastoral power, Foucault tends to neglect the importance of monastic self-practices, notably of exercises of the will. In order to substantiate this, I will focus on Foucault’s reading of Cassian and Augustine. Before turning attention to Foucault’s reading of these authors in *Confessions of the Flesh*, I will start with a brief exploration of the kind of problems and questions that made Foucault turn attention to early Christian doctrines and pastoral practices.

### **FOUCAULT’S TURN TO THE STUDY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND PASTORAL PRACTICES**

Although Foucault in 1984 announced *Confessions of the Flesh* as the fourth volume in *History of Sexuality*, we know that its manuscript components were written somewhere between 1980 and 1982.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he had already started studying Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Cassian from 1977 onwards. In the course “Security, Territory, Population” held at the Collège de France in 1977-1978, we find the first presentation of his findings. They concern the emergence of Christianity as a religion that lays claim to the daily government of men. More precisely, in early Christianity, one can witness the rise of a new

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975* (2003), 170.

<sup>9</sup> Pre-publications in the form of short articles on Cassian and Augustine were published in 1981 and 1982 (“Sexuality and Solitude” and “The Battle for Chastity”).

institutionalized art of conducting, directing, guiding and manipulating both individuals and collectives. Its key characteristics are the insistence on pure obedience, on the submission of one individual to another, on the renunciation of one's own singular will, and on the daily and permanent examination of conscience and spiritual direction aimed at the compulsory production of one's internal and hidden truth through confession (*aveu*).<sup>10</sup> This shows that Foucault, as Daniel Defert writes, already very soon after the publication of *The Will to Knowledge* was "attempting to shift his history of sexuality by several centuries".<sup>11</sup> From the first months of 1977 onwards, Foucault started to reconsider the original plan for the further volumes of *History of Sexuality*, of which the first one would be named *The Flesh and the Body* and would concern the study of Christian practices and doctrines of penance and confession in the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. From archival work we know that in January 1977 he changed the title of *La chair et le corps* to *Les aveux de la chair*.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand the modern and contemporary forms of government of men, Foucault now turns attention to the pastoral techniques developed in early Christian monastic tradition.

In order to understand what Foucault tries to establish in *Confessions of the Flesh*, one can best start from *The Will to Knowledge*. This text is first of all a critique of the liberation ideologies from the 1960s that dominated the contemporary public and political discourses. According to these – mostly Freudo-Marxist inspired – ideologies, civilization and the power of existing political systems are based on the repression of sexuality and the subjugation of human drives and instincts. At the heart of these ideologies, one finds the conviction that the removal of sexual taboos would not only grant freedom of expression of sexual desires but also create new political and societal realities. The aim was to give people the freedom to articulate their "true" sexual desires and preferences, and by doing so give people the freedom to define their own sexual identity. According to Foucault, these ideologies assume that (political) power in principle is always repressive and stands in opposition to the free expression of truthful and authentic human sexual desires. But is this repression truly a universal given and a historical fact? Must we necessarily think of power in terms of repression through prohibiting laws (taboos) and of human beings as desiring beings? According to Foucault, the conviction of so many people who claim, with passionate resentment against their past, present and themselves, that their sexual desires are repressed<sup>13</sup> has a scientific counterpart not only in the already mentioned Freudo-Marxist cultural studies of, for example, Marcuse but also in the dominant

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (2007), 148-185. Here and in *Confessions of the Flesh* Cassian is virtually the only relevant source for Foucault's inquiries into spiritual direction and obedience.

<sup>11</sup> Gros, "Foreword to *Confessions of the Flesh*," ix.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault wrote text for *The Flesh and the Body* until 1978 – the manuscript remained unfinished. Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme*, 149. Daniel Defert mentions that this manuscript was to present a "genealogy of concupiscence" through and in interaction with "the practice of confession" and "the direction of conscience" as developed from the Council of Trent onwards. Daniel Defert, "Chronologie", in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1* (2001), 73. See also, Philippe Chevallier, "The Birth of Confessions of the Flesh," *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* 11 (2022).

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 8-9.

structuralist theories in ethnology (Lévy-Strauss) and psychoanalysis (Lacan) that are organized around concepts of law and desire.<sup>14</sup>

This leads Foucault to formulate his main thesis in *The Will to Knowledge*: instead of repression of sexual desire, one finds from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards a growing number of institutions and practices for the incitement of individuals to put into discourse their sexual desires, feelings, activities, etc., with the aim of establishing the truth of sexuality as the truth of the subject and its identity.<sup>15</sup> In the modern age, sexuality became the object of pastoral, medical, juridical and psychoanalytical discourses that aimed to order, subject and control sexuality by making it speak the truth about itself and about the subject. This thesis is further explored in *The Will to Knowledge* through the critical analysis of the modern *scientia sexualis* as practices of the obligation to tell the truth of sexuality. According to Foucault, this obligation does not first appear in the modern sexual sciences (psychiatry, psychoanalysis). It has its roots in a Western Christian tradition in which sexuality could become the object of knowledge, was supposed to reveal the truth of the subject, and came to lead a discursive existence. In short, one needs to study “the history of the confession of sexuality”<sup>16</sup> in order to understand both the contemporary popular liberation discourses and psychoanalytic practices of the truth-telling of sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, Foucault questions the political and anthropological presupposition of the popular liberation narratives and the supporting scientific theories, that is to say, the assumptions that the dialectics of law and desire are situated beyond specific historical developments and contexts. Since, according to Foucault, all knowledge is historically conditioned, the question is raised whether power can be articulated without reference to a juridical law and a prohibiting authority, and whether sexuality can be articulated without reference to law and desire.<sup>18</sup> In addition, he raises the question as to when and in what context the theory of interrelatedness of law and desire first appeared.

What Foucault highlights in *The Will to Knowledge* are modern theories and practices that built on the essential interrelatedness of law and desire, and develop techniques for relieving the effects of the prohibiting laws by means of obligatory articulations of the incestuous, repressed desires. Psychoanalysis, for example, is a formation of knowledge that regards the subject to be organized around its hidden and prohibited sexual desires. At the same time, psychoanalysis is a technique founded in confession (*aveu*) with the aim of extracting the truth of the subject from its sexual desires.<sup>19</sup> We find here a theory of desire and law combined with a confessional technique – we find sexuality as an object of

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<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail Foucault’s critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis in *History of Sexuality*. Elsewhere I have elaborated this issue more extensively in Herman Westerink, *De lichamen en de lusten* (2020). See also, Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (1991), 270-272; Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (2001), 209-215; Amy Allen, “Foucault, Psychoanalysis and Critique,” *Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 23:2 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 12, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, 170.

