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I

The body and society

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MICHEL FOUCAULT AND RICHARD SENNETT

Sexuality and solitude

RICHARD SENNETT

A few years ago, Michel Foucault and I discovered we were interested in the same problem, in very different periods of history. The problem is why sexuality has become so important to people as a definition of themselves. Sex is as basic as eating or sleeping, to be sure, but it is treated in modern society as something more. It is the medium through which people seek to define their personalities, their tastes. Above all, sexuality is the means by which people seek to be conscious of themselves. It is that relationship between self-consciousness, or subjectivity, and sexuality that we want to explore. Few people today would subscribe to Brillat-Savarin's dictum, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are," but a translation of this dictum to the field of sex does command assent: Know how you love, and you will know who you are.

Michel Foucault and I are working, as I say, on two very different historical periods in which this theme of self-consciousness via sexuality appears. He focuses on how Christianity in its early phases, from the third to the sixth centuries, assigned a new value to sexuality and redefined sexuality itself. I focus on the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and within that period on how medical doctors, educators, and judges took a new interest in sexuality. When it became apparent to us in our conversations together during the last few years that we were asking rather similar questions about our two historical periods, we decided to set up a seminar to see what connections we could make.

Comparing two eras separated by fifteen hundred years should give any good historian the shudders. But the seminar is more than an idle experiment. We hope to get some rough, tentative ideas about the continuing influence of Christianity on modern culture. How do Christian ideas of sexuality continue as unspoken assumptions in the secular literature on this subject? Our purpose has been to answer that question.

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The first part of what follows is a short statement by each of us on how we came to focus on this particular problem, at these particular moments of history: These are two short overviews of the subject in general. The second part is an analysis of a specific text: Concrete textual analysis is the work we are conducting in the seminar. M. Foucault discusses the problem of sexuality and solitude as it appears in the work of the early church father Augustine. I then discuss medical analyses of masturbation, which begin with the work of the French-Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot in the mid-eighteenth century.

Let me begin the first part with something of a short intellectual autobiography. I did not set out to study sexuality at all. I set out to study the history of solitude in modern society. I wanted to understand the evolution to experiences of solitude because it seemed to be a good way to study a vast but amorphous subject: the development of subjectivity in modern culture. How has the concept of “I” changed in the last two centuries? To tame this very general subject, I sought to understand the changing circumstances in which people felt alone with themselves – the conditions of family, work, and political life that prompted people to consider themselves to be alone. Originally I focused on such tangible matters as how people felt alone in the middle of city crowds (an incomprehensible notion to someone of the mid-seventeenth century) and how factory conditions changed so that people felt more or less isolated from each other. This history of the circumstances in which people felt alone appeared to me after a while, however, to be inadequate to the subject. In particular, it did not account for the mental tools people use to think about themselves when they are alone. In the nineteenth century, one tool of self-definition was the perception of one’s own sexuality; this has grown ever more important. For instance, by the end of the century, there existed the notion that when one left the family and went out into the crowd, one was free to have all kinds of sexual experiences that one would have been ashamed to admit one could desire, thinking of oneself as a member of a family. Thus there appeared two kinds of desire, one for the anonymous man, one for the family man.

Let me now say something about what the word *solitude* means. We know three solitudes in society. We know a solitude imposed by power. This is the solitude of isolation, the solitude of anomie. We know a solitude that arouses fear in those who are powerful. This is the solitude of the dreamer, of the *homme révolté*, the solitude of rebellion. Finally, there is a solitude that transcends the terms of power. It is a solitude based on the idea of Epictetus that there is a difference between being

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lonely and being alone. This is the sense of being one among many, of having an inner life that is more than a reflection of the lives of others. It is the solitude of difference.

Each of these solitudes has a history. In the ancient world, the solitude imposed by power was exile; in seventeenth-century France, the solitude imposed by power was banishment to the countryside. In a modern office, the solitude created by power is a sense of loneliness in the middle of the mass. In the ancient world, the detached dreamer whom the powerful feared was one like Socrates – one who set against the laws of the state a discourse of superior law, an ideal against an established order of power. The modern *homme révolté*, an Artaud or a Genet, sets against the order of power the truth of lawlessness. The solitude of difference, of an inner life that is more than a reflection of others' lives, is similarly historical.

