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The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*

Stuart Elden

Utilising recently published lecture courses, some materials archived in Paris and the full range of the writings published in Foucault's life, this article traces the history of Foucault's last major project, the *History of Sexuality*. The guiding theme is the notion of confession, which was to be the subject of the second volume of the original abandoned plan and the fourth volume of the unfinished plan. Highlighting the problems of the original formulations of this concept, both in *The Will to Knowledge* and the *Les Anormaux* lecture course, the article shows why Foucault needed to trace the theme much further back historically. Foucault's failure to complete the original project was, it is argued here, a productive failure, as it led him into new and fruitful avenues

Introduction

The seconde partie de Penitence is Confessioun, that is signe of contricioun... First shaltow understonde that Confessioun is verray shewynge of synnes to the preest. (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 1987, p. 296)

At his death in 1984, Foucault had completed three volumes of his *History of Sexuality*. The first, *La Volonté de savoir* [*The Will to Knowledge*], had appeared in December 1976, the second and the third, *L'Usage des plaisirs* [*The Use of Pleasures*] and *Le Souci de soi* [*The Care of the Self*], in May and June 1984. But between the first and subsequent volumes, Foucault changed his project radically. He had originally intended to work on a thematic approach, and the initial plan—found on the back cover of the first volume—was for the following titles:

1. *La Volonté de savoir* [*The Will to Knowledge*]
2. *La Chair et le corps* [*The Flesh and the Body*]
3. *La Croisade des enfants* [*The Children's Crusade*]
4. *La Femme, la mère et l'hystérique* [*The Woman, The Mother, and the Hysteric*]
5. *Les Pervers* [*The Perverse*]
6. *Population et races* [*Population and Races*]

Such a program receives its rationale from the analysis in the first volume. Foucault sees Christian practices of confession as central to understanding the birth of psychoanalysis and the discourse of sexuality, and planned to analyse its understanding of the flesh as distinct from the body. Similarly sexuality's four constituent subjects were the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple and the perverse adult. These are the themes of the planned volumes, which Foucault aimed to publish at the rate of one a year (Macey 1993, p. 353), or if Eribon is to be believed, every three months (1991, p. 275). It is also worth noting another volume promised in *La Volonté de savoir* (though not in the English translation), particularly in relation to confession. Foucault suggests that "Greek law had already coupled torture and confession, at least for slaves. Imperial Roman law had developed the practice. These questions will be covered in the *Pouvoir de la vérité* [*The Power of Truth*]" (1976, p. 79 n; see 1978a, p. 59 n).¹

The subsequent volumes however, work on a very different plan. *L'Usage des plaisirs* discusses Ancient Greece, *Le Souci de soi* Greece and Rome. A projected fourth volume, *Les Aveux de la chair* [*Confessions of the Flesh*], which was intended to complete the series by looking at early Christianity, was left largely finished but unpublished at his death. This plan was, in truth, a much more *historical* study, tracing the subject of sexuality back to antiquity. *Les Aveux de la chair* looks at Christianity in the first to the fifth centuries, including such topics as John Cassian, monasticism, Augustine, and Christian hermeneutics of the self. In tracing the relation of the fourth to the previous two volumes, Foucault suggests that this period sees a shift in ethical practices from a small elite to a larger society—that this is in some sense the development of Christianity (1994, Vol IV, p. 610; 1991, p. 341). But the story is much more complicated than this would suggest—there were a number of plans for the series, and the reasons for the abandonment of the original plan are, when they are discussed at all, disputed.