<sup>17</sup> One could add here that Foucault views psychoanalysis as both a theory and practice of “interiorisation of the law by the self”. Michel Foucault, *About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self*, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 90-91, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Michel Foucault, “Interview 1984,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 2* (2001), 1484-1485.

knowledge and of power strategies.<sup>20</sup> The project of the history of sexuality can be seen as a study into the historical conditions of both such theories, such practices and the way these two became associated.

### A RELIGION NOT OF LAW BUT OF OBEDIENCE

In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault argues that the modern procedures (in and outside the *scientia sexualis*) for speaking the truth of one's sexuality "grew out of that formidable development and institutionalization of confessional procedures which has been so characteristic of our civilization".<sup>21</sup> Initially, he announced that the second volume in *History of Sexuality, The Flesh and the Body*, was projected to be a study of this institutionalization of confessional procedures in the Catholic pastoral and the sacrament of penance after the Council of Trent. On his findings he concludes: "According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications, (...) everything had to be told."<sup>22</sup> Why? Because not the concrete transgressions in sexual activities but "the root of all evil", i.e., "the flesh" or "the stirrings of desire" needed to be examined and brought under control. Foucault writes the following on this issue: "An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse. (...) The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech."<sup>23</sup> The confessional practices – defined as obligations – were to be seen as instruments of power and knowledge to reach into the most hidden and secret forms of desire. And it is this examination of desire that is supposed not only to produce a discourse of truth about the subject but also to have a transformative effect on that subject.

This suggests an already established relation between confession and the meticulous examination of desire. However, things are more complicated than they seem. One important complicating issue concerns the problematics of the law. The question can be raised as to how desire became related to law in the early modern confession practices; how desire became organized through juridical procedures. Also, there is the question of the relation between law and obligation. Notably, this second question is extensively explored by Foucault in the period he starts reading early Christian authors.

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<sup>20</sup> From this we can understand that Foucault in 1976 understood his project of a history of sexuality in terms of "archaeology of psychoanalysis". Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 129-130.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, "Interview on the history of sexuality," in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (1980), 191. See also Michel Foucault, "Interview on the confession of the flesh," in M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (1980), 211: "One thus finds [in Christianity] this formidable mechanism emerging – the machinery of the confession, within which in fact psychoanalysis and Freud figure as episodes".

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

In his course *Abnormal* held at the Collège de France in 1974-1975, Foucault had already begun to explore the evolution of confession and penance. He argues that in the Middle Ages penance was established in terms of the German juridical model as a system of “tariffed” penance. The actual transgressions one had committed were to be confessed to a priest, who would respond with a fitting and obligatory penance and the subsequent remission of sins – it is a system hence of offense and penalty, of crime and reparation.<sup>24</sup> In this course, a question emerges that will be important for further developments. According to Foucault, the guiding principle in the early modern confession manuals and practices is no longer “the law and breaches of the law”, hence no longer the medieval juridical model. Central now is the obligation to confess everything, that is, all lingering thoughts and impulses, bodily “ticklings”, pleasures, delights and desires.<sup>25</sup> Does this shift from law to obligation point toward an epistemic shift? This calls for further reflection on the different systematics and functioning of the law and the obligation of confession.

Foucault elaborates this problematic in courses held between 1977 and 1981. In the course ‘Security, Territory, Population’, he argues that the Christian pastoral is organized around “the insistence on pure obedience”. Notably in early monasticism, Christianity shows itself to be a religion of obedience and submission to God’s will. This divine will is neither founded in a – reasonable – law nor expressing itself merely through a general juridical law that applies to all men equally. Christianity is “a religion of what God wills for each in particular”.<sup>26</sup> This voluntaristic-theological principle is reflected in the actual Christian pastorate: the pastor is not a judge representing the law and demanding submission to the law but a spiritual director in “a relationship of submission of one individual to another individual”.<sup>27</sup> This view of the Christian pastoral power is continued throughout the period Foucault was closely studying early Christian texts and working on *Confessions of the Flesh*. In his course on the government of the living (1979-1980), we find similar statements on Christianity being a religion that binds individuals “to the obligation to manifest in truth what they are”, that is, to manifest in depth “the most imperceptible movements of the ‘mysteries of the heart’” in the form and context of complex relations with another (the pastor, spiritual director), other persons and the whole church community.<sup>28</sup> According to Foucault, this is particularly established in early Christian monasticism.<sup>29</sup> The obligation to tell the truth about one’s sexual desires is not first established in the context of Reformation and Counter-Reformation Christianization processes but is in fact older than the juridical systems that dominated throughout the Middle Ages.

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<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, 186.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> We note here that there are changes and nuances in the conceptualization of Christianity between 1974 and 1984, moving from the focus on Christianity as organization of pastoral power (and resistance) towards Christianity as inaugurating technologies of the self, new moral experiences and regimes of truth that will define modern subjectivity. See, Niki Kasumi Clements, “Foucault’s Christianities,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89:1 (2021); Arianna Sforzini, “Brève généalogie des *Aveux de la chair*,” in *Foucault, les Pères et le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, eds. Ph. Büttgen, Ph. Chevallier, A. Colombo & A. Sforzini (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 174-175, 183.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-275.

It remains as yet an open question, according to Foucault, as to when the principles and practices developed in early monasticism concerning the monastic subject of the spiritual truth-telling (*sujet de la vérédiction spirituelle*) became connected to juridical practices and the legal/juridical subject (*sujet de droit, sujet juridique* – “subject of law”) in the practice of confession (*aveu*). In other words, Foucault suggests a process of “juridification of the confession” that builds upon an earlier development, namely the obligation to examine and express the truth about oneself.<sup>30</sup> He points at two decisive developments that condition this process of juridification. The first one we have already seen. It is the alliance with the Germanic juridical/penal system and introduction of tariffed penance in the Middle Ages. He adds a second development: the influence of Augustinian thought on the Benedictine Rule that was to become the main monastic rule from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. In this rule, one finds something lacking from Cassian’s writings and actually undermining a monastic practice aimed at purification of the heart (see below): the definition of a number of faults and the subsequent sanctions – this is a first form of juridification that can be seen as paradigmatic for the much later – early modern – explosion of codified and casuistic literature and practices.<sup>31</sup>

The question of the relation between obligation and law, and of the introduction of juridical models and practices, is a question that repeatedly pops up in *Confessions of the Flesh*. On the developments until the age of Cassian and Augustine, we can be brief. According to Foucault, juridical models do not play a significant role in the early Christian practices of penance, in *exomologesis*, i.e., the public confession (*confession*) of faith and adherence to the truth of faith, in the confession of sins before God and a priest, or in the practice of virginity. There is no process of or tendency towards juridification until the 5<sup>th</sup> century in these domains. In fact, this tendency towards juridification starts in a relatively marginal domain that initially has no special spiritual significance: in the reflections on the ethics of marriage, its legitimacy and acceptability.<sup>32</sup> Foundations were laid in the Roman state when marriage came to be considered as an important concern since it was the basic component of society through which the moral conduct of individuals could be tied to a system of laws. What is first developed in this context is continued and Christianized by authors such as Clement of Alexandria or John Chrysostom: marriages can be defined as a legal bond organized and sustained through a set of reciprocal duties, rights, obligations and debts.

