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Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 4, *Les Aveux de la chair*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Paris: Gallimard, 2018. xi + 426pp. Notes, annexes, and index of works cited. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 9782072700347.

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For a long time, Michel Foucault went to mass. His upbringing in interwar Poitiers was ritually, if not emotionally, Catholic. As a boy, Foucault took communion at the Église Saint-Porchaire. Before enrolling as an adolescent at a local Catholic school, he attended the Lycée Henri IV, a state institution originally founded by Jesuits. Connected to it was the neighboring Chapelle Saint-Louis, which Foucault likely visited on numerous occasions. At the center of its altarpiece was an arresting painting of the circumcision of Christ. The focal point of the work, attributed to the Flemish Caravaggisti Louis Finson, is the obscured penis of the infant Jesus, who is held adoringly by Mary, as a man in bishop's clothing, watched intently by the surrounding crowd, leans forward to clip the child's foreskin. Perhaps Foucault learned how this story, interpreted theologically, connected the virgin birth to the first spilling of Christ's blood, prefiguring humanity's redemption; no doubt he had read Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which declared that circumcision must occur in "the heart, in the spirit" (KJV, 2:29).

In 1978, Foucault declared: "The church thrills me" (*L'Église, ça me rait*). It was not "faith" that intrigued him, he stressed, but the ecclesiastic institution itself: "It is a superb institution of power ... completely woven with imaginary, erotic, affective, bodily, sensual elements." In the same discussion, he recalled how, in 1975, he had witnessed the interfaith ceremony held by the Bishop of São Paulo after Brazil's military regime killed the Jewish journalist Vladimir Herzog, during which hundreds of soldiers and policeman had retreated before this cleric and his throng of followers. Foucault also regretted that intellectually, the church had become "extraordinarily weak," given that it had been "the west's great knowledge apparatus for centuries, until practically the eighteenth century."^[1]

Foucault brought these interests to fruition in *Les Aveux de la chair* (The Confessions of the Flesh), the fourth volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité* (History of Sexuality), which was published in France in 2018. Foucault completed the book, his only work devoted entirely to Christianity—specifically the church fathers from the second to the fifth centuries—prior to his death in 1984. It is difficult not to see Foucault's final book as engaging, however indirectly, with the Catholic milieu in which he was raised. At the same time, the book is clearly the culmination of his mature thought, particularly his work on subjectivity. For what retains his attention in *Les Aveux de la chair* is not the church as an institution of power, nor even as a generator of knowledge. Foucault

is interested, rather, in the way the church cultivated and rendered meaningful a distinct experience of selfhood. And it is this early Christian model of selfhood that, he maintains, lies at the foundation of the western understanding of sexuality. The root problem of our sexual experiences lies not in the fact that sex has been repressed, pathologized, or normalized. Rather, it is because early Christians bequeathed us the idea of a self brimming with involuntary desire, that sex became a never-ending source of intellectual, moral, and political preoccupation. The fault, Foucault argues, lies not in our institutions or our social structures, nor in our pleasures and desires, but in our “self.”

For thirty-four years, *Les Aveux de la chair* was, for Foucault’s readers, an obscure object of desire. Though mostly completed by the time of the philosopher’s death, it was one of his few writings to be clearly covered by his estate’s ban on posthumous publications—a prohibition that did little to break the stride of Foucault’s remarkable productivity *d’outre tombe*, which includes no less than thirteen volumes of Collège de France lectures. Scholars who have visited the Foucault archive at the Institut mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (IMEC) in Normandy will remember seeing the manuscript tantalizingly listed in the inventory, only to have their hopes of accessing it dashed by the terse summary of its status: “*incommunicable*” (non-consultable).

Whatever its topic, the appearance of the last book of a thinker of Foucault’s significance would be a major event. But even beyond the interest aroused by its long-delayed publication, *Les Aveux de la chair* occupies an important place in Foucault’s oeuvre. It is, of course, the final installment of his *Histoire de la sexualité*—after volume 1, *La Volonté de savoir* (*The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1976),^[2] volume 2, *L’Usage des plaisirs* (*The Use of Pleasure*, 1984),^[3] and *Le Souci de soi* (*The Care of the Self*, 1984).^[4] But it is also, in many respects, the series’ culmination: it resolves the problem that the earlier volumes—especially the second and third—were designed to explain, in addition to offering Foucault’s most comprehensive statement on the issues that led to the reorientation of his history of sexuality in the late seventies. Indeed, as Frédéric Gros explains in his “Avertissement,” *Les Aveux de la chair* was written *before* volumes two and three, and it was Foucault’s failure to revise this earlier manuscript before his death that postponed its publication for so long.