In most of the writings on this subject, the emphasis is put on the first two solitudes: people in isolation perceived either as victims or as rebels. Emile Durkheim is probably the greatest spokesman for the solitary as a victim, Jean-Paul Sartre for the solitary as a rebel. The sense of apartness, of difference, is more often neglected, and for a good reason. This is an immensely confused experience in modern society, and one reason for the confusion is that our ideas of sexuality as an index of self-consciousness make it hard for us to understand how we stand apart from other individuals in society. It is this third solitude upon which M. Foucault and I have focused.

Confusion about standing apart because of one's sexuality is bred partly of fear. The first modern researchers on sexuality believed they were opening up a terrifying Pandora's box of unrestrained lust, perversion, and destructiveness in looking at the sexual desires of people alone without the civilizing restraints of society. When we come to analyze the texts about masturbation of Tissot and others, I hope some sense of this terror will become apparent. A person alone with his or her sexuality appeared to be a person alone with a very dangerous force. In our seminar we have sought to understand these late Enlightenment and Victorian fears of the Pandora's box within a person to be not simply blind prejudices, or aberrations of scientific inquiry. These fears expressed ideas about the relation between mind and body, speech and desire, of which the Victorian doctors were themselves unaware. Their attitudes are buried in fundamental Christian formulas about the relationship among desire, discourse, and political domination. What is inherited blindly is likely to be passed on blindly. Victorian morality

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provides not simply the moral foundation of the sort of right-wing clamor for social repression that appeared in the last American election; it is also the foundation of the belief, in more benign circles, that contemplation of one's sexuality is the contemplation of "a problem," of mysteries inside oneself that can do great damage in the course of giving one pleasure. This highly charged psychological value put on sexuality is a legacy of Victorian wisdom, even though we flatter ourselves that we no longer share the Victorians' repressive prejudices. This idea of having an identity composed of one's sexuality puts a tremendous burden on one's erotic feelings, a burden that someone in the eighteenth century would find very hard to understand.

The second way in which our seminar has focused on the disorientations of sexual self-awareness concerns the act of relating the mind to the body. We have used in the seminar the phrase *the technology of the self* to describe how sexuality is used to measure human character. Part of the modern technology of the self consists in using bodily desire to measure whether or not a person is being truthful. "Do you really mean it?" "Are you being honest with yourself?" These are questions people have come to answer through trying to chart what the body desires: If your body doesn't desire it, then you aren't being honest with yourself. Subjectivity has become yoked to sexuality: The truth of subjective self-consciousness is conceived in terms of measured bodily stimulation. The practice in American speech of asking whether "you really feel what I am saying," that idea of using the word *feeling* as a measure of truth between people, is a consequence of yoking sexuality to subjectivity and carries with it the connotation that if something isn't felt, it isn't true. The origins of telling the truth through bodily desire have been traced back in our seminar work, again, to Christian sources. The modern consequence is that the wayward course of sexual desire has acted like acid on the confidence in one's self-consciousness: As bodily desires change, people have to keep telling themselves new or different or contradictory truths about themselves. Faith in oneself, in the integrity of self-consciousness, is eroded as the truth of one's self is yoked to the standards of the body.

Sexuality, then, has introduced elements of both fear and self-doubt into the experience of this third solitude, the condition of knowing oneself as a distinct, separate human being. It is a psychological truism that what is feared or ambiguous becomes urgent to a person. The very uncertainties that sexuality creates for subjectivity magnify the importance of the experience: That is, as sexuality becomes more problematic,

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it becomes more important to us in defining ourselves. I think the rhetorical and political view M. Foucault and I share is that sexuality has become too important, that it has become charged with tasks of self-definition and self-knowledge it cannot and should not perform.

Let me add a final introductory note. One logical response to this problem of sexuality and solitude is to maintain: "Forget it. Enjoy the sex and stop thinking about yourself." I would like to close my initial presentation by saying why I do not think the issue of solitude can be disposed of in this way.

There is a direct relationship between solitude and sociability: Unless a human being can be comfortable alone, he or she cannot be comfortable with others. There is a rhythm between the solitude of difference and sociability that ought to obtain in society, and it is a rhythm we do not feel because, in part, the experience of being alone with ourselves is so troubled. This rhythm is possible for us to experience in a way that it was not in the past, because an immense opportunity has opened up in Western bourgeois society, which is to live in a fragmented society.