But the question is: Were these developments sufficient condition for the “huge juridical edifice” that will be constructed in the Middle Ages “making spouses appear as legal subjects in complex relations of debts, demands, acceptances, and refusals”? Can we understand “the juridification of sexual practice” from this relatively marginal issue in early Christian thought? The answer is provided through Foucault’s reading of Augustine. It is in Augustine’s writings on marriage, such as *De bono conjugali* and *De nuptiis et*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 150, 169.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 176. See also, Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 298 (Appendix 2).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 194.



*concupiscentia*, that he finds “the rudiments of a jurisprudence of sexual relations” and the introduction of marriage as the main practice of pastoral care and intervention.<sup>33</sup> More importantly and more fundamentally, Foucault identifies Augustine’s theory of *libido* (theory of concupiscence – desire) as the condition for the possibility of a “general conception of desiring man” and “the subject of law as existing simultaneously and in a single form”.<sup>34</sup> It is the married individual who is thought by Augustine as a single subject of desire and law, that is to say, as a subject who is – on an ontological level – a libidinal being and, at the same time, a subject who is accountable for the manifestations of *libido* in sexual activities.

With regards to John Cassian and his role in the establishment of Christian practices of spiritual direction, examination of conscience, obligations to tell the truth in confessions (*exagoreusis* – *aveu*), and pure obedience, Foucault argues that these practices “do not take place within an apparatus of jurisdiction”. After all, these practices are not tied to the examination of acts one admits, laws one has transgressed or responsibilities one has towards others.<sup>35</sup> They were developed in a monastic context outside of urban communities, that is, in a context in which individuals had chosen to leave the world of social contracts organized in laws behind in order to devote their lives to obtaining purity of heart. In other words, the libidinization of sex and the juridification of sexual practices must be understood from a context in which there is a shift in Christianity’s center of gravity, namely the transition from the focus on intense asceticism of limited groups towards the reinforcement of the religious meaning of everyday life within the larger society.<sup>36</sup>

### AUGUSTINE: THE SUBJECT OF DESIRE AND LAW

Although *Confessions of the Flesh* was announced in 1984 as part of the study of the genealogy of desiring man, the most explicit exploration of this topic can only be found in the last chapter of the book on the “libidinization of sex”.<sup>37</sup> It is in this section of the book that Foucault focuses all attention on Augustine’s doctrine of *libido*. According to Foucault, this doctrine can be seen as an answer to the Pelagian doctrine of free will as represented by Julian of Eclanum,<sup>38</sup> in which desire and lust at work in sexual relations were seen as

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 253. We should not forget the simple fact that Augustine was not a monk but a bishop in the city of Hippo – he was the pastor of a Christian community consisting of mostly married people. On Foucault’s reading of Augustine’s writings on marriage, see, Elizabeth Clark, “L’Augustin de Foucault au risqué d’Augustin,” in *Foucault, les Pères et le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, eds. Ph. Büttgen, Ph. Chevallier, A. Colombo & A. Sforzini (2021).

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 255, 277.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>37</sup> See also Machiel Karskens, “Het regime van de bekentenissen. Foucaults *Histoire de la sexualité 4*,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 81 (2019), 562.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault basically follows Peter Brown’s view in that Augustine’s writings on marriage and sexual desire are for the larger part to be situated in the context of his debates with Julian of Eclanum – debates that occupied him in the last two decades of his life. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (1969), 381-397; Foucault, *The Confessions of the Flesh*, 260.

created by God and as such belonging to the very nature of the human being.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, this desire in itself could not be at fault and need not be renounced. It was a quality and not a deficiency of nature. In this view, however, what was considered as problematic was the excess of uncontrolled desire. The boundaries between “enough” and “too much”, and between “controlled” and “uncontrolled”, were easily identified. Desire and lust within marital relations and in the service of procreation were justified and good; desire and lust for the sake of desire and lust, or desire for extramarital sexual relations (adultery), or “unnatural” sexual activities (activities not aimed at procreation), were excessive. To maintain good desire was then a matter of self-control. For Julian, this was possible through the use of reason and volition, through understanding the nature of sexual desire (*concupiscentia*) and being able to control it with an act of the will.<sup>40</sup>

According to Foucault, in order to avoid an ethics of sexual desire based on the human capacities of reason and free will for controlling desire, Augustine needed to relocate “evil”, identifying it no longer with excess but viewing it as an inherent aspect of every sexual relation and activity. There was always something evil at work in sexuality, including the legitimate activities aimed at reproduction within lawful marriage. In order to avoid turning God into the creator of something inherently evil in human nature, it was necessary “to establish the metahistorical event that reshaped the sexual act in its original form so that from then on it would necessarily include this evil that is evident”.<sup>41</sup> There must have been an “event” through which the sexual act as inherent to human nature became corrupted and reshaped that human nature.

According to Augustine, Adam and Eve were created as man and wife; as sexual beings with the lawful possibility of having sexual intercourse for the sake of procreation. Yet, these paradisiacal possible sexual relations and activities must have been free from everything corrupted. From reading Augustine’s anti-Pelagian texts,<sup>42</sup> Foucault focuses on his view that the paradisiacal sexual relation can be defined as consisting of acts obediently placed under unfailing command of the will (*voluntas*) and, as such, existing without any *libido* (i.e., *concupiscentia carnis*).<sup>43</sup> The sexual activities are completely determined by

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<sup>39</sup> Julian of Eclanum and Augustine agree on one important point: Adam and Eve were created for each other as man and wife, and were meant to procreate. Their writings on marriage and sexual relations thus mark an important shift away from the model of virginity: although virginity is still seen as more perfect than marriage, both authors – bishops writing for a married audience – stress the fact that marriage can be thought of as something inherently good and can be seen as a significant spiritual practice. *Ibid.*, 232. See also, Daniele Lorenzini, “The Emergence of Desire,” *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019), 461-465.