Foucault’s tendency to strike out periodically in new intellectual directions is well known. What is the point of knowledge, he mused, if it does not result in the “knower’s straying afield of himself?”^[5] Few of Foucault’s works bear the traces of his philosophical recalibrations as much as his *Histoire de la sexualité*. The project was originally conceptualized on the basis of the genealogical method he perfected in the 1970s—that is, as an historical study of power, particularly at the “microphysical” level of seemingly non-political institutions and in the ways that power interacts with knowledge. *La Volonté de savoir*, the first volume, is less a genealogical study in its own right than a methodological prolegomenon, building and expanding on the insights about power’s productive nature first postulated in *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975). In particular, Foucault challenged what he called the “repressive hypothesis,” that is, the notion that power has been used primarily to repress sexuality, whether for psychological, socio-cultural, or economic reasons. Rejecting this view, Foucault contended that the most recurring feature of sexuality in European history has been the way that it is relentlessly, obsessively talked about. It is through the “incitement to discourse” (*l’incitation au discours*), rather than repression, that sexuality became the focal point of power relations. This position built on Foucault’s insistence that conventional ideas about power, which view it primarily as negative or repressive (i.e., “thou shalt not”), should be broadened to incorporate the fact that power is

frequently productive and incentivizing. The first volume's back cover announced five subsequent volumes that would examine the development of sexuality understood in these terms from the early modern period to the present--the same time frame he had covered in his previous books.^[6] As Gros notes, manuscripts in the Foucault archives show that, before abandoning them, he made significant progress on at least two of these volumes ("Avertissement," pp. I-II).^[7]

Yet in subsequent years, Foucault significantly reconceived his history of sexuality, in several steps. First, in his study of power, Foucault increasingly focused on what he called "government" and "governmentality." This shift further purged the concept of power of residual connotations of "repression," emphasizing instead the ways in which behavior can be guided and steered--the "conduct of conduct," as he once defined governmentality.^[8] The concept of government, moreover, both encompassed and transcended strictly political relationships: it could include both the "government of oneself" and the "government of souls and their conduct."^[9] It was the problem of government that led Foucault to investigate early Christian theology as a source of what he called "pastoral power," a distinctly Jewish and Christian form of rule that is primarily concerned with the wellbeing of a people, conceived as a herd entrusted to a shepherd's care.

Yet even as Foucault's interest in governmentality took him in new directions, such as the development of the modern state, political economy, and liberalism, he never lost sight of its implications for his temporarily suspended history of sexuality. Indeed, the initial intuitions, which he formulated around 1978, concerning the consequences of pastoral power for Christian thinking about sexuality already contain most of *Les Aveux de la chair*'s argument. Drawing on the work of his friend Paul Veyne, the Roman historian, Foucault observed that most of the sexual attitudes associated with Christianity--such as monogamy and the emphasis on procreation as marriage's social purpose--were already commonplace in Roman society by the second and third centuries. What Christianity introduced was not a new sexual teaching, so much as a "means for introducing a type of power that controlled individuals by their sexuality."^[10] This power form was pitched midway between simple obedience to civil laws and world-renouncing asceticism: through the notion of the "flesh," Christians conceived of sexuality as exposing individuals to the perpetual possibility of temptation, while still ensuring that sexuality played a meaningful role in social relations. The form of pastoral power that harnessed itself to sexuality thus required the "constitution of a subjectivity, of a consciousness of the self that is constantly awake to its own weaknesses, its own temptations, its own flesh."^[11] Early Christian practices for governing the self, notably confession and examinations of conscience, were the theme of Foucault's 1979-1980 Collège de France course, *Du Gouvernement des vivants*.^[12]

Early Christianity was thus Foucault's first stop on his much-discussed return to antiquity. The 1979-1980 course, the first of five that would deal with ancient authors, constitutes a very rough draft of *Les Aveux de la chair*, his history of sexuality's final volume. Similar ideas are found in two lectures Foucault gave at Dartmouth College in November 1980.^[13] It was Foucault's interest in Christianity that led him to shift from power to selfhood (by way of governmentality) as his primary focus and to extend his investigations further back into the ancient world.

In the early 1980s, Foucault's thinking underwent a further shift, which is necessary to understand *Les Aveux de la chair*'s final form. Though "government," as Foucault defined it, referred to a conceptual continuum extending from statecraft to spiritual direction, it remained at least partially rooted in his concern with power relations and the "conduct of conduct."

Technologies of the self meant, at this stage, the pursuit of power relations at a different level. Yet Foucault's journey into the ancient world led him to take some distance from this position. In his 1981–1982 lecture course, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, he examined the theme of the “care for the self”—*epimeleia hautou*—particularly as it was elaborated in Roman and Hellenistic thought. The emphasis here is almost entirely on subjectivity as a relationship one forms with oneself—the self as an object of ethical self-construction, a slab from which the person we aspire to be can be sculpted. As Foucault explained in the introduction to *L'Usage des plaisirs* (his *History*'s second volume), this detour was required to situate the “Christian experience of the ‘flesh’” and the genealogy of “desiring man” within a broader history of a hermeneutics of the self through which “Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire.”^[14] The insights of the Greco-Roman material proved so decisive that he decided that he could not address early Christianity’s sexual teachings without first examining *aphrodisia*, that is, ancient ethical practices relating to sexuality. Foucault submitted the manuscript of *Les Aveux de la chair* to Gallimard in the fall of 1982, with the understanding that it be placed on hold until he had completed his chronologically earlier studies of ancient Greece and the Hellenistic world (“Avertissement,” p. VII).

