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## Special Issue *Scientia Sexualis* and Historiography of Sexuality

### Paradisiacal Sex: Sexuality and Desexualisation in Michel Foucault and Augustin of Hippo's Confessions

Sajjad Lohi <sup>1</sup> [<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1667-5243>]

#### Abstract:

Towards the end of his life, Michel Foucault proposed an interpretation of the sexual revolution in terms of “desexualisation”. The purpose of this essay is to outline the relationships between homosexual and queer experiences and those in late antiquity and Christianity. Through an analysis of the Foucauldian interpretation of Augustine of Hippo – specifically of his doctrine on paradisiacal sex and chastity– the aim is to demonstrate that asceticism may be conceived as a different exercise of sexuality that do not solely consists of abstinence, abstention, self-control or abnegation but, rather, libido is the very foundation of the subject's being. Such a spiritual and sexual experience – that for Augustine tears subject from his will – for Foucault is very akin to the principle that should govern every devenir-homosexuals. Somehow, both Augustine's *Confessiones* and Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* are testament of different but parallel lives.

**Keywords:** Sexuality; Christianity; Flesh; Augustine of Hippo; Michel Foucault.

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*Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo*  
Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, VIII, 7, 17

*For me, Augustine was transsexual*  
P. B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*

*Resurrection of life as —in every moment— resurrection of bodies,  
of every man in his his singularity,  
of every whole man, soul and body.*  
*This [...] materialist assertion of the resurrection of the flesh is a truth/hope,  
or better: a formidable ethical and political dispositif.*  
A. Negri, *History of a Communist*

#### Introduction: Is Desexualisation a Grave?

Gay and, more recently, queer theory always acknowledged the power of sexuality. At least since the early 1980s, authors such as Mario Mieli (2018), Guy Hocquenghem (1993; 2010) and

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<sup>1</sup> Sajjad Lohi is a Phd student at the Department of Philosophy of Sapienza University of Rome (via Carlo Fea 2, 00161 – Rome). E-mail: [sajjad.lohi@uniroma1.it](mailto:sajjad.lohi@uniroma1.it).

Lee Edelman (2004)<sup>2</sup> have made sexual dimension the ground of all forms of oppression and possible resistance. Just a few years after Michel Foucault's death, in 1987, Bersani affirmed that in the economy of protests of homosexual communities, sexuality represented a state "between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self" (2010, 25). Hence, sexual liberation was not just about bodies and sexes but about the very being and the very self of the subjects. In *Is the Rectum a Grave?* Bersani mourned Foucault, gathering – though critically – some of his fundamental ideas, the most relevant of which was the concept of "desexualisation" understood not only as a liberation of sex, but rather as an attempt to free oneself from sex.<sup>3</sup> As one of the most critical witnesses of the protest movements of those years (Eribon 1999; Halperin 1997) – Foucault admonished: "We have come not only to seek the truth of sex, but to ask it for our own truth. It is up to sex to tell us what it is like for us" (2001, 103). Many years earlier, Foucault had noted one of the ways in which individuals establish a relationship of truth or of identity with themselves is through sex.<sup>4</sup> Desexualisation could set them free and homosexuals could be the first to be liberated from sex. Yet, was this not a contradiction in terms? How could a group of men become the subject of sexual liberation if they defined themselves by sexual orientation? In this sense, it is essential to explicate beforehand how sex – or it would be more appropriate to say "sexualization" – is to be understood with respect to "desexualisation" Foucault opposes. A concrete example is provided by gay saunas. As Foucault says in a well-known interview with Jean Le Bitoux:

I think it's politically decisive for sexuality to function as it functions in saunas. You meet people who are just like you, just like you are for them: nothing but bodies [...]. This is an exceptional opportunity to desubjectivize, to desubject oneself – perhaps not the most radical, but even so sufficiently intense to be worth noting. (Foucault 2011, 399)<sup>5</sup>

