

EMBODIMENT, DISEMBODIMENT, AND OVEREMBODIMENT MERLEAU-PONTY, FOUCAULT, AND AUGUSTINE ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEXUALITY IN HUMAN LIFE

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ABSTRACT: We live in a time when the body is given a relevance, even a symbolic relevance, which it may never have had in human history. But how tight is the link between body and personal identity? How much does our contingent body weigh on our sense of self? My paper's aim is to reflect on the role of the body in shaping people's identities by taking human sex life as a suitable example of the kind of energetic presence with which humans must come to terms in their lives. My argument begins with Merleau-Ponty's take on sexuality in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, it uses Foucault's investigation into the changes of sexual ethics in early Christianity as a counterpoint, and finally focuses on the asymmetrical dialogue between Foucault and Augustine in the fourth, posthumous volume of *The History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh*. The end goal of this quick journey is to clarify what is at stake when a special value is attached to sexual intimacy nowadays and to see if this "axiophany" can be interpreted as a modern kind of "hierophany."

Viviamo in un'epoca in cui al corpo viene attribuita una rilevanza, anche simbolica, che forse non ha mai avuto nella storia dell'umanità. Ma quanto è stretto il legame tra corpo e identità personale? Quanto pesa il nostro corpo contingente sul nostro senso di sé? L'obiettivo dell'articolo è riflettere sul ruolo del corpo nella costruzione dell'identità delle persone, prendendo la vita sessuale umana come caso esemplare del tipo di presenza energetica con cui gli esseri umani devono fare i conti nella loro vita. L'argomentazione parte dalla concezione della sessualità proposta da Merleau-Ponty nella *Fenomenologia della percezione*, utilizza come contrappunto l'indagine di Foucault sui cambiamenti dell'etica sessuale nel primo cristianesimo e si concentra infine sul dialogo asimmetrico tra Foucault e Agostino nel quarto volume postumo della *Storia della sessualità: Le confessioni della carne*. Lo scopo di questo rapido viaggio è chiarire che cosa vi sia in gioco quando si attribuisce un valore speciale all'intimità sessuale al giorno d'oggi e vedere se questa "axiofania" può essere interpretata come una sorta di "ierofania" moderna.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality, Personal Identity, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Augustine

PAROLE CHIAVE: Sessualità, Identità personale, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Agostino

1. Embodied Selves

We live in a time when the body is given a relevance, even a symbolic relevance, which it may never have had in human history. Or, at least, it has not had since the “axial” breakthrough disclosed a space beyond the physical world that began to be pictured as the place where essential and self-contained valuable things such as truth, goodness, beauty (the standard “strong evaluated” goods) are placed and pursued (Bellah and Joas 2011).

As Zygmunt Bauman (1999, pp. 42 and 46; 2001) recurrently noticed, we live in a society where there is an “obsessive preoccupation with the body,” which is regarded as an instrument of pleasure and therefore handed over to all the attractions the world has in store for those who treasure it. A generically anti-platonic mood dominates the life of most modern men and women.

Whether it is a product of secularization or of the extraordinary progress of medicine, many today entrust to a reality like the flesh, which has been regarded as a fragile, transient, unreliable thing for centuries, the task of fulfilling the injunction to happiness that operates almost as a categorical duty in our time. For most people nowadays, the only possible source of pleasure resides in the body. A non-corporeal happiness has become almost unimaginable.

Now, the body certainly is important. Who would deny that? Everybody wants a healthy, fit, “performing” body that, if possible, elicits the admiration or envy of others. This shouldn’t surprise us *per se*. What would be left of our self without a functioning body? How could we imagine it without a face to offer to the gaze of others, without senses to connect with the world around us?