There are various clues apparent in a range of interviews, articles and lectures which Foucault published in his life; and there is much supposition in biographies. A recent special issue of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* provided a number of discussions of the period to be covered by the unpublished fourth volume (2001, see especially Boyarin & Castelli, 2001). However, what is really starting to make this work better informed is the ongoing publication of the lecture courses that Foucault gave annually at the Collège de France. To date, four relevant volumes have been published: *La pouvoir psychiatrique* [*Psychiatric Power*] from 1973 to 1974 (2003); *Les Anormaux* [*The Abnormals*] from 1974 to 1975 (1999); «*Il faut défendre la société*» [*'Society Must Be Defended'*] from 1975 to 1976 (1997a); and *L'Herméneutique du sujet* [*The Hermeneutic of the Subject*] from 1981 to 1982 (2001). It is clear from these volumes that, given that *La Volonté de savoir* was only intended to serve as an introduction, these courses

1. As Macey, 1993, p. 354, notes, "this was a topic often touched upon since 1970, and one to which Foucault would often return, but the book itself remains unwritten".

Table 1. Michel Foucault: The History of Sexuality

Year	Original plan (1976)	Subsequent plan (1982-1983)	Final plan (August 1983-)	Lecture courses at the Collège de France	Other information
1974				<i>Le pouvoir psychiatrique</i>	
1975				<i>Les anormaux</i>	<i>Surveiller et punir</i> (February) Visit to California (Spring)
1976	<i>La volonté de savoir</i> (December)	<i>La volonté de savoir</i>	<i>La volonté de savoir</i>	«Il faut défendre la société»	
1977	La chair et le corps				Sabbatical year
1978	La croisade des enfants			<i>Sécurité, territoire, population</i>	<i>Herculine Barbin</i> (May)
1979	La femme, la mère et l'hystérique			<i>Naissance de la biopolitique</i>	
1980	Les pervers			Du gouvernement des vivants	
1981	Population et races			Subjectivité et vérité	Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice - lectures at Louvain (May)
1982				<i>L'herméneutique du sujet</i>	<i>Le désordre des familles</i> (October)
1983				Le gouvernement de soi et des autres	
1984		L'usage des plaisirs: Chresis et aphrodisia [Le souci de soi] ¹ Les aveux de la chair	<i>L'usage des plaisirs</i> (May) <i>Le souci de soi</i> (June) Les aveux de la chair	Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: Le courage de la vérité	<i>Fearless Speech</i> - lectures at Berkeley (Fall)

Titles in italics refer to books actually published or, in the case of the Collège de France lecture courses, currently published.

¹At this point intended to be separate from the *History of Sexuality* series, with largely different material.

are the most thorough treatment we are likely to get of what would have been in the originally planned set of volumes (see Elden 2001, 2002, 2003). Indeed, in the introduction to *L'usage des plaisirs*, Foucault thanks “those who followed the advances and detours of my work... my auditors at the Collège de France” (1984a, p. 13; 1985, p. 7).

What I am concerned with more generally—and the full elaboration will necessarily have to await the publication of further volumes of lectures—is how and why Foucault abandoned his original plan. [Table 1 provides a summary of the books, lectures and other information mentioned in this story.] I am attempting, effectively, to rebuild Foucault’s abandoned *History of Sexuality*, and to show how he would have completed the one left unfinished by his death. My model here is Theodore Kisiel’s *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (1993), which traces how and why Heidegger came to write *Being and Time* in the way he did, and why he left it unfinished. My inquiry is thus an exercise in the history of ideas. But I hope that it is more than that, because I believe that, even though the initial plan was, in some sense, a failure, it was a productive failure. It was productive, I contend, because it opened up a number of promising avenues for research; sheds light on misunderstood parts of Foucault’s *oeuvre*; and is testament to the insight a great thinker can provide even as, as Heidegger would have said, he stumbles.

The Original Plan

When Foucault first outlined his project for the *History of Sexuality*, in 1975, he made clear the importance of the theme of confession.² He suggested that this was older than the eighteenth century, and was already found in the Middle Ages. He notes that sexuality is something that *is* talked about—far from being subject to taboo and silence, there is a requirement to speak, through confession. “In the West sexuality has not been something that you hide but something that you confess. And it is to the degree that sexuality has been caught within the techniques of confession that it must consequently become silent at a particular moment or in a particular situation” (1996, p. 163; see 1999, p. 157). This requires a history of confession since the Middle Ages, which would include study of judicial confession, particularly the inquisition; the penitential confession; and confession of sins against the sixth and ninth commandments.³ Foucault suggests that at least the first two are recent developments (1996, pp. 163-164). Clearly central is the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which passed Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus* (see 1976, p. 78; 1978a, p. 58). Indeed, Oscar Watkins’

2. The text we have derives from a New York colloquium in November, but Foucault outlined it in the spring to a seminar in Berkeley. See Eribon 1991, p. 311.