Non-identity exceeds identity and boundaries between self, and others become blurred. In such experiences, it is possible to no longer be who one has been up to that moment, to become other than oneself. Even having one's own name is superfluous. "In other interview", Bersani insists, "Foucault specified that he was taking asceticism – in a very general sense – in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (Bersani 2010, 59). Nevertheless, as in *Homos* (1995), his contention is that such experiences – as subversive as they may be – remain within the hegemonic morality, not transgressing social boundaries enough. Against and unlike Bersani, I would like to demonstrate that the desexualisation Foucault alludes to should be understood neither in the way of a dismissal of an "irrelevant" sexual experience nor in the way of a "degenitalization". Desexualise is neither "stripping the body of its imposed and unnecessary sexual identity" (Bersani 2010, 136; Halperin 2007, 22–47). My hypothesis is that Foucault's attempt was to define a different relationship with oneself through a different relationship with one's body and sexuality – without denying them. In his intentions, desexualisation would have produced a new free subject, not an individual mortified in his

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<sup>2</sup> More in general, see Bernini 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See Foucault 2001, 321–322. All translations of Foucault 2001 are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Foucauldian works on hermaphroditism could be understood in this sense. See at least Foucault 1980. Referring to Herculine Barbin, he says: "What struck me most about Herculine Barbin's story is that there is no such thing as true sex" (Foucault 2001, 624–625). Indeed, the hermaphrodite "wanted neither sex (*ni l'un ni l'autre*)" but rather "being 'other' without ever having to be 'of the other sex' (*être "autre" sans avoir jamais à être "de l'autre sexe"*)" (ivi, 940).

<sup>5</sup> My tr. See also Foucault 1997, 136–137.

flesh. Bersani maintains that “if the rectum is the grave in which [...] subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death” (2010, 29), while Foucault opposes the possibility of a rebirth or, more radically, of a mundane “resurrection”.

In the first part, through a brief but decisive reference to Peter Brown, I will attempt to point out the Christian origin of the concept of style that returns in so many of the Foucauldian interviews on the “homosexual question”. Such a genealogy of (sexual) morality will allow for a more critical assessment of the transition that Christianity represented with respect to the ancient and late ancient world. The subsequent part is devoted exactly to the reenactment of a line of thought – in all its fragmentation and discontinuity – ranging from the ancient naturalists to Augustin of Hippo. The main part specifically concerns the bishop's concept of both heavenly and worldly sexuality: as he thinks of it, the sexual subject is characterised by a profound restlessness that divides the unity of his being into two parts that come into an agonistic and, above all, ascetic relationship. Nevertheless, while for Augustin it is essential to regain the lost unity, Foucault conceives this attempt or, rather, this exercise (*askesis*) of desexualisation as liberating in relation to constraints that bind sexuality and one's own identity and truth. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, in Foucauldian thought, the urge for “desexualisation” is motivated by the will to overturn the hegemonic regime of subjectivation (Zappino 2019), using bodies and sexes in a different way.<sup>6</sup> If the queer or gay subject opposes life, it is in order to claim a livelier one.

## A Matter of Style

As Bersani rightly emphasizes, Michel Foucault conceives (homo)sexual experience as irreducible to intercourse in itself. Rather it “a matter of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time”. He explains: “what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’ is the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself” (Foucault 1997, 136). Foucault is not interested in the “banal” sense of homosexuality. Indeed, it is characterized by a specific “way of life”<sup>7</sup> or – as he will say on more than one occasion – the “style” that defines one's own life (Foucault 1997, 146). One is not gay. One *lives as gay* or, as Foucault liked to say with Deleuzian echoes, one *becomes-gay*.<sup>8</sup> It is an ethical – or, more properly – a stylistic question. Almost absent in his writings prior to the 1980s, it is through the concept of “style” that he outlined the transition from the ancient and late ancient world to the Christian one. In his last interview, published posthumously, he states:

My use of “style” is largely borrowed from Peter Brown. But what I'm going to say now, which doesn't relate to what he has written, doesn't commit him in any way. This notion of style seems to me very important in the history of ancient morality. [...] What Peter Brown and I are trying to do is to distinguish, in their singularity, individuals who had a role in ancient morality or Christianity. (Foucault 2001, 1517–1518)

With a preface by Paul Veyne, *Genèse de l'Antiquité tardive* (Brown 1996) was published in 1983. On that occasion, the author of *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien?* commented:

Decidedly, some coincidences are wonderful accidents: in those early days of August 1983, when the author of these lines was acquainted with Brown's unpublished writings on the style of men's relations with other men and with gods, I have here the

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<sup>6</sup> See Foucault 1997, 165-166.

<sup>7</sup> “To be “gay”, I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits [...] to try to define a way of life”, in Foucault 1997, 138.

<sup>8</sup> See Foucault 1997, 135-140: “we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are” (136).

finished manuscript of Foucault's work on ancient love, in which sexual ethics are defined as styles too. (ivi, tr. fr., xix-xx)<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in *L'usage des plaisirs*, Foucault uses terms such as "stylization" or "austere style" on the subject of monogamy (Foucault 1988a, 23–24). Nonetheless, if the sense of these notions is to be fully understood, it is necessary to briefly return to the context in which they emerged. In 1984, eight years after the first tome of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault published *The Use of Pleasures*. The work is preceded by an *Introduction*, the first part of which is titled *Modifications* – a necessary premise to explain the "silence" as well as the time leap in the subject of the analysis. If the purpose of the work was to underline how every person is constituted as "sexual subject", the most suitable method cannot be but the genealogical one – whose aim is to retrieve the different elements at the origin of an occurrence. Yet – Foucault concedes – it would lead him "far from the original project", far enough to have to "reorganize the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self" (ibid, 6). In other terms, the modifications aim for a new comprehension of how sexuality enabled the emergence of a Self (*soi*) whose essence is identity. As is well known – despite the risks implicit in such a redefinition of the work (Foucault 1988a, 7–9) – it is in this sense that Foucault moved on to the period from antiquity to the first centuries of Christianity, the hypothesis being that sexuality was the means by which a new morality was imposed. Even so, before analyzing the influence sexuality had, it is necessary to preliminarily define the Foucauldian concept of "morality". In the last part of the *Introduction*, Foucault affirms that morality is a normed and normalizing set of constraints, but besides this "prescriptive" definition, there is a more complex one related to

the manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values. (ibid, 25)

The difference between these two senses of morality is closely related to four elements. Firstly, there is no subjectivation without "ethical substance" (*substance éthique*), that part of the self the individual reserves as a matter of moral life: given an order of continence, for example, it can be fulfilled either by abstaining from concrete acts of lewdness or by freeing oneself from impudent and immoral thoughts. The moral prescription is the same, but it is a question of body in one instance and of thoughts in another. The ethical substance may not always be the same. Nonetheless, morality cannot be reduced to a "substantial" dimension. It depends on what Foucault calls "mode of subjection" (*mode d'assujettissement*) (ibid, 27), that is, the different ways in which persons bind to moral duties, obliging themselves to respect them. To this effect, it is not indifferent whether a prescription is respected by virtue of a religious faith or to get the tranquility of the soul. Furthermore, the ways in which it could be put into action are different too. If one goes back to the example of continence, it can be materialized as an absolute and immediate interruption, as a slow preparation for a more virtuous sexual life. This is perhaps the fundamental trait in the transition from the ancient and late ancient world to the Christian one: there is no morality that does not imply a "teleology of the moral subject" (*téléologie du sujet morale*).

A moral action tends toward its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject. [...] In short, for an action

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<sup>9</sup> The relationship between Foucault and Brown is also discussed in Chevallier 2011.

to be “moral”, it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. Of course, all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. The latter is not simply “self-awareness” but self-formation as an “ethical subject” [...]. (ibid, 28).