However, come to think of it, the question is less trivial than it might appear at first glance. We can easily realize it if we focus on some revelatory questions. To what extent are we our body? How close is the link between body and personal identity? How much does the body we have been allotted by chance weigh on our sense of self? In other words, how much does the body matter when we have to answer the question “who are you?” For example, how much do the timbre of our voice, the color of our eyes or hair, the profile of our nose, our height, corpulence

or slenderness, elegance or awkwardness, beauty or ugliness, healthy or puny constitution, substantially affect our selfhood? Where is our true self to be located and championed?

I assume that many would hesitate to answer these questions with a blunt verdict and would opt instead for a qualified answer. We both are and aren't our bodies, because the human body is many different things. It probably doesn't make much sense here to contrast a pure interiority with a pure exteriority, as Descartes famously did, juxtaposing a *res extensa* – what inertly occupies a space – and a *res cogitans* – what is immaterial and capable of spontaneous agency. A related polarity, in fact, can be found within the experience of our “own” body. This should be obvious and familiar to everyone. Let's call it the double aspect of the body: that is, the fact that we experience our body both as our own and as a foreign mass – from within and from without, so to speak (*Leib* and *Körper*, a German philosopher would say). In this sense, there is indeed something like a basic dualism that weighs on the relationship we have with our body.

The lived body is *my* own body. The body that enables me to move, feel, speak, cogitate, in short, to feel happy and whole. When it is functioning at its best, the lived body is almost self-transparent. The magical experience of the “flow,” of doing things without thinking about them, immersed in the fluidity of movement and action, is something more ordinary than might appear to those who picture “flow” only in relation to exceptional performances (for example, the competitive trance state of great sports champions). Just think of how rewarding it is to return to mindless walking after a rehabilitated sprained ankle. The perfect overlap between self and body, which is also experienced when the expressive functions of the face operate in harmony with the expressiveness of another person or persons, is precisely what makes us feel at one with our own body and what leads many to think that the hard-to-figure-out idea of an afterlife – of personal immortality – doesn't make much sense if it doesn't imply the survival of this expressive and acting totality. Our eternal soul is there: one with the lived body.

The alien body is, on the other hand, the body that resists our will, our desires, our fantasies. The matter that weighs down the spirit. It is the sick, the cumbersome, the needy, the craving body, but also the

rejected body, the body that was given us by the genetic lottery and we would rather change. The body as a prison of which Plato spoke disdainfully in the *Phaedo*, but also the body reified by the gazes of others, of which Jean-Paul Sartre offered some celebrated descriptions in *Being and Nothingness* or in his novel *Nausea*. For another French philosopher, Henri Bergson (2005), the clumsy body is the quintessence of the comic: the unresponsive memory, the stammering speech, the stumbling man that makes spectators gasp, the fluidity of movements that vanishes in the presence of an intrusive gaze. All examples of a body tripping over an overconfident subject, who is too confident, that is, in the possibility of being master in his own house.

Both views of the body are legitimate and are grounded in reality. Our bodies are both intimate and foreign, irreplaceable and manipulable. Thus, we aren't surprised by the desire to correct myopia, heal a decayed tooth, or by the choice to heavily intervene on an offended or diseased body. The objectified, sedated, operated on, manipulated body, however, is the same body with which we hope to identify again once the treatments have ended. This is why most of us are puzzled by the disembodied or "excarinated" views of personal identity by many analytic philosophers since John Locke's pioneering forays into the subject, with their sci-fi examples about brains in the vat or perfect duplicates of people by teleportation, etc. How could our self possibly consist of nothing but contingent psychological associations (i.e., subjective continuity granted by memory and character)? How could our connection to our own precious body be so thin? Are there no intrinsic limits to the manipulation of the body other than those self-imposed by a free will?

2. Sexed Bodies

If such is the case, the philosophical poser at this juncture is to find a successful reflective equilibrium between body's alienness and intimacy or, if you will, between its passivity and spontaneity. The body plays a fundamental role in our personal identity because it is hard to make sense of a human being apart from his or her incarnation in a particular

body. When people say “I,” in fact, they also say “mine,” that is, they assume the lived body and the intentional acts it makes possible.