3. In the Protestant tradition these would be the seventh and tenth commandments. On the Inquisition, see particularly 1999, pp. 198-199.

extensive study of penance in the Church ends with this, as the “modern system of the Latin Church is henceforth in force” (1961, Vol II, p. 748). The Canon begins by stipulating that

All the faithful of both sexes [*omnis utrisque sexus fidelis*], after they have reached the age of discretion, must confess all their sins [*solus peccata*] at least once a year, to their own priest, and perform to the best of their abilities the penance imposed... otherwise they will be denied entry into the Church in life and a Christian burial in death... But if anyone should wish to confess their sins to another priest, with just cause, let them demand and obtain licence first from their own priest, as otherwise this other is not able to loose or bind them.⁴

The Church is therefore given extensive power over the individual, with a right to excommunicate, and grant access to other priests or not (Tambling 1990, p. 37; Haliczzer 1996, pp. 3, 8; Tentler 1977, pp. 16, 21-22; Bossy 1975). Later developments would include the Council of Narbonne in 1227, which enforced confession for those over 14; and the Council of Toulouse which called for three confessions and three communions a year, with those who failed suspected of heresy (Tambling 1990, p. 38). Peter Lombard later made confession a sacrament, a decision which was ratified by the Council of Trent (*Canons and Decrees* 1978, pp. 92-94). The Council of Trent ended on December 4th 1563, and was the basis for the reorganisation of Roman Catholic church. The Catechism ordered by the Council defined confession as “a sacramental accusation of one’s sins, made to obtain pardon by virtue of the keys” (*Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 1982). The keys here are the keys to heaven, the power Jesus gave to his disciples: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed on heaven” (Matthew xvi, 19). The basis of the church was from this point on centred on the individual rather than the group, with a stress on individual prayer and the sacramental system, but with a great deal of power in the hands of the priest (Haliczzer 1996, p. 21).

It is clear from Foucault’s outline that the importance of this notion is because of the uses to which it is put. He notes how in the eighteenth century mechanisms of confession are deployed in the crusade against childhood masturbation—children must confess to their family, to their family doctor, or to doctors specialising in sexuality. He suggests, but does not elaborate, that “this same confessional technique appears in general medicine at the end of the eighteenth century”. Central to understanding its impact, of course, was the use to which it was put in psychiatry. “In 19th century psychiatry, the sexual confession became one of the cornerstones of the ‘curative’ operation. It is this same confessional practice that Freud brought back in the technique of psychoanalysis” (1996,

4. The Latin text (“Concilium Lateranense IV”, Cap. XXI) appears in Watkins, 1961, Vol II, pp. 733-734; and in Braswell, 1983, p. 26. Watkins (pp. 748-749) and Flowers Braswell (p. 26) both provide translations, which I have followed in places.

p. 164). Foucault's work of the early 1970s, which looked at the role of psychiatric power in penal policy as well as the latter in isolation, brought up many of the themes he would look at in the work on sexuality (2003, for example pp. 12-13, 173, 184, 234, 275-276, 1999, 1994, Vol IV, 656ff). Equally we might anticipate that Foucault's research in this period would have looked at the role of the Spanish Inquisition which, when it started to look at the offences of common people, including blasphemy, bigamy or superstition, discovered how little confession was actually practised (Haliczer 1996, p. 3).