Thus, at the origin of the notion of “style” there is a fundamental quadripartition of moral life, and the subject is the effect is that emerges from the intertwining of these dimensions. As a consequence, “it should not be concluded that the Christian morality of sex was somehow ‘pre-formed’ in ancient thought; one ought to imagine instead that very early in the moral thought of antiquity, a thematic complex – a “quadri-thematics” of sexual austerity” (ibid, 21). The austerity of Christian sexual morality is a “fourfold” question.

## The Elephant, the Hare and the Hyena

As Foucault distinctly affirms in the *Introduction of The Use of Pleasures*, “it would be quite incorrect to reduce Christian morality – one probably should say ‘Christian moralities’ – to such a model” (ibid, 30), i.e., the model of the law and its transgression. Nonetheless, the correct way to understand them is a question that the author entrusted to a fragmented and unfinished text (Huffer 2021) on which he began working in the early 1980s: *Confessions of the Flesh (Les aveux de la chair)* (Foucault 2021). In 1981, indeed, in the *resumé* of the course on *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault specified that it would soon be “the object of a forthcoming publication” (2017, 299). One of the most interesting examples of this concerns the content of the first *séance* (7 January 1981), lifted verbatim in *The Use of Pleasures* and partly in *Confessions of the Flesh*. It comes down to an *exemplum*, an apology excerpted from the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales, a catholic bishop of the turn of the XVI century, who refers to the life of elephants. Foucault quotes the saint:

The elephant is obviously only a huge beast, but it is the most dignified that lives on earth and one with the most intelligence. [...]. The elephant never changes its mate and loves tenderly the one it has chosen, with which, however, it mates only every third year, and then for only five days and so secretly that it is never seen in this act. However, I have seen it on the sixth day, when, before anything else, it goes straight to a river in which it washes its whole body, not wanting to return to the herd before it is purified. Are these not beautiful and decent feelings on the part of such an animal? (2017, 1)<sup>10</sup>

What the author insists on, however, is the indeed troublesome origin of the *exemplum*. Contrary to what one would tend to think, the appreciation – even more so the moralization – of the modesty of pachyderms does not come with the intransigence and austerity of Christian spirituality of the XVI century. It has been evident since the late ancient world. Formerly, Aelian, Roman author of the late III century, deemed elephants as an example of virtue – perhaps even greater than in Christianity – since “they have intercourse with their mate only once in their whole life” and “only in order to” procreate (ibid, 6). Hence, it is not with Christianity that the bestiaries become a question of morality. Foucault’s intent is yet another.<sup>11</sup> As he concedes: “the question I will try to pose is not that of whether our morality is Christian” or the ethical principles proposed by de Sales should be led back to “Christian

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<sup>10</sup> See Foucault 1988a, 17.

<sup>11</sup> “The model, the sexual pattern of the elephant presented by the Christian authors, was formed wholly and explicitly well before Christianity” (Foucault 2017, 16).

morality and its intrinsic bleakness".<sup>12</sup> Rather, "the problem is what we should do with our morality rather than where it comes from" (ibid, 16-17). In *Confessions of the Flesh* – a spiritual testament of Foucault – these questions of "bestial" morality recur, though on that occasion the *exemplum* concerns

The hyena's bad reputation stemmed from an ancient belief -one found it in Herodorus of Heroclea- that every animal of this species had two sexes [...]. As for the hare, it was thought to acquire an extra anus every year and to make the worst use of these added orifices. (Foucault 2021, 19)