<sup>40</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 258, 283. See also, Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988), 412-413; Mathijs Lamberigts, “A Critical Evaluation of Critiques of Augustine’s View of Sexuality,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, eds. R. Dodaro & G. Lawless (2000).

<sup>41</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 259.

<sup>42</sup> Notably *Contra Julianum*, *Contra duas epistulas Pelagionorum*, *De civitate Dei* and *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*.

<sup>43</sup> The concept of *libido* was already used in Stoic writings (notably by Seneca) to denote sexual desire (*epithumia*). The concept of *concupiscentia* was introduced in Christianity and first becomes a central notion in the age of Augustine and Cassian, after the translation of the Bible in Latin (Vulgate). See, Lamberigts, “A Critical Evaluation of Critiques of Augustine’s View of Sexuality”; Westerink, *De lichamen en de lusten*, 139-140.

the volitional subject, i.e., by the subject acting from an undivided and unambiguous will. In Augustine's view, this means that Adam was capable of controlling and maneuvering his sexual organ just like he controlled his hands, feet or mouth. He was like a craftsman using his body parts as functional, calculable and obedient instruments for regeneration without any passion or lust.<sup>44</sup>

According to Foucault, the cause of the Fall and of human sin should be located in the volitional subject and its freedom of choice. This implies the possibility of willing against God or of being disobedient to God's will. The Fall (the eating of the forbidden fruit) marks the moment when Adam and Eve consent voluntarily to their own will against God's will. The just and definitive punishment for this act of disobedience does not consist in a Manichean split between matter and mind (body and soul) but is placed in the volitional subject. A division appears within the will in the form of a principle that is turned against the will, contradicting what the will wills,<sup>45</sup> while escaping from control by the will: the *libido*. The punishment for the disobedience of God's will consists of libidinal disobedience within the will itself. Augustine calls this *inobedientia reciproca*: the will is itself dominated by an involuntary disobedient principle (*libido dominandi*). Foucault underscores this link between *libido* and involuntariness. What we find in Augustine is the step from the volitional subject, capable of struggle against desire, passions and lust (in for example the virgin's and monk's practices of sexual abstinence) towards the subject of involuntary and uncontrollable *libido* (sexual desire and lust) – a "counter-will" that resists the will from within.<sup>46</sup> Since the Fall, the human condition can be defined in terms of the perverting and transgressive presence and dominance of *libido*, e.g., *concupiscentia carnis*.

The locus of sin (and punishment) is the will dominated by desires of the flesh. Augustine does not deny that since the Fall the human condition is one of weakness and limitation (in death), but nothing makes man's corruption and imperfection more visible than the lack of control over the sexual organs. It is notably the spontaneous and unpredictable erection of the male genital that is the most clear sign of man's insurrection against God and hence of his sinfulness. *Libido*, Foucault writes, "is phallic from the origin".<sup>47</sup> Every sexual activity and relation is perverted by the lack of control over the sexual organs and by its autonomous movements. Erection, in short, is the sign par excellence of the erectile aspect of the will,<sup>48</sup> i.e., the will that is no longer capable of determining man's spiritual and bodily activities in accordance with what is righteous but instead drives man to transgress everything originally created as good. Sexuality reminds us every day that the

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<sup>44</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 260-262.

<sup>45</sup> On Foucault's reading of Augustine on *libido*, see Colombo, "What is a Desiring Man?," 79-80; Laurent Lavaud, "L'insurrection du sexe," in *Foucault, les Pères et le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, eds. Ph. Büttgen, Ph. Chevallier, A. Colombo & A. Sforzini (2021).

<sup>46</sup> Lorenzini, "The Emergence of Desire," 464-465. Lorenzini has rightfully pointed at the analogies between Foucault's interpretation of Augustine and Hannah Arendt's analysis of will and counter-will in Augustine's writings. Comp. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Willing* (1978), 89-95.

<sup>47</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 265.

<sup>48</sup> On the erectile character of *libido*, see Sverre Raffnsøe, "Review Essay: Michel Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh. The fourth volume of the History of Sexuality," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018).

human will (*voluntas*) cannot simply master whatever it wants. The libidinization of sex in Augustine thus consists of two related ideas. First, the introduction of the libido as the principle and force corrupting and dominating the human will and as such defining the human condition. And second, the libido is the determining force in post-lapsarian sexual relations and activities.

According to Foucault, from this Augustine does not conclude that libido, with its autonomous movements, is only to be seen as an inevitable part of the human condition. It is also the principle of involuntary and disobedient movements, and because of this the subject should always in principle be held accountable for its libidinal investments. Of course, one cannot be held accountable for the *libido* as defining aspect of human nature. One can also not be held accountable for its autonomous movements. But one can be held accountable for the consent to libido through an act of the will. One can be held accountable for those acts of the will that consent to that what the *libido* wants.<sup>49</sup> The individual is guilty of sin when voluntarily consenting to the involuntary movements of libido, i.e., when consenting to the desires of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*).

It is the notion of consent (*consensus*) that makes it possible to establish the relation between the subject of desire and the legal subject. Through the notion of the will's consent to the movements of libido, the individual can be held responsible for concrete sinful, transgressive acts. Consent makes that which belongs to man's nature a fault. Consent is for that reason at the center of man's inner moral struggles: consenting or resisting to consent to the movements of *libido*, i.e., consenting or resisting to evil. Foucault discusses this notion of consent alongside the notion of use (*usus*). In the context of marriage, *libido* can be used in the service of procreation or as helping to prevent the spouse's fornication (in adultery, for example). In such cases, there is consent to *libido* (and hence to something inherently evil), without it being sinful since the *libido* is used for a legitimate cause.<sup>50</sup>

According to Foucault, one can understand the later process of juridification from Augustine's ideas on *libido*, consent and use. The libidinization of sexual relations and activities that can be witnessed in his anti-Pelagian writings is the condition for the possibility of later juridification processes in the Middle Ages and in early modernity. How exactly is this a condition? Through the notions of *consensus* and *usus* Augustine defines an ethics of sexual relationships and activities in terms of an inventorization of the legitimate and illegitimate ways in which the inevitable sinful *libido* is either used to the good (in marriage) or to evil, that is to say, for one's own lust and pleasure. "In Augustine, the evil is preexistent and fatally inscribed in the sexual encounter", but its manifestation in an actual sinful act is not a necessary one because of the role of consent and the possibility of legitimate usage.<sup>51</sup> The juridification and codification of legitimate and illegitimate sexual

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 278.