This body, however, is also an object of care in a twofold sense. It is in need of care because it concerns us: because the integrity of our identity depends on it. But, at the same time, it is such because it forces us into an endless activity of maintenance that is feasible only if the body, when necessary, is no longer seen and defended as an indivisible whole, but is broken down into its parts and temporarily reified.

This dual stance, by the way, is also common in ascetic practices, which are ways of using the body and its passivity for the elevation of the body itself, of repetition for escaping from repetition, of constructing a habitus or second nature to escape the constraints of physical nature. Finding the right balance between agency and patency is the task which all humans have to accomplish at every stage of their lives. And every life stage knows its critical junctions.

My aim in what follows is to reflect on the role of the body in shaping people’s identities by taking human sex life as a suitable example of the kind of energetic presence with which humans must come to terms in their lives. My argument will begin with Merleau-Ponty, it will then use Michel Foucault’s position as a counterpoint, and finally focus on the asymmetrical dialogue between Foucault and Augustine in the fourth, posthumous volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 2021, chapter 3, section 3). The goal of this quick journey, in a nutshell, is to clarify what is at stake when people attach special value to sexual intimacy.

When philosophers speak of “embodiment” they generally refer to the kind of insights that I invoked above. That is, they assume that the experience of the lived body, or “flesh,” in short, the sentient, acting body, is the first-person evidence that refutes any Cartesian substance dualism. From this point of view, disembodiment appears as both a theoretical and practical error: a misunderstanding that not only prevents us from fully understanding how we and other living beings function, but also gives rise to wrong, objectionable, even alienating life forms and life styles. When social critics blame the “excarnation” of modern civilization, they generally have in mind precisely the human harm that can result from the development and use of technologies which neglect the irreducibly embodied character of any animal life.

This is a reproach, which is often addressed to mainstream cognitive science or to the advocates of the much-trumpeted AI revolution. No machine, however “intelligent,” that is no extrinsic union between a *res cogitans* (information) and a *res extensa* (processor), can be embodied in the way humans are. This may be even taken to be a (weak) transcendental condition of human agency as such (Taylor 1995).

3. The drama of human sexuality: Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is generally seen as the originator of a “synoptic” criticism of philosophies that ignore these primary experiential data. His most important book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, has a chapter (the fifth in Part One) called “The Body in its Sexual Being.” A nonreductionist view of this important, but often neglected sphere of human existence is recognizable behind Merleau-Ponty’s meticulous argument. His choice is easily explained. Human sex life clearly is the domain where the temptation to mechanistically explain the impulses of the body reaches its peak. According to the French philosopher, however, this temptation must be resisted at all costs, because, if considered open-mindedly, human sexuality appears to be the prototypical example of an intentionality that organizes experience according to a meaning, which is embodied all the way down.

The human body’s sexual being, in short, is a universe populated with senses distinct from intellectual meanings, where the body acts plastically both as a synthetic power capable of amalgamating stimuli and as the source of an “intentionality which follows the general movement of existence”. Put otherwise, sexuality plays a primarily “expressive” role, insofar as it condenses in itself “the whole active and cognitive being” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 157).

Sexuality is “a manner of being in the physical and interhuman world,” an “atmosphere,” an “affective physiognomy,” in which something primordial is subjectively experienced, something anonymous is personalized, something that acts upon us is acted upon (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 159 and 168). And this can only happen through the body. For “the body expresses total existence, not because it is an

external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence comes into its own in the body. This embodied sense is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, sign and significance are abstract moments" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 166).

This is why Merleau-Ponty speaks of sexuality as a "drama," in which "the contradictions of love" are intertwined, in the second half of the chapter. The paradox ultimately depends on the "metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 167). From this point of view, "sexuality is dramatic *because* we commit our whole personal life to it," in a condition of structural uncertainty as to the ultimate meaning of what we do (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 171).