Within his history of sexuality project, we thus see a shift in emphasis from “a type of power that controlled individuals by their sexuality” to “arts of existence” and “techniques of the self”—that is, “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values.”^[15] Though Foucault suggested that this detour through arts of existence was primarily needed to contrast the pre-Christian self of ancient Greece and the Hellenistic world with the “desiring self” conceived by early Christianity (since, strictly speaking, a “hermeneutics of the self” did not predate this period), it becomes clear, in *Les Aveux de la chair*, that Foucault’s insights about arts of existence shaped his final position on Christianity. The traction gained by early Christian notions of concupiscence and *libido* lay precisely, Foucault recognized, in the way they led to “the formation of a new experience” (as the editors title the book’s first chapter). Ideas of selfhood, as well as the truth games and experiences they made possible, were perhaps more central to early Christian understandings of sexuality than power relations or governmentality.

One of the most intriguing elements of Foucault’s final work is the return of the concept of “experience.” In his first major book, *Folie et déraison (Madness and Civilization*, 1961), Foucault had made much use of the term, describing his study as a “reconstitution of [the] experience of madness.”^[16] Though this term is often seen as a vestige of Foucault’s youthful attraction to phenomenology, which would subside as he gravitated towards a kind of structuralism, it is significant that he seems to have believed that his inquiry into technologies of selfhood could not dispense with it. Just as Marx was constantly compelled to critique his previous positions as unintentionally idealist,^[17] a similar dynamic propelled Foucault’s work on sexuality: in effect, he repeatedly reproached himself for remaining too beholden to the “repressive hypothesis”—prohibition, constraint, or even manipulation by external forces—as he searched for the origins of the western sexual experience in ever more inner and subjective beliefs and practices.^[18]

This dynamic accounts for the position Foucault arrives at in *Les Aveux de la chair*. He lamented the fact that the thesis of his history’s first volume had been reduced to a simplistic formula: “sex is not repressed.” If one wanted to do the fourth volume a similar violence, its argument could be summarized as follows: “Christian sexual teachings are not repressive or prohibitive”—or, at the

very least: “The originality of Christian sexual ethics does not lie in their repressive or prohibitive character.” What early Christianity bequeathed us is a model of subjectivity and the intense experiences it makes possible. Reckoning with Christianity’s sexual legacy does not mean identifying its repressive implications so that they might be overcome, but understanding our investment in techniques of the self whose purpose and scope extends well beyond their original domains.

Les Aveux de la chair consists of three long chapters, each of which is divided into three or four sections. The first chapter (“La formation d’une expérience nouvelle”) addresses the specific innovations that early Christianity introduced into the sexual practices and discourse of antiquity. Foucault’s major point, building on the second and third volumes of his history, is that many teachings that later became definitive of western sexuality were already present in the pre-Christian thought, notably the teachings of philosophers. The book’s opening sentence refers to the previous volume’s conclusions: “Thus the regime of *aphrodisia*, defined in terms of marriage, procreation, the disqualification of pleasure and a respectful and intense bond of sympathy between spouses” had been defined by “philosophers” living in a “‘pagan’ society” (p. 9). Foucault’s claim that early Christianity’s sexual prescriptions were mostly unoriginal and inherited from earlier traditions is reiterated throughout the book.

Yet Foucault’s goal in emphasizing the continuity between ancient pagan and Christian ideas about sexuality is to pinpoint Christianity’s specific novelty. He does this in the first chapter’s opening section (“Création, procreation”) by examining Clement of Alexandria’s *Paedagogus* (from the late second century). Foucault shows how Clement wrapped ethical precepts rendered familiar by Stoicism in a new theological and metaphysical mantel: specifically, one that viewed human procreation as mirroring and perpetuating the fundamental goodness of divine creation. At the same time, Clement also connected an ethics of marriage to a detailed analysis of sexual practices, themes that were present but distinguished from each other in the work of the philosophers. Clement thus allows Foucault to maintain that early Christianity’s sexual teachings were not primarily characterized by their “severity, austerity, [or] greater rigor in interdiction” (p. 49), but by the way in which, through new theological teachings and the practices they made possible, they give birth to “another type of experience” (p. 49), associated with distinct forms of self-knowledge and self-transformation. Yet the potentialities of this new kind of experience only became apparent as Christian doctrine developed over the next few centuries, particularly with penitential discipline in the second century and monastic asceticism in the third.