No wonder that Foucault seeks ancient attestations of the "hermaphroditism" of the hyena and the hare, too. In reporting the apologue, the Alexandrian is absolutely faithful to Aristotle – except for a detail: however minimal, in his works on animals (especially *Περὶ ζῴων μορίων* and *Περὶ ζῴων γενέσεως*), the theologian could find a moral evaluation, but he omitted what ancient naturalists had understood, i.e., that the holes present in hyenas did not lead to either the uterus or to the intestine. The intent of the Alexandrian is to demonstrate the relation between their sexes and their "moral fault. If hyenas have a body that's arranged in such an odd way, this is because of a defect. A defect [...] utterly similar to a moral fault found in men: lasciviousness". This is why God gave hares "a womb with two branches that allows them to conceive [...] even before giving birth". Impatient hares become the example of an "excessive" sex "that enables 'excessive' relations" even if "the excess is 'useless'" given that they do not fit into the economy of the reproduction of life. They use these holes "for nothing" (ibid, 21-22). Here is a concrete example of the effects the quadripartition of morality leads to: it is enough that the purpose willed by God is lost for the subject to become predisposed to incontinence and sin and for sex to become immoral.

## Desexualisation or Virginity? Ascetism

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At this juncture, if it is true that "the flesh is a mode of subjectification" (Foucault 2021, 36),<sup>13</sup> one should ask what is its confession about. The notation does appear in a passage from the typescript that Foucault then deleted, but it is decisive. Apart from what Foucault calls "vie-sexe" or "sexistance" (Foucault 2001, 131), sexuality represents an experience through which the subject attains a special relationship with himself and with the truth of his own being. The truth of sex becomes the truth of the self.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, as Foucault concedes in an interview with *Le Monde*, it is not worth asking, "why has the West censured sex for so long; and, on the basis of this refusal, of this fear, how have we come, with all reticence, to ask the question of its truth". Much more decisive is to ask "why has the West so obstinately wanted our relation to ourselves to pass through this truth" (Foucault 1978, 7–8).<sup>15</sup> Following the well-known distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, *chair* and *corps*, the body one has and the body one is, Foucault outlines the very experience of the flesh – "a mode of [...] transformation of oneself by oneself, depending on a certain relationship between a

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<sup>12</sup> With respect to the quadripartition of moral experience, see Foucault 2021, 34: "it would be completely wrong to imagine that it was the Christian faith that-by itself and by the strength of its internal demands-inevitably imposed that strange and singular set of practices, notions, and rules that is simply called Christian sexual morality".

<sup>13</sup> See also Foucault 2001, 552-570.

<sup>14</sup> See the different opinion of Michel Senellart and Daniele Lorenzini, respectively Senellart in Lorenzini et al., 2015, pp. 31-51 and Lorenzini, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> See Foucault 2001, 311: "This work (*The will to know*) is the only that I write without knowing in advance the title. Until the last moment I did not find it. The *History of Sexuality* is a *faute de mieux*. The first title [...] was *Sex and Truth (Sexe et Vérité)*".



nullification of evil and a manifestation of truth” (Foucault 2021, 36). This is where Foucault calls Augustine of Hippo in question. As Peter Brown wrote: “unlike the hasty Jerome, and even unlike Ambrose, Augustine was exceptionally careful to point out [...] that the flesh was not simply the body: it was all that led the self to prefer its own will to that of God” (1988, 418; 1989). Trying to outline a genealogy of the subject of will, Foucault distinguishes two opposite experiences, the two extremities of sex and virginity. After all, the ultimate question is how every person should relate to instincts – whether abandoning himself without opposing any will or resisting with decisiveness. In the economy of this “relation of the individual to himself, his thought, his soul, and his body” (Foucault 2021, 116), Augustin represents one of the most relevant figures. The exercise of virginity had lifted a question about which the major Christian theologians discussed for a very long time: the “paradisical sex” (ibid, 146). What function could the differentiation of the sexes have if – as Gregory of Nyssa says in his *De virginitate* (XII, 4) – it was believed that before the fall reproduction would be asexual, like that of angels? The “Greek” response, for example, was in the divine omniscience: in heaven, nothing has not existed, or will there ever be anything sexual, and the earthly exercise of virginity is nothing but a way of returning and anticipating the idyllic state.