These passages from the *Phenomenology of Perception* effectively summarize an "expressivist" view of human sexuality that has been almost common sense in the West since at least the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s (on Romantic expressivism and the resulting ethics of authenticity, see Taylor 2007, chapter 13). When someone today makes a trivial statement such as "a happy sexual life is fundamental to couple well-being," she is taking a stance, which is close to the one articulated in a more abstract and rigorous way by Merleau-Ponty.

Let me elaborate further on this point. From a non-sexophobic or, as we often hear it said today, sex-positive perspective, a fulfilling sex life is an essential component of a romantic relationship because sexual acts entail two closely related qualities: intensity and intimacy. Indeed, intensity of involvement demands a form of surrender, of letting go, and a loss of the boundaries of the self that makes the condition experienced by lovers special. To use a phenomenological vocabulary, erotic pleasure is the product of a common pre-thematic intentionality, as when you know what to do without explicitly telling yourself or mentally representing it.

Collapsing into one's sentient body, however, is an event occurring in different grades in the sexual act, which is a performance only partially out of the agent's control. When it is satisfying, sexual intercourse is rather experienced by partners as an opportunity for *self*-empowerment. From a self-interested perspective, this is why a happy sex life consolidates a couple and an unhappy one undermines it.

Explaining this dynamic in detail, though, is no easy feat. The context isn't self-interpreting. Self-empowerment seems to depend on the type of pleasure, evidently. But sexual pleasure has a distinctive nature. For it to be lived as a physical event that signifies something beyond itself, it must be experienced as an *appropriable*, personal process, in a different sense from that which we ascribe to other fleeting bodily pleasures such as scratching or evacuating. Here, however, the argument thickens, because an important part of the attractiveness of sexual pleasure actually lies in its also being a subpersonal pleasure, that is, the expression of impulses transcending the domain of alert consciousness.

In the *Third Duino Elegy*, Rainer Maria Rilke (1989) poetically translated this aspect of human sexual life with memorable images: the "terrors rushing back" [ältere Schrecken]; the "bitter engagements" [dunkelstem Umgang]; "the tempest of origin" [die Fluten der Herkunft]; the "whirlpool raging inside"; "the primitive beckoning forest"; "ancestral blood"; etc. What Rilke wanted to convey with these celebrated lines is that the sexed body is never wholly transparent. That is, it is impossible to establish a priori *whom* the pleasure that lovers experience through the sexual act belongs to. When the qualifier "carnal" is associated with the sexual domain, it usually indicates the experience of the body as a physical entity, "matter" endowed with an enigmatic intentionality. The impact on people's imagination and will of this picture of the body cannot be underestimated and seems to demand a general reconfiguration of the ontology of the person, now seen primarily as a field of forces where ambiguous and insidious impulses, drives or inclinations impinge. This is more or less what we conjure up when we hear people say that sexuality is something important, enigmatic and, following Merleau-Ponty's insight, "dramatic."

4. Downplaying sex: Michel Foucault

It is precisely against this way of framing the human experience of *aphrodisia* (erotic pleasures) that Foucault mobilizes his skeptical gaze in his influential writings of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In particular, he develops an original genealogical study of Western sexuality to shed

a different light on the constellation of insights, models and questions fashioned, among others, by Merleau-Ponty. In short, Foucault's primary aim is to instill in his readers a robust impulse to proceed with caution and take nothing for granted in this beleaguered domain of human life. For, while the argument sketched above has the semblance of a first-hand account, the truth is that even Merleau-Ponty never explicitly discusses the concept of "sexuality" that he employs in the relevant chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. On the contrary, he assumes it straightaway as a basic piece of evidence.

Yet, are we sure that we know what we're talking about when we talk about sex?

To begin with, the certainty that we're sticking here to a strictly descriptive approach is shattered by the realization that the term "sexuality" itself, and along with it the belief that the concept denotes a separate realm of human life characterized by a semantics and pragmatics of its own, is a fairly recent invention (19th century).