<sup>50</sup> On the topic of consent and use in Foucault's reading of Augustine, see Westerink, *De lichamen en de lusten*, 144-148; Colombo, "What is a Desiring Man?"; Bernard Harcourt, "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," *Foucault Studies* 29 (2021).

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 282.

activities becomes possible through separating the evil of libido (as inherent to human nature) from the actual sexual activities as either permitted or prohibited.

Although Foucault claims, as we have seen, that Augustine's doctrine of *libido* had a huge influence on Western technologies of the self, i.e., on self-examination, self-decipherment and on what he in the later texts names the "hermeneutics of desire",<sup>52</sup> he does not establish a direct relation to these techniques in *Confessions of the Flesh*.<sup>53</sup> Augustine is relevant for his doctrine of *libido* and its implications but not for developing pastoral techniques for examinations of the involvement of the will in sexual activities. Foucault's reading of Augustine thus raises the question as to whether his doctrine of *libido*, consent and use can be seen as a condition for a later *hermeneutics* of desire. According to Foucault, Augustine's doctrine is the condition for the modern subject coming to recognize and experience himself as a subject of desire. Also, through the notions of *consensus* and *usus*, Augustine establishes a relation between sexual desire and legitimate and illegitimate sexual activities. This will give rise to the production of rules and casuistry concerned with defining one's rights, duties and transgressions in sexual relations (marriage).<sup>54</sup> In other words, in Augustine we find a matrix for relating desire to permitting and prohibiting law. One's sexual activities are evaluated as either good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, through and within a juridical framework. Yet, such evaluation does by no means necessarily imply the obligation to tell the truth about one's lingering thoughts and impulses, bodily sensations, and secret pleasures, delights and desires.<sup>55</sup> Augustine's doctrine does not necessarily pave the way for a hermeneutics of *libido* as an obligatory analysis of the hidden origins and movements of lust and desire or as a technique for dissociating *libido* from sexual activities.<sup>56</sup> Instead of a pastoral power organized through obedience and submission to the other's will, one finds in Augustine the conditions for a juridical organization of sexual relations and activities.

## CASSIAN: PASTORAL ARTS AND TECHNOLOGIES

### The obligation of the examination of thoughts

Foucault's interest in Cassian's writings is first and foremost linked to his explorations of the origins and development of the Christian pastoral power in early Christianity. More specifically, this concerns the institutionalization of new techniques for governing men,

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<sup>52</sup> Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," 186. Compare also, Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 5. We should note here that the concept of "hermeneutics of desire" or "hermeneutics of the self" does not appear in *Confessions of the Flesh*.

<sup>53</sup> See also Colombo, "What is a Desiring Man?," 83-84.

<sup>54</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 283-284.

<sup>55</sup> From this we can begin to understand how Reformation authors, profoundly influenced by Augustine's late doctrinal writings, could set in motion a "dejuridification" process, which included a dismissal of hermeneutics of the self and confession of the involvement of the will in legitimate and illegitimate activities. Michel Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai. Fonction de l'aveu en justice. Cours de Louvain 1981* (2012), 185.

<sup>56</sup> This aspect of dissociation marks an important distinction with Cassian's view of the struggle for purity of heart. See below.

as evidenced notably in Cassian's *De institutis coenobiorum*. As we have already seen, the striking feature of the Christian pastoral power, making it completely different from Greek and Roman practices, is "the insistence on pure obedience" in a relation of submission to a spiritual director. According to Foucault, such submission to another person stands in opposition to the idea of obedience or submission to a law.<sup>57</sup> According to Foucault, pure obedience means, first, absolute obedience to the will of the other, such as, for example, evidenced in the test of absurdity.<sup>58</sup> Second, it means obedience for the sake of obedience, that is to say, obedience in order to arrive at a state of obedience. This state of obedience can be further specified. It implies humility (*humilitas* – refraining from willing), subjection to the will and direction of the other (*subditio*), and the renunciation (mortification) of one's own singular will "so that there is no other will but not to have any will" and no resistance to the other's will (*patientia*).<sup>59</sup> Further, this state of pure obedience implies permanence of spiritual direction. This spiritual direction is not aimed at a simple teaching of the truth of doctrine or law but consists of absolutely permanent direction and examination of conscience, here not seen as an instrument of self-mastery but of submission to the other's examination and evaluation, and of "objectivization of the self".<sup>60</sup>

In order to make this direction and examination possible, it is eminent that the individual monk confesses his thoughts permanently (*exagoreusis*) "in order to disclose not only to the other, but also to oneself, what is happening in the mysteries of the heart and in its vague shadows. It's a matter of exposing as a truth something that was not yet known to anyone".<sup>61</sup> The aim of this disclosure of mysteries of the heart is, first, to gain insight (knowledge) in the degree of purity of one's thoughts by examining the origins of these thoughts. The decipherment of one's thoughts focuses on the question of whether these thoughts are mixed with illusionary and misleading representations incited by demons. This exegesis of the subject can be seen as self-disclosure in the sense that it produces self-knowledge through the examination of the quality of thoughts and the reconstruction of the pure/impure origins of thoughts.<sup>62</sup> Second, the examination aims at eradicating everything from the mind that disturbs the contemplation of God and the purity and peace of heart.<sup>63</sup> Confession is not only a hermeneutical practice but also a cathartic method of freeing oneself from disturbing impure thoughts through verbalization.

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 174-175; *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 137. See also Philippe Chevallier, *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011), 70ff.

<sup>58</sup> In Cassian's writings, we find the famous example of a monk who was ordered to water for a year a dried stick planted in the middle of the desert. This example shows that obedience is not trained through reasonable practices but implies submission to the will of the other. John Cassian, *Institutions cénobitiques*, ed. J.-C. Guy, *Sources chrétiennes* 109 (1965), 4.24; see also, Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 92.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 178; Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 124-150; Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 94.

<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," in Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. J.R. Carrette (1999), 196.

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 109-110.

<sup>62</sup> Compare Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 300-301.

<sup>63</sup> John Cassian's *Conférences* start from the notion of purity of heart as the immediate aim of the monk's efforts: it is only with a pure heart that one may enter God's Kingdom and gain eternal life. Cassian, *Conférences*, ed. E. Pichery, *Sources chrétiennes* 42, 54 and 64 (1955-1959), 1.5-7.