Virginity is barren. But this barrenness has to do with only carnal birth, which is connected with death in two ways: first because death is its consequence, and next because it stands for the end of posterity, the passing away of human beings, one after the other. But as a rejection of generation, virginity is a rejection of death, [...]. “Through virginity a boundary line is drawn for death, [...]”; those who have chosen virginity “have made themselves, in fact, a frontier between life and death, and a barrier, too, which thwarts it”. (Foucault 2021, 149–150)<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, as Foucault himself is keen to underline, virginity “is substantial. It passes through matter. It operates throughout the world and transfigures things” (ibid, 147). It is not only abstinence, abstention, self-restraint, or self-denial. Rather, it is equivalent to a “closing off of the body to the external world, in response to a danger [...] that disturbs and in a certain way ‘sexualizes’ the soul” (ibid, 161). Foucault comments:

one sees the practice of virginity, which had been extricated from the principle of continence and defined as a positive spiritual experience, being organized as a type of relation to the self that concerns not just the body, but also the relations of the body and the soul» or – one might say – the relations of the sex of the body and the sex of the soul. (ibid, 165)

Yet, the very fulfillment of this theology of “being virgin” comes with Augustin of Hippo, author of many treaties on the subject – including *De Continentia* (396 ca.) and *De sancta virginitate* (401). In his anti-Pelagian dispute, not only did Augustine refuse to admit the sexual instinct to be the work of God and to become vice only if taken to excess, but he harshly opposed any “ethics of non-excess” (ibid, 259). More concretely, the bishop of Hippo’s intent should be understood as an attempt to bring sin back to a moment prior to excess and unbound from it. To this effect, Augustin characterizes Adam and Eve’s sex as examples of absolutely voluntary one – going so far as to compare it to the movement of the fingers of the hand. Coitus occurred with full will. Thus, when they turn against God, for the principle of *inoboedientia reciproca*, their sex turns against them: just as they revolt against God, so their sexes stop obeying them. The reason why they both covered themselves with

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<sup>16</sup> It follows: “This is one of the most characteristic traits of the Christian mystique of virginity, a trait that carries it very far from the old conception of continence”.

fig leaves is indeed the humiliation of Adam for his involuntary erection.<sup>17</sup> *Libido* is the name that Augustine gives to this involuntary power. Nonetheless:

The involuntariness of concupiscence is not to be thought of as a nature opposing the subject, or confining it, or dragging it downward. It is not the body freed of all control and escaping the soul; it is above all the diminished being, the lack of being of the subject whose will finds itself willing the opposite of what it willed. A volition turned back against itself, a divided will, through a failure to be what it wanted to be in wanting to be self-willed. (ibid, 269)

Thus, the libidinal lines between voluntary and involuntary no longer pass through the external sex, but through the subject and its being. More specifically, these lines “make the soul a subject” (ibid, 271). Augustine comes to sexualize beings even before bodies. Even virgins can never be totally saved from the concupiscence of the flesh: like every moral body, theirs too, confesses a sexual and sexed essence. Virginity becomes at most, “a means for approaching a sanctified existence, a prelude to that time when the resurrected flesh will no longer know gender difference” (ibid, 119).<sup>18</sup> What Foucault seems to be proposing, then, is a true asceticism, a relentless exercise of one's own sexuality. As he says in the well-known interview *Friendship as A Way Of Life*, *askesis* should be conceived in its etymological sense: not as renunciation, but as a “work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains”. After all, the end of time is far away and one can only live as sexual beings. There is nothing left but to exercise it in the wisest of ways. “We've rid ourselves of asceticism. Yet it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves” (Foucault 1997, 136–137).

## Sexuality Without Sex

Not only gay and queer theory have acknowledged the power of sexuality: (a part of) Christianity did it as well.<sup>19</sup> In authors such as Augustine of Hippo, the flesh becomes a subject in revolt, fighting against others, but also and above all against itself. With the coming of Christianity, a subject appears – a subject “always exposed to the risk of being owned by the other” – the other that is (in) itself. In such a spiritual economy, ascetic and agonistic in the etymological sense of the terms, the sexes become “techniques of revolt” (Büttgen et al.

