

Book Review

Foucault, Michel, *Confessions of the Flesh*¹

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Pope Paul VI's 1968 *Humanae Vitae* was his last encyclical that is widely remembered for being a landmark document stating the Catholic Church's view on contraceptives, the family, and, notable for this review, the two goals of marriage—union and procreation.² He sought to clarify the Church's official stand vis-à-vis the progressive social climate of the time, and this view was further explained in the context of the Sacrament of Marriage in the eventual publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church more than 30 years later.³ On this point does Michel Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* spark immense interest. The English translation of *Les aveux de la chair* published in 2021 is the last installment to the History of Sexuality series, a planned six-work investigation into sexuality as an object of discourse. However only four books have been published, none corresponding to what Foucault initially envisioned. This current fourth book was intended to be the series' second installment yet far from the exact scope. Upon completion of its initial draft, Foucault, though sought the need to probe the Greco-Roman world—thus books two and three, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* respectively—before revising the manuscript prior to its planned publication by October 1984. But Foucault was unable to complete it due to his passing in June 1984.⁴ This book allows readers the apogee of just how engaged Foucault was with Christian literature, previously only known to us through the first volume or through some scattered insights on governmentality in his lectures at the *Collège de France*.

¹ Ed. by Frédéric Gros, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Book, 2021, 396pp.

² Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968), <https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html>, §12.

³ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1664.

⁴ See Frédéric Gros, forward to Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Book, 2021), xi and Stuart Elden, Review: Michel Foucault, 'Confessions of the Flesh,' in *Theory, Culture & Society* (20 March 2018), <<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/review-michel-foucault-confessions-of-the-flesh>>.

Foucault tells us that the series has changed direction toward what he regarded as a hermeneutics of the self considering the desiring subject.⁵ A genealogy of sexuality, neither simply intercourse nor what is usually associated with sexuality, breaks away from its static image, moving toward rooting out the sources of power that direct, if not totally regulate, its progression. Foucault already presents in the series' first volume, *The Will to Know* (published also as *An Introduction*), broad sketches of the regulation of sex between spouses.⁶ He argues that we lack actual discourses on it for what abounds in the sheer quantity of *apparent* discourses are forms of regulation if not simply general insights into what intercourse is. On this note, the *Confessions of the Flesh* begins with the aphrodisia regime "defined in terms of marriage, procreation, a disqualification of pleasure, and a respectful and intense bond of sympathy between spouses" that is found in the writings of the Church Fathers yet abound even prior in "pagan" literature.⁷

Returning to how I began, what makes Foucault's book profoundly interesting is his effort not to decouple the Christian tradition's two aims of marriage but to show how this was not always the view. Foucault juggles different readings of sex, from a consequence of the Fall, something practiced even in the Garden of Eden, for the twin goals of unity and procreation, to something that solely unites spouses. The return to the Patristics is significant because the Church Fathers had to interpret and defend the faith against the heretic claims from Pelagius and Arius among others without relying on the councils that we have today. Foucault shows how the Church Fathers were quite practical in their ministry's orientation, not simply talking about eschatological realities but also about procreation, progeny, or sex, even linking these to pagan authors of the time. Their efforts, in fact, became the basis for what later emerged as the Christian pastoral and the subsequent regressive hypothesis, of which Foucault previously provided a critique in the first volume.⁸ However, to think that this book is only about sex is to totally miss the point.

As a whole, one ought to remember that Foucault presents a genealogy of sexuality, and this is the guiding insight throughout the 12 chapters grouped into three parts—concerning the art of pleasure, virginity, and married life (four chapters under the first part and three chapters each for the remaining two parts)—with some notes compiled as appendices at the end. I usually provide the exact titles of the sections in presenting the book's

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, History of Sexuality Vol. 2, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 6ff.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Know*, History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 37.

⁷ Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 3.

⁸ See Foucault, *The Will to Know*, 17ff.

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overview, but this is an exception for most of the section titles are provided not by Foucault himself but by the editor, Frédéric Gros, the editor of all of Foucault's works published by the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* and of his *Collège de France* lectures. Gros played a crucial role in the book's current form, the extent to which he explains himself.⁹

The first part begins with the aphrodisia theme, i.e., the right economy of pleasures.¹⁰ This is a crucial theme, yet one that may be easy to ignore, since it provides the eventual link between virginity and marriage. What this brings to the fore is the instigation of governmentality, summed up as the *ars artium*.¹¹ The art of arts points to the formation of an individual Christian's identity as of primal importance, forged through spiritual direction, self-examination, and confession. This identity is generated due to constant introspection that finds its apex in monastic communities. However, this discipline, prior and after baptism, ultimately points to self-renunciation, that the "search for truth about oneself must constitute a certain way of dying to oneself."¹² This generates the truth of oneself, yet *truth* does not capture its entirety. Instead of this being simply an epistemological gain, this signifies *the formation of a new experience* (the title of the first part) since one's identity is sandwiched in this experience of the right economy of pleasure between a battle inside of oneself—self-examination, discernment, and reflection—and even outside through penance and mortification. The language that Foucault uses here closely follows the spiritual tenor of the Church Fathers but is, at the same time, juridical, a deliberate choice consistent with his lectures that probe governmentality throughout Church history. From this dual direction—interiority and exteriority—proceed the next two parts of the book: virginity and married life.

The second part prods the interiority of this *ars artium* through virginity. Virginity is re-evaluated according to distinctive views: barrenness, nature's interruption, a form of remembrance of paradise, and above all dissimilar to continence. Concerning the last point, what may be observed is a shift from a negative view of the self as merely restricted (continence) to a positive image of preparing oneself (virginity). This transition signifies the conversion from pagan to Christian tradition. Foucault expounds on the relationship between the practices of virginity and the development of the techniques of the self.¹³ With this, it is unsurprising that athleticism and warfare come up as methods to illustrate virginity, but with special emphasis

⁹ See Gros, forward to Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*.