Thus, the first effect of truth produced by Foucault's conceptual-historical investigations comes from a radical form of recontextualization and has essentially a critical-negative intent. He proceeds, that is, as a *déconstructeur* of conventional wisdom. His overarching goal is to undermine the "apparatus of sexuality" that, he thinks, has only recently settled in people's everyday life. The result is a kind of "antidoxa" a reversal of common sense in matters of sexuality. In what follows, I will try to summarize the gist of his view in a few paragraphs, hoping to stay faithful to the spirit of Foucault's enquiry⁽¹⁾.

Contrary to what an erotic imaginary centered on genitality and the reproductive impulse would lead us to think, human sexuality is no fact of nature. At the most, brute facts of nature are intense sensations (in which, as is well known, the boundary between pleasurable and painful is fluid), the irritable surfaces into which they are built, and the various ways of mastering them (in the guise of either the economy or the art of pleasures). There is no plausible reason to push our ontological commitments beyond these philosophically unproblematic assumptions. In

(1) To condense Foucault's position, I have drawn on the three volumes of his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978, 1984, 1986) and Carrette 1999. For an overview, see also Elden 2016.

contrast, the desire to know more about a behavior that, as such, means nothing beyond its matter-of-factness, should always be viewed with suspicion. Put otherwise, the presumption or attribution of a more complex intentionality than that which is superficially manifested in the act of indulging in an intense sensation may conceal a dynamic of simultaneous construction and constriction of a subject who, as a result of his or her “libidinalisation,” is both empowered and made more docile to social disciplines. From this point of view, a disproportionate interest in erotic practices and their taxonomy in conjunction with a problematizing stance may indicate that two converging processes of subjugation and subjectivation are covertly at work.

If this plea for recontextualization is successful and the apparatus of modern sexuality loses its veneer of obviousness, an almost boundless space for intellectual curiosity is opened up. On the one hand, the ways in which the bureaucratic agencies entrusted with the task of studying and watching over sexual malaises, dysfunctions or abnormalities operate in bourgeois society can be creatively re-described with further estrangement effects. Foucault’s aim is to insinuate at least the suspicion that the modern invention of sexuality, notwithstanding its libertarian interpretations, may have surprising overlaps with the extravagant obsessions built into early Christian preaching. In his perspective, the common element would be the impulse to fathom, regulate and codify the pliable surface of human bodies, burdening them with a background of opaque intentions and meanings around which their unspeakable truths would revolve (which, as long as they are hidden or cloaked, must be extorted or released according to the prevailing mood in society).

Given that the use of pleasures is closely tied to the exercise of personal autonomy, one is naturally led to wonder how our understanding of the space of freedom actually enjoyed by individuals who are affected by these convergent processes of subjugation and subjectification should change in the light of the effort to defamiliarize what is *prima facie* common. According to Foucault, the liberties enjoyed even by “libinalized” beings are twofold. On the one hand, there is always the “negative” possibility of local resistance, since the power that is actualized in the dynamics of *assujettissement* is no less lacking in substance than the human beings on whom its effects are produced. On the flip

(constitutive) side, the point is instead to understand on which strategies or arts individuals can base their capacity to experience pleasure in order to explore possibilities that aren't predetermined by the disciplinary practices at work in their society, at least before they get stuck in a state of domination.

In the wake of this broadly "ethical" interest, Foucault retrieves from pre-Christian antiquity the ideas of a *souci de soi* and a technology of the self with constructive but not naively optimistic intentions. The kind of free subjectivity that forms the backdrop to his non-traditionalist recycling of tradition isn't built on an alleged inner "ideal" freedom – that is, it isn't premised on a "deeper" self – but takes shape in a practical-reflexive relationship of the acting and thinking subject with itself, whose ultimate goal is the preservation of a space of non-identity and non-determination. The reflexive practice of freedom, in other words, doesn't lead to the continuous solicitation of a hypertrophic moral consciousness, but to the slow construction of exemplary habitus or, likewise, "stylisation".