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<sup>17</sup> “Let us note, of course, the fact that libido conceived in this way is characterized essentially by male genitality, its forms and its properties. It is phallic from the origin. [...]. In Adam, the rebellious member had announced itself by an abrupt springing forth; among the men of his line, it is manifested by inopportune failures as well as by unseemly movements. The involuntary of the fallen sex organ is the erection, but it is also impotence” (Foucault 2021, 265–267). See also Brown 1988, 417–418: “In this psychological model, impotence was of equal interest to him. For in impotence, also, the will was mocked by the body quite as bluntly as in the incontrollable delight of orgasm: lust itself does not serve lust ... and is divided against itself. [...] Augustin presented impotence and frigidity, for the first time, as psychosomatic symptoms whose causes lay deep within the self. Sexuality was effectively taken from its physiological context and made to mirror an abiding, unhealed fissure in the soul”.

<sup>18</sup> It follows: “It is possible to make an utterly non-concupiscent use of concupiscence, but the latter will not be done away with for all that» (Foucault 2021, 283). See also Philippe Büttgen, *Aveu et confession* in Büttgen et al. 2021, 85–107: “Flesh always confesses (*aveu*), before confessing (*se confesser*) and after confessing (*s'être confessé*). It remains a confession (*aveu*) on this side and beyond the confession (*confession*). [...] Foucault's insistence on involuntary shudders of the flesh demonstrates this well; for they, too, are confessions (*aveu*), the erection so feared by Augustine is a confession (*aveu*)» (p. 95).

<sup>19</sup> See Bernauer 2005, 217–232; Jordan 2015.



2021, 33–35), and what apparently seems to be a negation of it turns out to be a way of resistance. One of the first to seize the Foucauldian insight is Gilles Deleuze. In a very brief note in his *Foucault* – discussed more extensively in the course given in memory of his friend in 1985 – he refers to a “sexuality without sex” as a “means of ‘resisting’ the agency of ‘Sex’” (Deleuze 1988, 148). Where sex and the sexes tend to get “institutionalized”, that is, to bind themselves to their own truth and identity, the power of sexuality rejects these bonds. As for virgins, it could be said that they die in the flesh to be reborn in spirit,<sup>20</sup> to resurrect, in a spiritual relationship with God that is still a sexual one (Foucault 2021, 150–153). It is much more than total abstention from sexual intercourses, much more than absolute chastity. The gesture of virgins should be understood as a radical critique of the uniqueness of the bond imposed by West thought between sex, sexuality and the truth of the Self. However distant they seem, then, sexual revolution and Christian virginity insist on a common theme: both the experiences give life to a body that is no longer a grave – the classical opposition between σῶμα/σῆμα – but a way of resistance. To desexualise is to reject this dichotomy and give oneself a lively and unpredictable sex. Chastity is just a way among many. What Foucault seems to want to suggest is that, even in a theology such as Augustine's, desexualisation is not about sexuality per se, but rather about the sex to which one is stuck and the exercise and the effort to experience it in a different way. Foucault's whole attempt is to demonstrate that in the history of sexuality Christianity had a very controversial relationship with the late antiquity from which it inherited a concern related to sexual continence or incontinence (as the *exempla* prove). As Agamben recently noted, it is in Christianity that it was first possible “to conceive the separation of an organ from its function” – although it returns to be in unity in the afterlife, after the resurrection of bodies: “to use a body and to make it serve as an instrument [...] are not the same thing” (Agamben 2011, 100–102). Just as Christian experience of chastity is much more than a vow to abstain oneself from sex, being homosexual is not equivalent to only having intercourses with persons of the same sex or gender – since both implies bonds that affect psychic and spiritual life too. With due differences, both experiences represent an exposure of self to the other, to the apprehensions and upheavals that the other provokes: the virgin is bound to God (often bride of Christ) just as the homosexual is bound to a community. There is no sovereign subject of its sex. To desexualise oneself is to be aware of it, of one's own sexuality, and say “no to sovereign sex” (Foucault 2001, 256–269).