The rest of chapter one explores how this new experience developed in the context of three early Christian practices and corresponding doctrines: baptism, penitence, and spiritual direction. For early Christians, baptism, Foucault argues, was more than a symbolic ritual or a method of self-discipline: it was a practice designed to produce an array of unique subjective experiences. In baptism, remission of sin and access to truth (i.e., the recognition of one’s sinfulness that is required before turning to god) became tied to *metanoia* or penitence (“Le baptême laborieux”). In *metanoia*, the subject, suspended between two worlds, acknowledges the gulf between what it was and what it strives to be, while seeking to overcome it. For this reason, baptism became associated with self-mortification: to be reborn, one had to be willing to crush everything in one’s soul that remained steeped in sin. In this way, baptism participated in a complex process of self-manifestation, a need to render truthful accounts of oneself that became increasingly prominent in third century teachings about salvation.

For the church fathers, Foucault explains, penitence was seen as a repetition of baptism—the sole recourse for Christians whose sins had sullied that which baptism had purified (“*La seconde pénitence*”). The path to reconciliation required penitents to undertake exacting work on themselves, in which “truth procedures” (p. 96) played a critical role. These procedures imposed on penitents two tasks. First, one had to acknowledge one’s sins—though, strictly speaking, “veridiction” was preparatory to penitence rather than constitutive of it. Second, it was expected that one’s sinfulness be openly displayed, at times with shameless candor: this “ostentatious, gestural, corporeal, expressive demonstration of what a sinner is is intrinsic to penitence” (p. 98). Penitence thus opened the conceptual space for what would later become confession: the remission of sin necessitated the open display of one’s sinful truth. It required “*publicatio sui*” (p. 99)—the self-advertisement, as it were, of one’s sins.

The final element of this new experience is what Gregory of Nazianzus called “the art of arts” (p. 116): that is, the art of “direction,” of guiding individuals, and the closely related practice of examining one’s (or another’s) conscience (“*L’art des arts*”). Once again, Foucault reminds us that these practices were firmly anchored in pre-Christian philosophy and only later, notably with the rise of monasticism, passed over into Christianity. Yet early Christians dramatically changed the practices of direction inherited from philosophy. Where the Stoics had seen obedience as a means for achieving self-mastery, Christian monks viewed it as an end in itself: what mattered was obedience’s form—the subjugated will—not its content. Obedience’s basic form was *exagoreusis*, or examination-confession. This practice’s cosmological and theological premise was the belief that somewhere in one’s soul, Satan was always lurking. Consequently, the inner self was experienced as a theater of illusions that lured the soul from the path of righteousness. Confession, in this context, was not a one-time admission of an independently verifiable truth, but a never-ending process of unearthing one’s darkest, most secretive desires. In these ways, this intense preoccupation with the self and its truths becomes intimately tied to relations with others—the inner other that deceives us, the other to whom one confesses, the divine other that one aspires to be worthy of serving. The “essential paradox of these practices of Christian spirituality” lay in the fact that “self-veridiction is fundamentally tied to self-renunciation. The indefinite task of seeing and saying the truth about oneself is an exercise in mortification” (p. 145). More succinctly still, Foucault says that early Christianity was founded on “the paradox of tenacity in not willing” (p. 127).

Thus *Les Aveux de la chair*’s first chapter is devoted to the “new experience” of selfhood that early Christianity inaugurated, in which self-transformation, confession, and self-mortification acquired distinct meanings and purposes as Christian theology evolved. The rest of the book examines how this new experience was interwoven into the Christian sexual practices, particularly virginity and marriage. Reiterating a variant of the book’s core thesis, Foucault maintains that virginity—the second chapter’s theme (“*Être vierge*”)—has little to do with prohibition or sexual abstention. It was valued in Christianity because it helped to define “a relationship of individuals to themselves, to their thoughts, to their souls, and to their bodies” (p. 152).

Foucault first distinguishes the early Christian valorization of virginity from the philosophical advocacy of continence (“*Virginité et continence*”). Drawing on Saint Cyprian and Methodius of Olympus, Foucault contends that early Christian thought was far less concerned with banning fornication than with promoting virginity as a preferred means for raising the soul to god. This is why Foucault stresses the continuity between virginity and baptism, both of which were

conceived as preparing the soul for receiving god. Beliefs about the historical significance of Christ's life proved critical to ideas about virginity. For Methodius, the Incarnation was a second creation: with Christ's death on the cross, the world's corruption had been washed away and, thanks to the church, a new spiritual relationship had been instituted between god and humanity. The only superficially paradoxical belief that the faithful, through the church, were spiritually married to Christ proved decisive for the early Christian conception of virginity. Its importance was entirely grounded in a "historical-theological perspective" defined by the Incarnation, which turned virginity into "something very different than a prohibition concerning a particular aspect of human behavior" (p. 166). Far from being a law, it participated in an historical moment when the Law was suspended and access to god required the "exercise of the soul on itself" (p. 176).