In tune with these assumptions, the importance of a judicious use of pleasures doesn't depend on any of the characteristics that the apparatus of modern sexuality attributes to a healthy sexual life. Rather, it arises from its being a suitable field for exploring borderline situations in which social heteronormativity can be circumvented not only in a punctual manner (as it is the case with madness, dissipation or death), but in the deferred and negotiated form of an aesthetics of existence. That is why Foucault insisted on the emancipatory potentialities of desexualized bodily pleasures in the last years of his life. In particular, he stressed the need to push sensory and sensual experience beyond the binary schemes entrenched in a form of life that, while it isn't built around individual freedom, neither can it completely wipe out its local and interstitial exercise.

5. Sex beyond the fallen body: Augustine

To wrap up my argument so far, Foucault not only claims that nothing "dramatic" happens in erotic pleasures, but that we must be wary of

clothing sex with a sacred or numinous aura, which can only have a disciplining effect. Put in a slightly different way, we must beware of attributing to the body meanings that it doesn't have per se. In short, we must be concerned less with disembodiment than with "overembodiment", i.e. with an excessive preoccupation with what the body might disclose to us about ourselves.

But when did this oversignification of the sexed body emerge in Western history?

Something subtle did happen during the twilight of classical antiquity. In *The Confessions of the Flesh*, in particular, Foucault's curiosity is aroused by the realization that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the sexual morality of the Church Fathers and the use of pleasures in ancient societies. Continuity can be found in the adherence to a lifestyle oriented towards temperance, self-mastery and a view of the reasons for action polarized between what is active and what is passive in human beings. Discontinuity, conversely, can be found in the subjectifying effects produced by how this common prescriptive level is "signified" and turned into reflexive practices through the construction of ascetic habits and the relevant "aleturgic", i.e. truth-making, imaginaries.

If the point is to understand the extent to which the history of early Christianity may help us to genealogically understand today's generally taken-for-granted link between a person's sexuality – and by "sexuality" I mean here the investment, orientation, success, nonchalance, experimentation, stylization in the domain of sexual acts, pleasures and desires – and his identity – his sense of self – this is more or less Foucault's conclusion: "with Christianity, the body becomes flesh."

Corps and *chair*: how should we understand the semantic divergence between two terms that are generally taken to be synonyms? In a nutshell, the idea is that, in the Christian worldview, a contingent fact of the world, which means nothing beyond itself, that is to say, which is more or less "efficient" and is at best manipulable, controllable, trainable through extrinsic arts or techniques, acquires a form of opaque intentionality. It becomes, that is, a field of autonomous signification, whose "truth" must be exposed, illuminated and turned into a norm by an elite of powerful *virtuosi*, who assign themselves a pastoral mission

towards the mass of *non virtuosus*. This pedagogical endeavor significantly narrows the scope of individual freedom precisely because it includes in the sphere of personal responsibility those sub-personal processes that had generally been contemplated with sovereign detachment in the past.

Parallel to this gestalt shift, there is a displacement of subjectivity upstream rather than downstream of acts or behavior. In the beginning, I mean, there is no longer action, but an embodied logos – a meaning that lurks in the recesses of reality, including its less noble parts. For flesh-and-blood individuals, this entails a thickening or hardening of the stakes of being a person. This leads to an almost exclusive focus in Christian pastoral care on the question of the meaning of individual acts and motives in the light of the (individual and collective) salvation history taken as a whole.

Even if one accepts this crude portrait of the transition from the pagan to the Christian world without objection, there still remains the problem of explaining such a shift on the basis of either internal reasons or external causes. While, with an investigative style that, rather than providing evidence, displays a wealth of significant information, Foucault succeeds in the feat of familiarizing the reader with an alien form of life, merging curiosity, respect and a sense of foreignness in equal parts, a surprising deafness to the leading tone of the Christian mind can be sensed between the lines. By “tone” I mean here the set of strong evaluations and moral sensibilities from which the distinctively Christian view of the human condition originates, and which isn’t reducible to the urgency of codification, which has indeed often prevailed in the history of the Catholic Church, and which Foucault’s investigation focuses on compulsively.