¹⁰ See Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 12.

¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 110.

¹³ See *Ibid.*, 158.

on the former, as the regulation of the will upon oneself.¹⁴ Ultimately, this *ars artium* at this first level conjures subjectification through the gaze's internalization. One is made to speak of the truth of oneself and to constantly be vigilant of one's intentions.

Presenting the high reputation virginity has, Foucault exposes an obvious question, whether this takes precedence over marriage. With numerous saints exalted as virgins—e.g., Agnes, Agatha, Philomena, and Mary—and even Christ's explicit use of virginity in the parables, tensions may arise concerning this spiritual form of continence and married life. Their contrasting reputations are not taken on equal dimensions, and Foucault labors to present these from Patristic literature. This forms part of the third part in which *ars artium* is linked with marriage. Foucault points out the absence of any specific *techne* of married life, unlike virginity on which numerous authors have provided treatises.¹⁵ Yet, despite this apparent dearth, the regulation of marriage is quite familiar; St. Paul writes to the Ephesians that spouses have duties toward each other.¹⁶ This passage of *submission* found in Paul brings marriage closer to subjectification. Foucault works on Patristic literature to show this within the context of the regulation of desire, *epithumia*, a different form of chastisement than virginity.

At this point, the view of marriage is that it is similar to monasticism in regulating desires (preventing fornication) and meriting salvation, with progeny not considered as an essential aspect.¹⁷ The Christian view of marriage though did not end with this, and the last two parts of the book generally treat St. Augustine's view of the goods of marriage and the role of the libido, especially in the institutionalization of a particular form of governmentality linked to the *societas*.¹⁸ Considering the sexual drive as part of an involuntary (natural) urge, Foucault situates it within marriage to underscore not the morality of the act—although this is the textual basis from the Church Fathers—but the use of the body therein.¹⁹ Each spouse has this duty to one's partner—to give oneself is a participation in this economy of pleasure that one *voluntarily* engaged in. The juridical term is of grave importance here to highlight the movement of the will (in consenting to marry) and at times the inability of the will to engage in sexual acts (when the libido goes contrary to what one wills). Progeny only enters the discourse through, weakly, the serious consideration of the command to be fertile and multiple and, better, the desire for immortality assured through offspring and

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁶ See Eph. 5:22ff., NABRE.

¹⁷ See Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 218ff.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 280.

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the creation of the *societas* only possible through humanity's multiplication.²⁰ Marriage, hence, is understood as a bond among spouses that brings each of them to the community as an expression of both a pact and a sense of faithfulness with progeny as a tangible sign, an effect, of this shared commitment.²¹

The final phase that Foucault provides in this book is how the economy of pleasure becomes regulated by the libido. The libido demarcates what is permissible from what is not within the juridical bounds of marriage, citing the legitimate nuptial ends as the union of spouses and progeny, which for more than a millennium and a half will be further elaborated by the Church.²² It is at this point that we notice the equation between the *bonum conjugale* and the *bonum sexuelle* in that the latter is placed within the bounds solely of the former, spiritualized to the level of a sacrament.²³ Concerning the economy of desire, Foucault presents this movement from an internal struggle to an external consideration of proper relationships; whereas virginity is the relationship of the soul with one's own body, marriage is that with another's. This shows how the codification of sex becomes the seedbed for its governmentality that later, in history, is evident with the Christian pastoral that Foucault critiques in his other works.

What this book offers is not a groundbreaking alteration of his philosophy or a radical shift in his intellectual focus but a confirmation of his intellectual might through another demonstration of his critical inquiry into the movement of power. This is another insight into his genealogical inquiry, but this time raised to the Patristic era. Returning to the Patristics requires explaining how they had to confront the issues of their time. Foucault did precisely this, and his academic rigor is admirable for such a textual encounter with expansive references to Patristic literature, at times multiple books by a single author. A reader who is knowledgeable of this period would be taken aback by Foucault's ability to guide through several works of towering figures such as Philo and Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine among several others. Reading this book thus, for a believer, serves partly as an apology of certain beliefs since Foucault clearly explains the view. Parenthetically, this admiration becomes even greater with the knowledge that he himself did not consider himself a Catholic.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 249 and Gen. 9:17, NABRE.

²¹ See Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 245.

²² See *Ibid.*, 283.

²³ See *Ibid.*, 256.

As common to any work on Foucault, there are two registers that are essential to consider. The first pertains to the actual accounts that illustrate the narrative, while the second refers to the general development of the theme he wishes to root out. In this book, the first appeals to the Christian who wishes to learn more about one's faith, the erudition of the Fathers, and the practices of the early Christians. The second appeals to the scholar who wishes to see Foucault's genealogical inquiry into power formed within the Catholic tradition. Balancing these two is the ideal approach to the work. It will be easy for those who solely focus on either of the two to miss Foucault's entire point due to the sheer range of authors he cites for the former, while those who are only interested in the latter need to pay close attention to the development of the former to root out Foucault's intentions. As such, those without at least basic knowledge of the Patristic era or who are not exposed to the Christian faith would encounter some initial difficulty in reading this work. It is extremely helpful to already have a working understanding of who these individuals are, their place in the timeline of the Patristics, and also how they have contributed to the faith's formulation, especially against heresies of the time. Also, usual to Foucault is the constant use of untranslated terms or phrases be it in Latin or Greek which is maintained in this oeuvre that a neophyte to the ancient languages might need to return to previous pages to remember Foucault's initial usage.

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