Foucault is struck by how steeped Christian "arts of virginity" were in theology and eschatology. Ideas--particularly religious ideas--play a much more important role in *Les Aveux de la chair* than in any Foucault book since the late sixties, even if he ultimately relates these ideas to practices. Thus being a virgin, he explains (in "Des arts de la virginité"), entailed a "mutation in existence," even a "revolution" in selfhood, that was believed to prefigure the angelic life to which the soul was destined in paradise (p. 192). By being born to a virgin and living a life of perfect virginity, Christ gave human beings the "power to defeat the rebellion of the flesh" and made it possible for flesh to be reborn in glory. "After the Incarnation and through it," Foucault writes, "virginity as a restitution of angelic life from within the world and even in connection with flesh has become possible" (p. 195). The decision not to procreate, moreover, expressed a desire to overcome the mortality that was procreation's inescapable consequence: like Christ, the virgin sought to vanquish death itself. The "age of virginity" to which humanity was summoned after the Incarnation thus coincided with the end times and the fulfilment of salvation. Far from a "pure and simple prohibition of sexual relations," the early Christian conception of virginity transformed the "relationship of individuals to their own sexual conduct" into a "positive experience with a historical, metahistorical, and spiritual meaning" (p. 201-202).

In the second chapter's final section ("Virginité et connaissance de soi"), Foucault, examines how virginity became central to fourth-century ascetic practices--especially but not exclusively among monks--in which self-understanding played an increasingly important role. Specifically, he shows how this new thinking about virginity came to fruition in the distinctly Christian notion of chastity (*castitas*). Chastity cannot be conflated with continence: where continence was a "refusal" and "rejection" of sexual activity, chastity was a "positive force" (p. 217). Using John Cassian as his source, Foucault identifies two key concepts that became associated with early Christian practices of chastity: purity of the heart and spiritual combat. Purity of heart refers to chastity's connection to self-knowledge. Chastity is, first, a condition of self-knowledge: only those who have freed themselves from the passions of the flesh can experience the tranquility required for genuine spiritual knowledge. But chastity is, at the same time, an effect of self-knowledge: one is pure only if one is constantly on guard against possible disturbances to one's contemplations. Purity of heart thus names the "circularity" that characterizes this kind of asceticism: "the more one knows oneself, the more one recognizes oneself to be impure" (p. 223). Spiritual combat, for its part, hinges on the notion of temptation, which Foucault defines as "the insinuation into the soul of a thought that comes from a power other than itself" (p. 229). Chastity, in short, means finding oneself in a never-ending battle with alien forces inside oneself. Christianity's technology of the self is thus organized *not* around the idea of fault or failing (*faute*), but rather around that of temptation. From this perspective, fornication is unquestionably a problem, but primarily as an extraordinarily difficult episode in one's spiritual struggle. What

Cassian calls “pollution”—nocturnal emissions—trouble the ascetic not because they violate a rule, but because they prove that temptation has yet to be conquered. In these ways, virginity and chastity make clear that Christianity did not propose a code of forbidden conduct, so much as a “technique for surveilling, analyzing, and diagnosing thought,” its origins, and its meanderings (p. 244). It entailed a process of “subjectification” comprising a process for knowing oneself—and a “never-ending objectification of oneself”—and a complex array of relationships with others (p. 244–245).

The Christian valorization of virginity and chastity raised a crucial question: was monasticism the necessary telos of Christian life? And what, if any, spiritual options were available to those unable or unwilling to pursue this path? It was questions such as these that placed marriage—the theme of the book’s third and final chapter (“*Être marié*”)—at the center of Christian sexual practices. In Christianity’s early centuries, Foucault argues, marriage had no special stature. It was simply a carryover from the culture of antiquity. It was the dramatic forms of spiritual struggle that monasticism placed at the heart of Christian concerns that gave rise, around the fourth century, to a new understanding of marriage. Marriage became a way that one could give “religious intensity to a life” that was not marked by the “ruptures” of monasticism (p. 251).

In the first section of this chapter (“Le devoir des époux”), Foucault examines the ways in which theologians gave a “positive value” (p. 259) to a decidedly familiar institution to which philosophers had, at best, attributed a utilitarian function. Though Christian thinkers adopted much of the philosophers’ teaching about marriage, they introduced two new elements that stood in tension with older ideas. First, they articulated a complex theology of marriage. Not only was the union of man and woman tied to god’s creative will—the “fortunate incest” (p. 258) that makes all humanity one substance—but Christ’s relationship with the church was regularly described as a marriage, becoming the very model of virtuous matrimony. Thus for John Chrysostom, it became possible to see marriage as something more than “an inability to live a life of absolute continence” (p. 259). Second, Christianity challenged the received wisdom that marriage’s ultimate purpose was procreation. For theologians like Chrysostom, procreation was tied to humanity’s postlapsarian condition, promising a kind of immortality from within the reign of death. After the resurrection, the prospect of genuine eternal life deprived procreation of its spiritual salience. The purpose of marriage, like that of virginity, was now interpreted in terms of an “economy of concupiscence” (p. 273). This meant that marriage was founded on a strict “equality of [sexual] privileges” (p. 275) between husband and wife, as refusing sex to one’s partner made one complicit in their potential concupiscence. Thus marriage, like virginity, was grounded not in a logic of prohibition, but in a technology of the self premised on concupiscence. It was a means of “managing through the other this fundamental relationship of the self to the self” (p. 282).