I hope that the general thrust of my argument is clear so far. Now, I’d like to further articulate my critical point by briefly discussing the original and symptomatic discussion of Augustine’s understanding of the flesh in the final sections of *Les aveux* (Foucault 2021, III.2-3). Augustine famously took the gloomy Pauline vision of human nature after the fall to its extreme consequences. A distinctive feature of the postlapsarian condition is the splitting of the will and, with it, human beings’ loss of spiritual and ethical self-mastery. According to a daring

interpretation of Genesis propounded in the *City of God* (Augustine 2012, bk. XIV), the beginning of this state of inner conflict would coincide with Adam and Eve's act of disobedience and manifest itself in the disconcerting form of a latent intentionality at work in the appetites, desires, primary emotions and thoughts that accompany the spontaneous dispositions of a Flesh in systematic struggle against the authority of the Spirit.

But why is this independent intentionality of the body so problematic for Augustine and, more generally, for Christians? Why are the spontaneous motions of the sexually aroused flesh more scandalous than the gut-wrenching reaction in front of an injustice that cries out to heaven (Jesus' *splanchnizesthai* in Mt 14:14)? Such questions do not seem to trouble Foucault, as if the basic insights and reasons that set the tone for Christian theological reflection were beyond the bounds of his investigation. In short, what stays on the margins of the picture painted in his *Confessions* is the insight that the scandal of the sexually aroused flesh concerns less the dualism between spirit and body, than the paradoxes afflicting the believer's efforts to construct a *personal* loving relationship with a *deus absconditus*. If this God, though inaccessible, is in his deepest essence love, the relationship with him cannot, in fact, disregard appetites, receptivity, passivity, which are all attributes of the flesh in Christian anthropology. Particularly disturbing, hence, is the presence of a disordered (i.e. self- and world-centered) form of love (*cupiditas* or *concupiscentia*) that pulls in the opposite direction to the *ordered dilectio*, which is instead guided and fertilized by God's oblation (i.e. self- and world-denying) love (see Arendt 1996; Nussbaum 2001, chapter 11). Viewed from this perspective, the dualism between *cari-tas* and *cupiditas* is a theological and exegetical conundrum that cannot be reduced to the "legal" question of the proper ordering of the various figures of sovereignty with which any individual has to reckon in relation to oneself. The point, to sum up, is the glorification of the "animal body" into a "spiritual body," when "the flesh will not lust after anything against the spirit," because it is still "the same self" that wavers between the mind and a flesh moved by "motions of desires which he wouldn't have, and yet had" (Augustine 1887, VIII, 19; see also Piergiacomini 2023).

Sure, the structural ambivalence of the flesh and the resulting unresolved tensions between emphasis on self-mastery and rhetoric of surrendering to God, use and enjoyment of the world, openness and closure to otherness, realism and enthusiasm, have constantly fueled the restlessness of Christ's followers and paved the way for exacerbating polarities (spirit/body, finite/infinite, high/low) around which not only the Christian worldview, but any religious tradition that, adopting Karl Jaspers' vocabulary, might be called "axial", revolves (Jaspers 2010).

All of this, however, stays on the background of Foucault's analytical gaze, whose theoretical impulse points elsewhere. But where exactly?