There exists today an opportunity to escape the organic bonds of religion, family, work, and community, which have held many societies together before – if not completely in fact, at least as a common ideal. The love of the organic is a love we can begin to do without. Large bureaucracies are not held together by principles of organic solidarity, as Durkheim was the first to point out; the family and the workplace are no longer joined, even physically in the same household, as they were in the eighteenth-century city or countryside. Religion no longer plays the integrating role it played in traditional Catholic or Jewish life. Rather than bewailing these changes as signs of decline in society, I think we have to accept them and try to see what good they serve. The good I see them serving is to create a new opportunity for both solitude and sociability.

The loosening of organic bonds means that sociable relations could become more and more matters of choice. The less often social relations appear embedded in a scheme of nature, of divine law, of organic necessity, the more often people should be able to imagine themselves as creatures with a life apart from their social roles. When we choose to enter into social relations, they matter more. But that sense of choosing or not choosing whom a person cares about in a fragmented society depends on knowing how to see oneself as a distinct human being in one's own right. The inflation of sexuality to a measure of psychological truth has come to disorient this kind of self-knowledge.

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MICHEL FOUCAULT

In a work consecrated to the moral treatment of madness and published in 1840, a French psychiatrist, Louren, tells of the manner in which he treated one of his patients – treated and, of course, as you may imagine, cured. One morning he places Mr. A., his patient, in a shower room. He makes him recount in detail his delirium. “But all that,” says the doctor, “is nothing but madness. Promise me not to believe in it any more.” The patient hesitates, then promises. “That is not enough,” replies the doctor. “You have already made me similar promises and you haven’t kept them.” And he turns on the cold shower above the patient’s head. “Yes, yes! I am mad!” the patient cries. The shower is turned off, the interrogation is resumed. “Yes. I recognize that I am mad,” the patient repeats. He adds, however: “I recognize it because you are forcing me to do so.” Another shower. “Well, well,” says Mr. A., “I admit it. I am mad, and all that was nothing but madness.”

To make somebody suffering from mental illness recognize that he is mad is a very ancient procedure in traditional therapy. In the works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one finds many examples of what one might call truth therapies. But the technique used by Louren is altogether different. Louren is not trying to persuade his patient that his ideas are false or unreasonable. What happens in the head of Mr. A. is a matter of perfect indifference for Louren. The doctor wishes to obtain a precise act, the explicit affirmation: “I am mad.” Since I first read this passage of Louren about twenty years ago, I have kept in mind the project of analyzing the form and the history of such a bizarre practice. Louren is satisfied when and only when his patient says, “I am mad” or, “That was madness.” Louren’s assumption is that madness as a reality disappears when the patient asserts the truth and says that he is mad.

We have, then, the reverse of the performative speech act. The affirmation destroys in the speaking subject the reality that made the same affirmation true. What conception of truth of discourse and of subjectivity is taken for granted in this strange and yet widespread practice? In order to justify the attention I am giving to what is seemingly so specialized a subject, let me take a step back for a moment. In the years that preceded World War II, and even more so after the war, philosophy in continental Europe and in France was dominated by the philosophy of subject. I mean that philosophy took as its task par excellence the foundation of all knowledge and the principle of all

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signification as stemming from the meaningful subject. The transcendence of the “A” group reigned. The importance given to this question was, of course, the result of the impact of Husserl, but the centrality of the subject was also tied to an institutional context, because the French university, since philosophy began with Descartes, could only advance in a Cartesian manner. But we must also take into account the political conjunct. Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters, and despotism, it seemed to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices. With the leisure and distance that came after the war, this emphasis on the philosophy of subject no longer seemed so self-evident. Hitherto-hidden theoretical paradoxes could no longer be avoided. This philosophy of consciousness had paradoxically failed to find a philosophy of knowledge, and especially of scientific knowledge. Also, this philosophy of meaning had failed to take into account the formative mechanisms of signification and the structure of systems of meaning.