In the penultimate section (“Le bien et les biens du mariage”), Foucault examines the process—which he claims is essential to western sexuality—whereby Christians came to see marriage as spiritually superior to virginity. The key figure in this shift was Augustine, the subject of the book’s final two chapters. Augustine, according to Foucault, undertook a “metahistorical requalification of the conjugal relationship” (p. 296) that boldly affirmed marriage’s spiritual validity. Previous theologians had imagined a cycle in which prelapsarian virginity gave way to a fallen world, with marriage reigning in human sin’s worst tendencies, before humanity was, with the resurrection, restored to its virginal state. Augustine, however, conceived of a framework in which the cultivation of relationships and affinities—*societas*—was the telos of human history.

While both spiritual and carnal relations persisted after the resurrection, their purpose was to prepare the way for spiritual *societas* in the City of God. From this perspective, the sexual act itself was not inherently sinful (however impure semen might be), so long as the couple was careful not to use the marriage to sate their lust. In *De bono conjugali*, Augustine maintained that marriage so tempered the pleasures associated with procreation that it ceased to be *libido* (i.e., concupiscence), just as having a meal could hardly count as gluttony. Managed judiciously, conjugal *libido* was not true *libido*. The significance of this shift from virginity to marriage was, Foucault concludes, momentous. Virginity was about practicing abstinence to achieve purity; marriage, for Augustine, consisted in constantly monitoring concupiscence levels experienced by both partners. The resulting technologies for managing married life constitute the nucleus, Foucault contends, of the western concept of desire.

Foucault's book culminates with a chapter devoted to Augustine's theory of concupiscence, found primarily in book XIV of the *City of God* ("La libidinisation du sexe"). This remarkable chapter is undoubtedly one of the most important statements in Foucault's oeuvre. Augustine, Foucault argues, sought an alternative both to the position that sex is inherently impure and the view that it is condemnable only in excess. He probed the sexual act for a "dividing line" that circumscribed its evil nature, the precise point at which sex becomes wrong. This required, moreover, explaining how a natural act, part and parcel of divine creation, acquired with the fall a propensity for evil—a transformation Foucault describes as the "'libidinization' of paradisiacal sex" (p. 329). Before the fall, Augustine claims, the sexual act was purely voluntary: Adam could express his desire for Eve as willingly as he lifted his hand. After the fall, sex became involuntary—and it is this involuntary quality, rather than its impurity or passionate excess, that is constitutive of concupiscence or *libido*. Like some of the penal models discussed in *Surveiller et punir*, concupiscence is ingeniously tailored to the crime it punishes: because man disobeyed god, his body will disobey his will. The moment when Adam and Eve recognize one another's nudity marks, for Augustine, the birth of *libido*, specifically in the way it links vision to desire: where sexual organs freely controlled elicit no visual interest, the libidinous gaze is irresistibly drawn to genitalia prone to unintentional arousal. Sexual organs become "the subject of an insurrection and the object of a gaze," and the exemplary object of desire is a "visible and unpredictable erection" (p. 337).

The conception of sexuality that finds its most sophisticated articulation in Augustine's theology—and that becomes the foundation of "western sexuality"—is ultimately characterized by a particular understanding of subjectivity and a distinctive approach to managing it. This view of sexuality hinges on the notion of a divided subject, in which uncontrollable desire is at war with the will. As Foucault emphasizes, this "split" ("scission," p. 343) is not between the self and the outside world, nor between the soul and the body, but a rupture within subjectivity itself. Strictly speaking, this will is not even truly divided: in the fallen state, the will is concupiscence, which refers to "the involuntary of the will itself" (*l'involontaire de la volonté elle-même*, p. 344). Only grace can end the will's rebellion and suture that which the reign of death has rent. In the meantime, mortals must learn to govern the unruly will they harbor within. Moreover, the divided Christian subject is *ipso facto* a legal subject, one that is susceptible to "juridification" (p.351ff). By its very nature, the Christian subject is constantly exposed to legal interrogations, insofar as the question of its responsibility for its rebellious will is always posed. Foucault mentions two major forms of "juridification": consent (*consensus*)—did the subject willingly assent to its involuntarily desires?—and usage (*usus*)—did the subject use concupiscence to good ends, thus cancelling out the moral stain it represents?