What, then, exactly needs to be disclosed, examined and confessed? According to Foucault, the *exagoreusis* in Cassian focuses not on past sinful acts but on the multitude and course of spontaneous thoughts (*cogitationes*).<sup>64</sup> More specifically, the focus is on the discernment of good thoughts on the one hand and bad thoughts that disturb contemplation on the other hand. Such disturbing thoughts consist of all kinds of illusionary temptations and misleading representations, urges, agitations, suggestions, images, desires and acts of the will that create disorder and disquiet in a soul in need of stability and tranquility.<sup>65</sup> In addition, there are thoughts that are produced by and benefit from disorder and the multiplicity of thoughts – thoughts that appear innocent, are not mistrusted, and can yet introduce impurities. In short, “the examination consists in a constant oversight of the constant and uncontrollable stream of all the competing thoughts that present themselves to the soul”.<sup>66</sup>

The examination and confession do not concern desire but the stream of thoughts, of which desires are an integral part. Foucault recognizes this when, in his course in Louvain-la-Neuve (1981), he states that Christianity has invented a practice of veridiction around a “hermeneutics of thought”, i.e., the deciphering, discerning and scrutinizing of the multitude, mobility and illusionary character of thoughts – and I would like to add: *not* a hermeneutics of desire. He further writes that this hermeneutics of thoughts was never fully assimilated into the later juridical models organizing desire.<sup>67</sup> Foucault, however, does not further systematically explore the reasons for this impossibility of full assimilation. What reasons could there be? A first reason we have already explored. According to Foucault, the pastoral model and techniques Cassian develops around obedience, submission and *exagoreusis* differ for a juridical model with its references to the law. The voluntaristic aspects (the will of the other, the divine will, the unique interactions between monk and spiritual director) of the monastic pastoral power are difficult to reconcile with the notion of general laws that apply to all.

But there might also be another (related) reason. We have said that Foucault is primarily interested in Cassian as founding father of the Christian pastoral power. In his discussion of Cassian’s writings, the focus is therefore on obedience, submission and confession to the spiritual director, and renunciation of one’s will. Clearly, this is what Foucault is preoccupied with in his study of the historical conditions for modern disciplinary regimes. However, in this context Foucault also regularly refers to an important principle present in Cassian’s writings that seems difficult to reconcile with submission and renunciation: the examination of conscience as “the screening of the soul by itself” and the

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<sup>64</sup> Foucault mentions that Cassian follows his predecessor Evagrius Ponticus when arguing that, since monks have already renounced a sinful life, the demons attack monks in their thoughts (*logismoi*). Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 102; Foucault, *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980* (2012), 298-299.

<sup>65</sup> Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (1998), 42-47.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 103. See also, Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” 187.

<sup>67</sup> Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 150. See also, Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 109.

monk's exegesis of himself of and sorting in the flow of his thoughts.<sup>68</sup> Like the examination by the spiritual director, such self-analysis aims at discernment, that is, at making a split (*partage*) between true and illusionary thoughts. In order to create such *partage*, one has to examine and distinguish (*discretio*) the origins of the thoughts in order to establish their "quality". The obedient and well-directed monk does not so much consider the content of his thoughts but their "value" by seeking the author – a demon, God, oneself – of the idea.<sup>69</sup> In this context, Foucault refers to Cassian's concept of *arcana conscientiae* as describing the thinking subject's relation to his own thoughts, a relation that Cassian further describes in terms of an inner "arbitrator" of one's thought and a "judge monitoring the way we combat".<sup>70</sup> Adequate examination of conscience presupposes the formation of an inner critical instrument for the monitoring and discerning of thoughts and for boosting the subject to continuous battle against the vices. What we find here in Cassian is a theory of "the battle within", that is to say, a process of purification of the soul through a close combat<sup>71</sup> in which the formation of an inner arbitrator of one's thoughts – conscience – is a fundamental precondition.<sup>72</sup>

Although Foucault consistently highlights obedience and submission to the will of the other, Cassian's views on the formation and examination of conscience point at an important aspect of his thought: self-analysis as ascetic practice, that is, as "an exercise of self on self".<sup>73</sup> Here, we come across an aspect of Cassian's thought that points towards self-practices in which the authority and presence of a spiritual director is unnecessary. It is not only because the pastoral model of obedience cannot be reduced to a juridical model that Cassian's hermeneutics of thought was never fully assimilated into the later juridical models organizing desire. In addition, in Cassian we also find self-practices that at least potentially resist the model of obedience and the juridical model. Cassian's pastoral model, in which the intimate relation between the subject and the spiritual director is central, includes technologies of subjectivation (*subjectivation*), that is to say, of constituting individual subjectivity through "subjection (*assujettissement*) of the individual to himself".<sup>74</sup> The well-trained monk can – so to say – be a pastor to himself, subjecting himself to the inner authority of a well-trained conscience.

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<sup>68</sup> Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 141; Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 103-105; Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 300; Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 301. Kasumi Clements has argued that Foucault's reading is static in its focus on technologies of domination (obedience, submission). As a result, Foucault does not fully develop the aspect of technologies of the self and self-practices in Cassian's work. Niki Kasumi Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self. John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation* (2020), 10-20.

<sup>69</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 2.21-24; Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 104.

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 105; Cassian, *Institutions*, 6.9.

<sup>71</sup> Westerink, *De lichamen en de lusten*, 125-126.

<sup>72</sup> Cassian's view of conscience differs from Augustine's views in which conscience can be seen as the verdict of reason against the consent to sinful desires. Manfred Svensson, "Augustine on Moral Conscience," *The Heythrop Journal* 54:1 (2013).

<sup>73</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 205.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir," in *Dits et Écrits 2* (2001), 566.



### The renunciation of the will and the dissociation of thoughts

From what we have said on Cassian's affirmation of the examination of conscience as self-analysis, we could raise the question of how his notion of renunciation of the will has to be interpreted. What does Cassian mean when he writes that "taught by many examples, they say that a monk, and especially the younger ones, cannot bridle the desire (*voluptatem*) of his concupiscence (*concupiscentia*) unless he has first learned by obedience to mortify his wishes (*mortificare per oboedientiam suas voluntates*)"?<sup>75</sup> An answer to this question may be found in Cassian's *Collationes Patrum* in the context of a discussion of the daily combat between desires of the spirit and those of the flesh. Cassian writes: "Between these two desires then the free will of the soul stands in an intermediate position somewhat worthy of blame, and neither delights in the excesses of sin, nor acquiesces in the sorrows of virtue. (...) And this free will would never lead us to attain true perfection, but would plunge us into a most miserable condition of lukewarmness".<sup>76</sup> This lukewarm free will is the first eminent obstacle for the daily life of the monk as a life in close combat. The weakness of this will and its tendency to slackness and carelessness fundamentally undermines the inner battle against disturbing thoughts and the continuous striving for purity of heart. In other words, according to Cassian, the monk should not renounce his own singular will because it is egoistically dominant or fundamentally perverted by an evil libidinal principle, but – to the contrary – because the will is weak. Its freedom implies that it can move in various directions but without offering steadfastness in spiritual matters.