Therefore "for the past six or seven centuries, sexuality has been less something that you do than something that you confess, by which and through which are established a whole set of obligatory procedures of elocution, enunciation and confession; the obligations of silence are doubtless the counterpart of these". Confession is the first trait of this technology of sexuality: "sexuality is something that must be talked about inside a ritual discourse organised around a power relationship" (1996, p. 164, see 1999, p. 157). We find this notion of confession played out in *La Volonté de savoir*, where for example Foucault contrasts two texts: one religious, one secular.

Tell everything... not only consummated acts, but sensual touchings, all impure gazes, all obscene remarks... all consenting thoughts.⁵

Your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you describe relates to human manners and character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance; and what is more, the least circumstance is apt to have an immense influence upon what we expect from your stories.⁶

The first comes from St. Alfonso Maria de Ligouri's eighteenth century commentary on the sixth/seventh commandment; the second from de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*.

It therefore makes sense that the second volume, following *La Volonté de savoir*, would be concerned with precisely these matters. It would be followed by volumes on children, women, perverts and race and population. Of these themes only two receive anything like systematic treatment in the courses currently available—the notion of the perverse and the crusade against childhood masturbation, both in *Les Anormaux*. In order to illuminate the problematic of masturbation Foucault spends some time on the notion of the body and confession. There are running themes on the control of populations in *Les Anormaux*, and this receives much more detailed treatment in «*Il faut défendre la société*», which discusses the notion of race in considerable detail (see Elden 2002).

By March 1976, then, when the final lecture of «*Il faut défendre la société*» was delivered, much of the original plan of *The History of Sexuality* would seem

5. Alfonso de' Ligouri, *Préceptes sur le sixième commandment*, 1835, p. 5, cited in 1976, p. 30; 1978, p. 21.

6. Donatien-Alphonse de Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*, edited by I. Pauvert, pp. 139-140, cited in 1976, pp. 30-31; 1978, p. 21.

to have been sketched out. According to the chronology in *Dits et écrits*, Foucault finished the manuscript of *La Volonté de savoir* in August of that year (1994, Vol I, p. 49). The researches for *Les Pervers; Population et races* and *La Croisade des enfants* appear to have been well under way. The theme of the projected fourth volume—on women—receives much less treatment, although there are some important comments on hysteria in *Le pouvoir psychiatrique* (see for example, 2003, pp. 253, 318-319, 324). It seems that the feminist criticism of Foucault is not likely to be substantially altered by this newly available material, although a detailed examination of what material there is is necessary. But in general terms, Foucault seems to have largely worked through the issues that concern him, and *La Volonté de savoir* was therefore appropriately placed to introduce a series that, simply, he just had to write.

The Historical Plan (1)

After «*Il faut défendre la société*» Foucault had a year sabbatical, and when he returned to the *Collège de France* in early 1978 he appeared to have shifted direction. (In most academic years Foucault's lectures ran from about January to March, hence when he finished «*Il faut défendre la société*» in March 1976 his year sabbatical allowed him effectively 22 months absence.) The 1977-1978 and 1978-1979 courses were entitled *Sécurité, Territoire, Population* [*Security, Territory, Population*] and *Naissance de la biopolitique* [*Birth of Biopolitics*]. Although the first began with questions of power it was quickly replaced with the new focus on government, bio-politics, and population—what Foucault now called the analysis of governmentality. It was really only in 1979-1980, *Du Gouvernement des vivants* [*On the Government of the Living*], and 1980-191, *Subjectivité et vérité* [*Subjectivity and Truth*] that the overall trajectory became clear again, as Foucault started to look at Christianity again, and antiquity in detail for the first time. In fact, it seems apparent to me that looking at these earlier courses in the light of the ones that followed the continuity was indeed there. They are both in some sense concerned with the question of government of the self or others, which would be Foucault's late concerns. Indeed, in *Les Anormaux* he describes the pastoral as a "technique for the government of souls" (1999, p. 165). This leads him through long, but productive, detours into notions of pastoral power, governmentality and related matters. For now though, because of their unpublished nature, and limitations of space a single article imposes, they will have to be left aside. I have no doubt though that in the overall inquiry they will need to be weaved into the narrative.