In sum, the historical significance of late ancient Christianity lies in the way it ceased to predicate sexuality on earlier ethical principles, such as purity or excess, and reframed it in terms of concupiscence or *libido*. By the same token, the locus of sexuality was no longer the body and its pleasures or the administration of its urges and needs, but a permanently desiring and inherently uncontrollable will subject to never-ending legal interrogations.

Had *Les Aveux de la chair* been published anonymously, avoiding the intellectual politics intrinsic to identifying its author as “Michel Foucault,” would it be seen as significant on its own terms? Would any markers connect it obviously to Foucault’s previous books and utterances? Except in the most general terms, very little in the book harks back to Foucault’s prior interest in *epistemes*, discourse, and the linguistic preconditions of thought. Nor does it refer directly to the theory of power he formulated in the seventies. One would be hard pressed to find in it features of Foucault’s distinctive methodology: the argument does not rely on obscure treatises symptomatic of epistemological breaks or forgotten textbooks for controlling bodies and souls. The book’s sources consist entirely of the writings of church fathers, most of whom—John Chrysostom, John Cassian, Augustine—are well known. While he reads these authors, of course, to identify early Christian technologies of selfhood—though even this term is used sparingly—the interpretive approach used in this book is hardly groundbreaking or even especially idiosyncratic. Traditional historians of ideas would find little to quibble with here. For all its attention to practices, *Les Aveux de la chair* devotes long passages, for instance, to church doctrine and theology.

Yet despite the absence of the hallmarks of his earlier work, the book’s central concerns remain fully consistent with Foucault’s longstanding preoccupations. The question that underpins it is not “why are we sexually repressed?”, but “why do we care so much about sex and sexuality at all?” In this way, the program of *L’Histoire de la sexualité*’s first volume continues to drive the fourth, despite the distance separating them. The “deployment of sexuality” that Foucault initially located in power relations and social institutions has become, in the final volume, a way of experiencing one’s self. Early Christianity’s legacy to western culture is a self beset with desires which, because they are unconscious and involuntary, require a relentlessly hermeneutic relationship with one’s self. What do my desires mean? What do they reveal about my true nature? How do they influence me in ways I am only dimly aware of? The broader cultural and historical stakes of Foucault’s argument are transparent, even if he scrupulously refrains from hinting at them in his book. To state only the most obvious implication: psychoanalysis did not so much discover the unconscious as render explicit the truth game upon which sexuality had long been premised. Our understanding of the libido and its economy owes as much to Augustine as to Freud.

Unsurprisingly, *Les Aveux de la chair* raises the perpetual Foucault question: that of his normative standpoint. How does Foucault evaluate the historical process he describes? The writer Edmund White, a close friend of Foucault’s, recalls a lecture Foucault gave at New York University in the early eighties contrasting late pagan and early Christian sexual ethics, material that the philosopher intended “to include in the last volume of *The History of Sexuality*.” White remembers that when Foucault was asked how his analysis applied to the present, he “stormed out of the room shaking with rage.” Despite his admiration for Foucault, White explains why this question mattered to his friends in the gay community: “[I]f we were hanging on every word surely we did so because we wanted to know exactly where our culture had gone wrong. We wanted to

return to the golden, nuanced liberality of paganism. Foucault knew this—privately, as it were—but for methodological reasons, if nothing else, he wanted to limit his claims to contemporary relevance.”^[19]

In many ways, Foucault keeps his normative cards closer to his chest in *Les Aveux de la chair* than in other books. Yet while Foucault confines himself to describing a genealogy of “desiring man,” it is difficult not to agree with White’s assessment of his friend’s conclusions: Christianity has bequeathed us a way of relating to ourselves in which knowledge and desire mutually enhance one another, engendering a conception of sexuality that has become almost limitless in its explanatory scope and increasingly remote from the body and its pleasures. Foucault’s work has often been described as Weberian, despite the fact he never directly engaged with the German sociologist’s thought. This characterization seems particularly fitting in the case of *Les Aveux de la chair*: Christian sexual ethics represent, for Foucault, a form of this-worldly asceticism, an attempt to integrate the ecstasies of world renunciation into the quotidian realities of bodily and relational existence. Early Christians chose to interpret their selves as haunted by involuntary desires; we are forced to do so.