My hunch (see Cohen 1997; and Costa 2015) is that Foucault's thought, as well as that of several other French authors before and after him, taps into a vitalistic *Lebensanschauung* that functions as the theatre of a non-dialectical conflict between, on the one hand, the unrepresentable flux of life (exemplified first and foremost by needy and desiring bodies) and, on the other hand, the straitjacket that social institutions impose on such a principle of indeterminacy in an attempt to harness it, at least temporarily. In this sense, notwithstanding their apparent semantic depth, concepts such as "use of pleasures," "flesh," and "sexuality" are all shaky constructions, if not "fictitious points." One might even say that they are structurally "false," were it not for the fact that what is at stake in this kind of apparatus isn't knowledge as such, but knowledge as the power to determine the indeterminate (in the case at hand, the body as an infinitely malleable surface and its capacity to limitlessly expand the range of sensations that can be experienced).

6. Modern Hierophanies

What, then, would be the right measure to apply to the sexed body – that is, a measure that doesn't exceed either on the side of a desire-stifling "disembodiment" or of a penitentially disciplining "overembodiment"?

I only have the space here for gesturing towards some research questions. To begin with, the both theoretical and ethical dispute that I have presented and discussed in this essay could be re-described as a symptom of the typically modern dialectic between enchantment and disenchantment.

This claim should sound less extravagant once the biopolitical constructions that have articulated and channeled the enigmatic power of the sexed body in the modern age are regarded less as the net power effect of apparatuses of subjugation than as the generative and open-ended result of processes of sacralization and countersacralization. Following the German sociologist Hans Joas (2013), however, “sacralization” ought to be understood here not so much in terms of prohibition or tabuization, but rather as the standard setting for the emergence of new values, whose meaning and significance can be reconstructed by relying on a genealogy that is “affirmative” rather than purely negative or deconstructive.

To this end, it might be a good idea to see erotic practices as a prototypical case of experiences of self-transcendence, which, in turn, are the anthropological core of events of hierophany in general. That is to say, people encounter the sacred in their lives at times when the beautiful and the sublime, Eros and Thanatos, terror or ecstasy, seize them to the point of extorting thereby a surrendering, an opening or, indeed, an overstepping of the boundaries of the self, which demand then some kind of social or moral fashioning precisely because of the disrupting character of such irruptions (Joas 2022, pp. 182–184). In the case of sex, this shared demarcation and articulation of an uncanny experience takes place, first of all, as a mode of routinization through ritualization of excessive sensations. The excess depends, partly, upon emotional contagion, the rhythmic synchronization of gestures, as well as the enhanced attention that such an intimate “dance” or liturgy conveys, and in part upon the painful dissonance between the personal and sub-personal grounds of erotic pleasures.

In a book called *Interaction Ritual Chains*, the American sociologist Randall Collins (2004, chapter 6) developed a theory with a distinctly Durkhemian flavor, which, by bringing together the unstructured (or Dionysian) character of erotic ecstasy and the modern sacralization of the person, makes it possible to explain why self-transcendence and self-affirmation can go hand in hand in modern common-sense view of sexuality thanks to typically modern values such as respect/recognition and authenticity.

But having said that, why does it matter to establish who’s right and who’s wrong in this high-flown dispute between advocates of

reenchantment and disenchantment in matters of sex, where individual freedom should reign supreme?

The answer to this question, I think, turns around the way we interpret what is at stake in limit-experiences of self-transcendence, including erotic experiences. What do we ultimately expect from them? If we consider them in any sense of the word “important,” “significant,” what impact do they have on our expectations of a life, let’s say, “fuller,” more “authentic,” “freer,” etc.?

My hunch, as I have hinted from the beginning, is that the higher or strong goods we glimpse and seek in a fulfilling sexual life have more to do with self-transformation than with self-mastery, self-construction, or self-stylization. When I speak of “transformation,” needless to say, I don’t have in mind a planned and impeccably overseen change, but rather an “enactive,” practical, dramatic metamorphosis of one’s way of being open to the world and others, which relies also on the arcane intentionality of a body that, to quote a radio lecture by Foucault (2006), can never be a totally “utopian” reality, but it is always an agent called upon to measure its own field of action in the *terra incognita* that stretches out between being a body and having a body.

An enchanting experience, after all⁽²⁾.

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