From articles, lectures and interviews published at the time it is clear that Foucault was working back much further historically than he had originally intended. In January 1978 he was again working on the volume on Christianity, and was concerned with matters such as concupiscence (strong, especially sexual, desire—from the Latin *concupiscere*, to covert) and the council of Trent. But this version was, as Foucault's partner Daniel Defert reports, completely

destroyed (Foucault 1994, Vol I, p. 53, see 1999, p. 325). According to Defert's chronology, in January 1979 this "history of confession" was leading him to study the first great texts of Cassian, Augustine, Tertullian, and this was leading to the "progressive birth of new subject material for the second volume", now under the title of *Les Aveux de la chair* (Foucault 1994, Vol I, p. 56). Rather than beginning his inquiry into confession with the late Middle Ages, Foucault was going back to the early Church Fathers. In April 1978 he suggests that the departure point is at least since Saint Augustine, since the first centuries of Christianity (1994, Vol III, p. 555); and as Carrette notes, as early as 1977 Foucault was already "grappling with Tertullian and the church in late antiquity in preparation for such a volume" (1999, p. 43, see 2000).

By the early 1980s Foucault seems to have finished this investigation into early Christian understandings of confession and subjectivity. Much of this material will surely be evident in the lecture courses of this period, particularly *Du Gouvernement des vivants* which looked at the notion of truth-telling [*dire-vrai*], and offered a detailed analysis of Christian modes of confession, introduced by an analysis of *Oedipus Rex*. In May 1981 he also gave six lectures in Louvain under the title "*Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice*" (1994, Vol I, p. 59), which remain unpublished. Here he described confession as

An act by which the subject, in an affirmation of that which they are, binds themselves to this truth, places themselves in a relation of dependence towards the other and at the same time modifies the connection that they have to themselves. (Cited in Foucault 2001, p. 353 n. 22)

There are many places in the 1982 lecture series *L'Herméneutique du sujet* that refer back to these previous courses, and to that earlier research more generally (see, for example, 2001, pp. 44, 202-203, 244-248, 286, 316-317, 345-346, 381, 391, 402-403). As such this course provides a fascinating preview of the material to appear in the ongoing publication of these lectures. Foucault clearly thought that he had reached a publishable stage. For example, a piece entitled "The Battle for Chastity" (1994, Vol IV, pp. 295-308) which discusses Cassian was published in 1982 and "Sexuality and Solitude" (1994, Vol IV, pp. 168-178) which touches upon Augustine appeared in 1981. However, Foucault claims that the introduction to the volume he had at this time rested upon a number of 'clichés' about pagan ethics (i.e. Greece and Rome), which were misleading, based as they were on generalisations in the secondary literature. Turning back again, he wanted to sort out his view of the earlier period before he published this book on Christianity (1994, Vol IV, p. 384; 1991, pp. 341-342; see Carrette 1999, pp. 43-44).⁷ That, it seems, is what led Foucault into those earlier periods—material on which first started to appear in his lectures in 1981.

In April 1983, in discussions with Rabinow and Dreyfus, Foucault suggests that the series on sexuality begins with *L'Usage des plaisirs*, is followed by *Les Aveux*

7. See discussion with Dreyfus and Rabinow, 21 April 1983, Manuscript D250(6), p. 5. These manuscripts are archived at the Institut de Memoire d'Éditions Contemporaines, Paris.

de la chair, “which deals with Christian technologies of the self” (1994, Vol IV, p. 383, 1991, p. 342), and then there is “*Le Souci de soi*, a book separate from the sex series, [which] is composed of different papers about the self—for instance a commentary on Plato’s *Alcibiades*... about the role of reading and writing in constituting the self, maybe the problem of the medical experience of the self, and so on...” (1994, Vol IV, p. 383, 1991, p. 342).⁸ This seems to have been the plan for at least a year—in the first paragraph of “The Battle for Chastity” Foucault notes it will appear in the third volume. The English editors of this lecture seem to assume that this means that Foucault must have further divided the material into different volumes. Rabinow and Faubion suggest that “the description precedes Foucault’s decision to relegate discussion of the period discussed in the text to a fourth volume, *Aveux de la chair* [*Confessions of the Flesh*], which remains unpublished” (Foucault 1997b, p. 185). But if, as Foucault says, *Le Souci de soi* is a book separate from the sex series, then the description is entirely consistent.