Les Aveux de la chair also provides an at least implicit explanation of why the Christian hermeneutics of the self have proved so culturally tenacious—which may explain, in part, why Foucault was reluctant to propose the kind of alternative that White and his friends longed for. If *Surveiller et punir* was Foucault’s reply to the *Genealogy of Morals*’ second essay, on guilt and punishment, *Les Aveux de la chair* might be read as his engagement with the third essay of Nietzsche’s book, “What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” Like Nietzsche, Foucault was interested in Christian ascetism’s pervasive influence on western culture, particularly the “absolute value of ‘the true’ which stems from the ascetic ideal and stands or falls with it.”^[20] Missing from Foucault’s analysis, however, is Nietzsche’s insistence on the way ascetism’s life-denying powers rationalize sickness and weakness. Foucault is interested, rather, in the intensity elicited by early Christian spiritual exercises that made sexual desire interesting even to those who aspired to overcome it. The return of the term “experience” to Foucault’s lexicon is crucial, for what the ascetic attitude towards sexuality creates more than anything is a powerful experience (a point that Nietzsche, too, intuited). Instead of a negative experience based on abstinence, virginity became, for early Christians “a complex, positive, and agonistic experience” (p. 185). Christianity gave “to the subject’s relationship to sexuality an importance that would never have occurred to Greek and Roman morality” (p. 202).

This is why, nearly forty years after its completion, Foucault’s history of sexuality, and particularly the fourth volume, remain untimely. This is less true of other aspects of his thought: Foucault’s critique of normalization, his unmasking of the power dynamics inherent in seemingly apolitical institutions, his suspicion of fixed sexual identities, and his analysis of governmentality have been woven into our understanding of the present. Yet Foucault’s suspicion of our fixation on seeking our truth in our sexuality could hardly run more counter to the definitive concerns of our time. The nexus between desire, self-interpretation, and the regulation of sexual conduct continues to define political agendas on both the left and the right. Indeed, the rejection of various forms of sexual normality, to which Foucault’s thought gave a powerful intellectual impetus, is often premised on the kind of hermeneutics of the self that Foucault warned against. Understanding ourselves as desiring beings and ordering our lives around this premise seem as important to us as to early Christians. At least when it comes to sexuality, perhaps we have never been Foucauldians.

NOTES

[1] Foucault quoted in Thierry Voeltzel, *Vingt ans et après* (Paris: Grasset, 1978 [Gallimard, 2014]), 141, 142.

[2] Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1, (New York: Vintage, 1990 [1978]).

[3] Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 2, *L'Usage du plaisir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

[4] Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3, *Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

[5] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 8.

[6] In a 1977 interview, Foucault mentions six volumes: see Foucault, “Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l’intérieur du corps,” interview with L. Finas, in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 1976-1979, eds. Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 228-236, at 231.

[7] The two manuscripts, which can be found in the Foucault archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale, were for *La chair et le corps* (The Flesh and the Body), devoted to post-Tridentine penitence, and *La Croisade des enfants* (The Children’s Crusade). Gros also notes, referring to Michel Senellart, that Foucault’s original title for *La Chair et le corps* was *Les Aveux de la chair*.

[8] Quoted in Colin Gordon, “Governmental Rationality: An Introduction,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-51, at 2.

[9] Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*. (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), 92.

[10] Foucault, “Sexualité et pouvoir” (1978), *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 1976-1979, 552-570, at 565. Foucault also refers to the importance of the practice of confession in early Christianity in an even earlier interview, first published in December 1977: See “Pouvoir et savoir,” interview with S. Hasumi, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 1976-1979, 399-414, at 412.

[11] Foucault, “Sexualité et pouvoir” (1978), *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 1976-1979, 566.

[12] Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants. Cours au Collège de France (1979-1980)* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2012).

[13] Foucault, *L’Origine de l’herméneutique de soi. Conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Danièle Lorenzini (Paris: Vrin, 2013).

[14] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 5-6.

[15] Ibid., 10-11.

[16] Foucault, “Préface” (1961) (original introduction to *Folie et déraison*) in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 1954-1969, ed. Defert, Ewald, and Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 159-167, at 166.

[17] “Each of the successive positions [Marx] had occupied before 1848 had appeared to him as a move from abstraction and idealism to empiricism and realism ... Yet each new position had revealed to Marx that his earlier one contained a residue of abstract thinking he had not perceived when he embraced it.” Jerrold Seigel, *Marx’s Fate: The Shape of a Life* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993 [1978]), 327.

[18] Foucault admitted as much when, in an interview from 1984, he noted that a fact that had struck him about antiquity—that the most widely discussed aspects of sexual pleasure were “by no means the points representing the traditionally accepted forms of prohibition”—was one he had already “suspected” in volume one when he “posted the hypothesis that it was not simply on the basis of mechanisms of repression that one could analyze the constitution of knowledge about sexuality.” Foucault, “Le souci de la vérité,” interview with François Ewald, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, 1980-1988, ed. Defert, Ewald, and Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 668-678, at 671.

[19] Edmund White, *My Lives: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 196. White may be referring to a lecture Foucault gave with Richard Sennett in the fall of 1980, where, according to Gros, Foucault presented many of the ideas that would become *Les Aveux de la chair* (“Avertissement,” pp. IV-V).

[20] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NJ and New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 288. Foucault acknowledged that Nietzsche’s analysis of Christian asceticism was partially erroneous in a conversation with Paul Rabinow and Hubert L. Dreyfus from 1983, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 229-252, at 248.

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