Foucault seems to have recognized that the renunciation of the will concerns the will's weakness and lukewarmness when he writes that Christian direction aimed at renunciation of the will "rests on the paradox of a determination not to will".<sup>77</sup> Foucault does not further explore this "determination not to will", and yet, in my opinion, this is a crucial element in Cassian's views of the monk's daily practices. The monk needs to be trained in a powerful not-willing, i.e., the steadfast capacity to say no to demonic trickery and illusions. This is what the spiritual directors teach by example: in the battle against the vices, a weak free will is useless; one needs to acquire the determination not to will in order to maintain striving only for perfection and willing nothing else. The monk needs to renounce the *weakness and mobility* of the will in order to be able – to put it in Foucault's terms – to dissociate (*dissocier*) and disconnect (*defaire*) the will from its involvement in and consent to the movements of thoughts.<sup>78</sup> In order to decipher and discern the course of thought, one first has to radically interrupt the mobility of free will.<sup>79</sup> Freedom and weakness of the will have to be replaced by determination in not-willing.

In Cassian's view, examination of conscience is possible and effective when the weakness of the will is mortified and the determined not-willing is set in place. How then does this

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<sup>75</sup> Cassian, *Institutions*, 4.8.

<sup>76</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 4.12 and also 3.12.

<sup>77</sup> Foucault, *The Confessions of the Flesh*, 95-96.

<sup>78</sup> Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," 193; Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 184-186.

<sup>79</sup> Seen from this perspective, the absurdity test (see above) is more than only an exercise in obedience; it is also an exercise in determination of the will.

not-willing relate to desire? Can this determination not to will be seen as a condition for the mortification of a desire that perverts all thoughts? Is the hermeneutics of (and battle against) disturbing thoughts after all a hermeneutics of desire? Peter Brown and others have argued that Cassian agrees with Augustine in so far as he assumes that since the Fall sexual desires and the inner conflicts with these desires are “as it were implanted in our bodies” and thus came to belong to the very “substance of human nature”.<sup>80</sup> But this does not mean that Cassian accepts Augustine’s view of *libido* or *concupiscentia carnis* as inner dislocation of the will. Nor are Cassian’s ideas organized around a notion of sin as disobedience to God’s law. What characterizes the post-lapsarian human condition is not the dynamics of will and counter-will but the battle between spirit and flesh. This inner conflict manifests itself in ongoing conflicts between various thoughts: representations against representations, acts of the will against acts of the will, desires against desires. When Cassian writes about *concupiscentia carnis* he places the concept in opposition to *concupiscentia spiritualis* – and, analogously, he places *voluntas carnis* in opposition to *voluntas spiritualis*.<sup>81</sup> The renunciation of the will is not an attempt to mortify libidinal desires but serves the purposes of creating a capacity for the dissociation of and detachment from tempting thoughts.

And what about *libido*? Despite the fact that Cassian in his writings in the context of his discussions of the battle against the vice of fornication (*fornicatio*) mentions *libido* as one of its components,<sup>82</sup> Foucault realizes that Cassian does not develop a full-fledged doctrine of *libido*. This is likely one of the reasons that in the chapter on the “libidinization of sex” in *Confessions of the Flesh* there are only minor references to Cassian.<sup>83</sup> *Libido* is indeed not frequently mentioned in Cassian’s writings and also not systematically elaborated. It is not synonymous with *concupiscentia carnis* but seems to denote a very specific aspect of man’s sexual thoughts. It is described by Cassian as “developing in the dark corners of the soul” and as being “without physical passions”.<sup>84</sup> And in the context of his discussion of the problem of nocturnal pollutions, he mentions that in order to triumph over this impurity, one has to mortify the “libidinal ticklings” (*libidinis titillatione*) that are hidden in the depth of man’s interior.<sup>85</sup>

In the chapter “Virginité and Self-Knowledge” in *Confessions of The Flesh*, Foucault focuses attention on Cassian’s views on sexuality as radically different from Augustine’s views on the *libido*.<sup>86</sup> Writing for monks, Cassian presupposes sexual abstinence and is

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<sup>80</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 4.7; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 420-422. See also Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 65, 76-77; Colombo, “What is a Desiring Man?,” 84-85.

<sup>81</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 4.11.

<sup>82</sup> Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity,” 190; Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 181, 184.

<sup>83</sup> We note here that Foucault is not primarily interested in theological discussions between Pelagians (such as Julian of Eclanum), semi-Pelagians (such as Cassian) and anti-Pelagians (such as Augustine). The fact that Cassian and Augustine were actively involved in debates on free will, sin and grace, and critically responding to each other’s positions, has not kept Foucault from treating them separately without making significant comparisons.

<sup>84</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 12.2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.6.

<sup>86</sup> Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 181-189. See also, Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity”.

only concerned with bodily sensations and sexual thoughts that challenge a monk in his search for purity. That Cassian devotes special attention to the nocturnal pollutions (Conference 22) is understandable given the fact that these pollutions point toward a fundamental problem for the monk: How can one monitor and dissociate pleasurable libidinal ticklings and hidden desires from other thoughts (acts of the will, representations, phantasies, etc.) when one is asleep and cannot actively labor upon the movement of thoughts or prevent their physical effects? Foucault argues that the problem of pollutions during sleep does not have the same status as the problem of erection in Augustine. The pollutions are not the visible sign of a perverted will inscribed in human nature. If the monk does succeed in tracing its origins and is able to disconnect this physical phenomenon from the will and from dream images, the pollutions are merely the last “remainders” of imperfection – the last involuntary inner stirrings to remain after one has succeeded in detaching oneself from tempting thoughts and desires. As such they remind the monk to remain humble and patient. One could at this point raise the question in what sense these detached pollutions are a sexual problem. In Conference 22, Cassian argues that the pollutions are caused by an excess of moisture through overeating (the vice of gluttony), spring from a mind empty of spiritual pursuits (the vice of acedia), or originate from lack of humility making a monk feel guilty of imperfections that belong to human nature (the vices of vainglory and pride) and preventing him from joining in the (contemplation of the) Eucharist.<sup>87</sup> The nocturnal pollutions point towards the likely presence of a variety of hidden disturbing thoughts (excitations, urges, etc.). They indicate that there are limits to self-mastery, and they determine the field for technologies of the self – the continuous examination of the stream of thoughts in the never-ending search for perfect *puritas cordis*.<sup>88</sup>

## FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND REMARKS

What Foucault found in the writings of Cassian and Augustine were historical conditions for modern organizations of power and knowledge. Notably in psychoanalysis, he saw an interaction of a theory (knowledge) of the interrelatedness of the law and desire, and a truth-telling technique (power) for the decipherment of desire. However, from the analysis of Foucault’s readings of Cassian and Augustine, one cannot conclude that Foucault provides convincing arguments for such unity and analytic. Augustine’s doctrine of libido did not include a hermeneutics of desire and an obligation to confess, and the later juridical pastoral models conditioned by Augustine’s views on legitimate-illegitimate consent to desire are fundamentally different from Cassian’s pastoral model of obedience and submission to the will of the other. Cassian’s pastoral technologies were not organized around the problem of libido as the univocal sinful force perverting the will but around

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<sup>87</sup> Cassian, *Conférences*, 22.2-8. Peter Brown has rightfully argued that whereas Augustine has placed sexuality in the center of the human condition, Cassian places sexual thoughts in a complex interaction with other dangerous vices that lurk in the soul. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 422.

<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Clark, “Foucault, the Fathers and Sex,” 47.

the decipherment of the quality of a multitude of thoughts, and they were aimed at the dissociation of and detachment from misleading thoughts. Cassian did not introduce juridical models for the confession of libidinal desire as the truth of the subject.

And yet, it is precisely because the monastic ascetic techniques and Augustinian doctrine are “different” and “contradictory” – as Foucault himself noticed – that his readings of Cassian and Augustine open up new perspectives within his genealogical project of the history of sexuality. Notably Cassian’s views of exercises and practices, in which the subjection to the other’s will and renunciation of the weakness of one’s own will can be seen as instrumental for the formation of conscience, self-examination and self-practices of dissociation and purification, open new trajectories for an analytic of modern forms of subjectivity relative to forms of governmentality. For, although Foucault does not explore the significance of the formation and examination of conscience as a fundamental aspect of subjectivation in Cassian’s writings, in my opinion this aspect can be seen as important for later developments. In the Age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, not only the practices of obedient subjection to spiritual directors powerfully resurface but also technologies for the subjection of the individual to his own conscience strongly come to the fore, notably in the Reformation as the “revolts of conduct” that oppose the sacramental power of the priest-pastor.<sup>89</sup> Although Foucault did not systematically explore the impact of the Reformation on the modern governmentality, we know that he saw the Reformation as a key factor in the transformation of the individualizing pastoral power (the subjection of the individual to the spiritual director and the examination of conscience) towards a totalizing political power in which the state produces institutions (schools, prisons, etc.) aimed at enclosing and disciplining individuals.<sup>90</sup> The way in which Reformers such as Luther and Calvin articulated conscience – relative to confession (*confession*) – could shed light on the genealogical connection between the Christian pastoral power and the modern forms and manifestations of governmentality. Notably in Calvin’s theory of “double conscience”, in which he makes a distinction between a “political conscience” that has the function of adjusting one’s life to the societal norms and civil righteousness as organized by the political order, and a “spiritual conscience” that instructs an individual in matters of faith and truth, we can detect both a strong individualizing tendency as well as a tendency towards morally disciplined integration in the larger unities of church and society.<sup>91</sup> We may find here a condition for the disciplining of populations (through processes of Christianization and confessionalization) on the one hand, and for counter-conduct, revolt and resistance (through the primacy of spiritual conscience over political conscience), on the other. In my opinion, this problematic provides a fruitful trajectory for further

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<sup>89</sup> Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 85; Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 166.

<sup>90</sup> Foucault, “Le sujet et le pouvoir,” 146ff.

<sup>91</sup> On this issue, see Herman Westerink, *The Heart of Man’s Destiny. Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Early Reformation Thought* (2012), 110-116.

research into Foucault's published texts and the Foucault archives at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which include several documents on Luther's texts on confession.<sup>92</sup>

We have seen that Foucault's study of early Christian doctrine and pastoral practices had its origins in the questions and theses formulated in *The Will to Knowledge*.

If Foucault intended to trace back the contemporary analytic of the subject of desire to early Christian authors, we can conclude that his reading of Augustine and Cassian do not provide convincing arguments for such an analytic being established in early Christianity. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that readings of Cassian and Augustine are of no value for understanding contemporary theories and practices such as psychoanalysis. In his 1981 course in Louvain-la-Neuve, Foucault suggests that the influence of Cassian's hermeneutics of thoughts can be traced through history, resurfacing in Descartes exclusion of the *malin génie* as the producer of illusionary and misleading thoughts.<sup>93</sup> This exclusion functions as an introduction of a fundamental problem that haunts modern thought: one could be mistaken; there is the possibility that one produces illusions for oneself (*possibilité d'illusion de moi sur moi*).<sup>94</sup> According to Foucault, first Schopenhauer and then Freud will articulate this problem in terms of the inevitable presence and workings of unconscious and illusory thoughts. In this 1981 course, Foucault does not further explore this train of thought that points towards the possibility of a general reinterpretation of the history of Western thought relative to Christian spirituality.<sup>95</sup> Again, this opens new possibilities for further reflections on the way the early Christian monastic practices (hermeneutics of thoughts, examination of conscience) may have fundamentally influenced the character of Western philosophical exercises in thought activities that, according to Foucault, can be seen as "the living substance of philosophy".<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> References to Luther can notably be found in Box 88 in the Foucault archives. These documents show that Foucault, through his study of the confession of sin and lust in Luther and his catholic contemporary Cajetan, encountered subjectivity in the form of a relation to the self and others, i.e., a form of subjectivity further characterized by dissociating forces, inner conflictual experiences and subjection to various techniques of self-decipherment and truth-telling. On this issue see, Arianna Sforzini, "L'autre modernité du sujet. Foucault et la confession de la chair: les pratiques de subjectivation à l'âge des Réformes," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 235:3 (2018).

<sup>93</sup> Foucault had already explored this aspect of Descartes's *Meditations* in his 1972 essay "My Body, This Paper, This Fire". In that text he underscores that fact that meditations imply "ascetic" exercises through which the subject "detaches" himself from "impure" and "disordered movements" of thought. (Interestingly, this choice of words later returns in his analyses of Cassian's writings.) Michel Foucault, "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu," in *Dits et Écrits 1* (2001), 1125. See also Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (2007), 175-194.

<sup>94</sup> Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai*, 167-168.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 169. The relation between philosophy and spirituality is explored in the course "The Hermeneutics of the Subject" but without extensive elaborations of the monastic hermeneutics of thought, the problem of illusionary versus true thoughts, and its significance for Western philosophy.

<sup>96</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 9.

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