## Confessions: A “Parallel” Conclusion

However disdained, it is through sex that Augustine comes to his conversion. Perhaps due to the equivocality of *aveu* and *confession* (Büttgen 2021), in *Confessions of the flesh* there is no mention of Augustin's own *Confessiones*, the confessions of his flesh, but they represent a concrete example of what one may call “the persistence of sexuality”. Indeed, not even a saint – to whom Continence itself appears – can avoid the fight with himself (VIII, XI, 27); not even Augustine, thinking back to his “past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul (*carnales corruptiones animae meae*)” (II, I, 1) cannot avoid wondering either “am I not myself at that time?” (*numquid tunc ego non sum?*) (X, XXX, 41).<sup>21</sup> It goes without saying that Augustine denies in the most absolute way the sexual dimension in favor of an experience of

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<sup>20</sup> “Virginity is therefore both an element of a deathless world and an embryo of that world” (Foucault 2021, 150)

<sup>21</sup> No less relevant is the Pauline passage that convinced Augustine to convert: “Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in [...] sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy” (Rom., XIII, 13).

the spirit alone, and yet the biographical datum cannot be dismissed (all the more so since it is the Saint himself who confesses it). The very “subject” of conversion is the libido, the sexual instinct – never quite repressible – that causes that fragmentation of being to which conversion returns its original identity. In short, in the regime of subjectivation defined by Augustine, sexuality is by no means absent: if anything, it is a becoming-sexual in such a way that one's own sexuality never becomes a grave for the infinite instincts that flow through every person, but rather the possibility of a new life – chaste or not.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, *Les aveux de la chair* and Augustin's *Confessiones* represent the testaments of two different, but parallel lives. Introducing the Gallimard' new series, *Les vies parallèles* (on which, not unexpectedly, the memoirs of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin were published) Foucault explained:

The Ancients liked to draw parallels between the lives of illustrious men. [...] Parallels, I know, are drawn to merge infinitely. Let's think others that diverge indefinitely. No meeting point or place to collect them. Often, they have had no echo other than that of their condemnation. One should take hold of them in the force of the movement that separates them; [...] It would be like the reverse of Plutarch: lives that are so parallel that no one could join them again. (Foucault 2001, 499)

Despite the infinite distance of time between them, it is as if Augustine's *Confessiones* and Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* refer to the same experience, that of that of one's own will turning against oneself and converting sexual instincts into concupiscence, “not the involuntary as against the voluntary, but [...] that without which the will cannot will”, except with the intervention of grace (Foucault 2021, 271). The paths of the two authors end here. Foucault does not have the same faith in the divine providence, since in his thought there is nothing that could mend the two parts of the subject – the voluntary and the involuntary. It is a shame that Foucault never gave an explicit answer to the question: “Shall we say that after Augustin we experience our sex in the head?” (Foucault 2001, 996). It demonstrates, indeed, that after the bishop of Hippo a shift has happened in the ethical substance of the sexual experience – from the sexual organ to the thought, from the act to the libidinal instincts.

In conclusion, when in his last interview Foucault refers to his antiquity “trip” saying that “it would be a misunderstanding to want to found modern morality on the ancient morality skipping the Christian morality” (Foucault 2001, 1525), he has no apologetic intentions. There is not such a thing as “Foucauldian theology” (despite what Bernauer 2005 and Carrette 2000 may suggest). Christianity is somehow a “revolutionary” religion since it is the very demonstration that the four dimensions constituting the style of moral experiences, their stylization, may not always remain the same. For Foucault, the queer and homosexual communities of his time should have pursued along a distinct, distant but parallel line – desexualising themselves, but only in order to unleash a more liberated and lively sexuality. Contrary to Bersani's allusion, Foucault did like sex. He just didn't want it to become his grave.

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<sup>22</sup> That is why the part on *Being virgin* is followed by one on *Being married*, where the reference to the Augustinian works is fundamental. See Foucault 2021, 191–255.

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