More accurate is the suggestion by the French editors, Defert and Ewald, who claim that “at this time, *L’Usage des plaisirs* had not been divided into two volumes” (Foucault 1994, Vol IV, p. 295 n.**). This claim becomes clearer through Defert’s note in the *Dits et écrits* commentary for March 1983:

The enormous manuscript of the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, which is henceforth named *L’Usage des plaisirs*, is divided into four parts:
 The use of pleasures, a part itself divided into two large chapters: (1) Terms and principles; (2) An example: Onirocritique.
 Practices of temperance
 The cultivation of the self
 The requirements of austerity, itself divided into three chapters: (1) The body; (2) The wife; (3) Boys (1994, Vol I, p. 61)

It is therefore clear that the material in this manuscript (with the working subtitle of *Chresis et aphrodisia*) was split into two volumes, the first half retaining the title *L’Usage des plaisirs*, and the second half taking the title *Le Souci de soi*. Defert notes that this decision was made in August 1983, and that the redrafting was done by September (Foucault 1994, Vol I, p. 63). Sections very similar to the projected “the cultivation of the self” and the three chapters of “the requirements of austerity” do indeed appear in the actually published *Le Souci de soi*, as does the analysis of onirocritique. It is not therefore that the Christian material was relegated to a fourth volume, which implies that it was originally to appear in one of the other volumes, but that the division of *L’Usage des plaisirs* into two volumes pushed it further down the list. The material of *L’Usage des plaisirs* (as planned) is distributed between the book with that title, and the one bearing the title *Le Souci de soi*.

8. As Macey 1993, p. 458, notes, “what emerges from the Berkeley conversations is both a rather confused project for future publications and a more general ethical project for an aesthetics of the self”.

The Historical Plan (2)

A book entitled *Le Souci de soi* did therefore appear in the “sex series”, but in rather a different form from the original projection. There is, for example, no extended discussion of Plato’s *Alcibiades*, which was a major theme in the *L’Herméneutique du sujet* course. Nor is there the material on writing or reading, or the discussions of Seneca or Plutarch that Foucault suggested led him to this work (1994, Vol IV, p. 383, 1991, p. 342). All of these are touched upon in greater detail in *L’Herméneutique du sujet*. This course is orientated very explicitly toward the question of the care of the self, and is therefore comparable with the volume under that title in the *History of Sexuality*. But *L’Herméneutique du sujet*, actually, is much closer to what Foucault originally envisioned *Le Souci de soi* would do than the book of that title is (see 2001, p. 496). As the editor suggests, this course is in some sense an elaboration of Part Two of the published book (2001, p. 489). As Macey notes, there was considerable debate even as the books were in press, with Foucault having to be persuaded to this rather than other plans, such as the publication of *Les Aveux de la chair* first or all three parts together in a single volume (Macey 1993, p. 466). Indeed, the interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow was reworked by Foucault before its French publication a year later. Here he changed the outline to: “A book on the problematisation of sexual activity in classical Greek thought concerned with dietetics, economics and erotics, *L’Usage des plaisirs*; then a re-elaboration of the same themes in the first centuries of the Empire, *Le Souci de Soi*; then a problematisation of sexual activity in Christianity from the fourth to the fifth centuries, *Les Aveux de la chair*” (1994, Vol IV, p. 611).

This is the plan found on the unpaginated insert slipped into early copies of *L’Usage des plaisirs* and *Le Souci de soi*, which discusses the reasons for the change and lists the final order.