With the all too easy clarity of hindsight – of what Americans call the Monday-morning quarterback – let me say that there were two possible paths that led beyond this philosophy of subject. The first of these was the theory of objective knowledge as an analysis of systems of meaning, of semiology. This was the path of logical positivism. The second was that of a certain school of linguistics, psychoanalysis, and anthropology – all grouped under the rubric of structuralism. These were not the directions I took. Let me announce once and for all that I am not a structuralist, and I confess, with the appropriate chagrin, that I am not an analytic philosopher. Nobody is perfect. But I have tried to explore another direction. I have tried to get away from the philosophy of the subject, through a genealogy of the modern subject as a historical and cultural reality. That means as something that can eventually change, which is of course politically important. One can proceed with this general project in two ways. In dealing with modern theoretical constructions, we are concerned with the subject in general. In this way, I have tried to analyze the theories of subject as a speaking, living, working being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One can also deal with the more practical understanding found in those institutions where certain subjects became objects of knowledge and at the same time objects of domination: asylums, prisons, and so on.

I wished to study those forms of understanding that the subject creates about himself. But since I started with this last type of problem, I have

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been obliged to change my mind on several points. Let me introduce a kind of auto-critique. It seems, according to some suggestions of Habermas, that one can distinguish three major types of techniques: techniques that permit one to produce, to transform, to manipulate things; techniques that permit one to use sign systems; and, finally, techniques that permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain ends or objectives – that is, techniques of production, techniques of signification or communication, and techniques of domination. But I became more and more aware that in all societies there is another type of technique: techniques that permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. Let us call this kind of technique technologies of the self.

If one wants to analyze the genealogy of subject in Western civilization, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of self. When I was studying asylums, prisons, and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on techniques of domination. What we call discipline is something extremely important in this kind of institution. But it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. Having studied the field of power relations and taken that as a point of departure, I would like, in the years to come, to study power relations starting from techniques of the self. In every culture, I think, this self technology implies a set of truth obligations: learning what is truth, discovering the truth, being enlightened by truth, telling the truth. All of these are considered important either for the constitution or for the transformation of the self.

What about truth as a duty in our Christian societies? As everybody knows, Christianity is a confession. This means that Christianity belongs to a very special type of religion – one that imposes obligations of truth on its practitioners. Such obligations in Christianity are numerous. For instance, there is the obligation to hold as truth a set of propositions that constitute dogma, the obligation to hold certain books as a permanent source of truth, and obligations to accept the decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth. Christianity requires another form of truth obligation: Everyone in Christianity has the duty to explore who he is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may

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have committed, the temptations to which he is exposed. Moreover, everyone is obliged to tell these things to other people and, hence, to bear witness against himself.

These two ensembles of obligation – those regarding the faith, the book, and the dogma, and those regarding the self, the soul, and the heart – are linked together. A Christian needs the light of faith when he wants to explore himself, and, conversely, his access to the truth cannot be conceived of without the purification of the soul. One can object that the same two obligations are found in Buddhism. The Buddhist also has to go to the light and discover the truth about himself. But the relation between these two obligations is quite different in Buddhism and in Christianity. In Buddhism, it is the same type of enlightenment that leads a person to discover what he is and what the truth is. In this simultaneous enlightenment of oneself and the truth, one discovers in Buddhism that the self was only an illusion. In Christianity, these two types of truth obligation, the one concerned with access to light and the other concerned with discovering truth inside oneself, have always kept a relative autonomy – even after Luther and Protestantism.

I would also like to underline that the Christian discovery of the self does not reveal the self as an illusion. It gives place to a task that cannot be anything else but undefined. This task has two objectives. First, there is the task of clearing up all the illusions, temptations, and seductions that can occur in the mind and discovering the reality of what is going on – within ourselves. Second, one has to get free from any attachment to this self, not because the self is an illusion but because the self is much too real. The more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we have to renounce ourselves; and the more we want to renounce ourselves, the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves. That is what we could call the spiral of truth formulation and reality renouncement, which is at the heart of the Christian techniques of the self.

Professor Peter Brown told me recently that what we have to understand is why it is that sexuality became, in Christian cultures, the seismograph of our subjectivity. It is a fact, a mysterious fact, that in this indefinite spiral of truth and reality in the self, sexuality has been of major importance since the first centuries of our era. It has become more and more important. Why is there such a fundamental connection among sexuality, subjectivity, and truth obligation? Then I met Richard Sennett's work.