Volume 1	La Volonté de savoir
Volume 2	L’Usage des plaisirs
Volume 3	Le Souci de soi
Volume 4	Les Aveux de la chair (forthcoming)

Here, *Les Aveux de la chair* is described as a book that “will treat the experience of the flesh in the first centuries of Christianity, and the role played by hermeneutics and the purifying decipherment of desire” (1984b, p. 2). Speaking of himself in the third person, Foucault suggests that “to speak of sexuality as a singular historical experience implied undertaking the genealogy of the desiring subject and to return not only to the beginnings of the Christian tradition but also to ancient philosophy” (1984b, p. 1). Even more explicit, he states that he “went back from the modern era, beyond Christianity until antiquity” (1984b, p. 1). Following his lecture courses, we can see this in practice. He worked backwards, as historians regularly do, even though the books were presented in forward

order.⁹ Because of Foucault's death, and his prohibition on posthumous publications, the manuscript that he was reviewing shortly before his death remains out of the public domain.¹⁰

Foucault did not completely abandon the idea of a book on practices of the self. The piece "The Scripting of the Self", published in February 1983, discusses "a series of studies on 'the arts of the self', on the aesthetics of existence and the government of the self and others in Greco-Roman culture in the first two centuries of the empire" (1994, Vol IV, p. 415). At the time, this was the form projected for *Le Souci de soi*. Later, suggest the French editors, "a series of more general studies on governmentality was then planned with Éditions de Seuil under the title *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres*" (1994, Vol IV, p. 415). The title, coincidentally, was that used by Foucault's last two courses at the *Collège de France*, the second of which bore the subtitle *Le courage de la vérité*. Finally, in 1983 Foucault tells Dreyfus and Rabinow that he had "more than a draft of a book about sexual ethics in the sixteenth century, in which also the problem of the techniques of the self, self-examination, the cure of souls, is very important, both in the Protestant and Catholic churches" (1994, Vol IV, p. 383, 1991, p. 342).¹¹ It would seem, after many years going further and further back that he still thought he could return to the original period of Christianity he had been concerned with.

The Reasons for Change

If that complicated and torturous path shows what actually happened, we are still some way from a convincing explanation of why this happened. In an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy in March 1977, Foucault claimed that he did not "intend to write the chronicle of sexual behaviour over the ages and civilisations. I want to follow a narrower thread: the one that through so many centuries has linked sex and the search for truth in our societies" (1994, Vol III, p. 256, 1990, p. 110). Later in the interview he suggests that he is concerned with "the economy of untruth. My problem is the politics of truth. I have spent a lot of time realising it" (1994, Vol III, p. 263, 1990, p. 118). Although elsewhere in this interview Foucault mentions the "subsequent volumes, concrete studies—on women, children, the perverted" (1994, Vol III, p. 258, 1990, p. 112), is this in some sense

9. See 1994, Vol IV, p. 697; 1990, p. 242: "one reason for the delay in the appearance of these books is that the order in which they are coming out is the opposite of that in which they were written".

10. See the comment made in his May 29 1984 interview: "I am in the process of rereading the manuscripts dealing with the beginning of Christianity which I wrote for this history of morality" (1996, Vol IV, p. 697; 1990, p. 242).

11. In the original manuscript, D250(3), p. 10, Foucault is asked if this is the next step, rather than the Middle Ages. Foucault replies that the Middle Ages had "very strict and formal juridification", and that consequently technologies of the self are not so important. For a detailed discussion of this period, see Payer 1984.

the first spectre of doubt or change of emphasis? Compare with the statement at the beginning of the chapter on method in *La Volonté de savoir*: “analyse the formation of a certain type of knowledge concerning sex, not in terms of repression or law, but in terms of power” (1976, p. 121, 1978a, p. 92). There were certainly doubts in 1977. In a preface written that year for the German translation he announced that “for the moment, the volumes which will follow can only be announced provisionally” (1994, Vol III, p. 136); and “I know that it is imprudent to send out first, like an illuminating flare, a book which constantly makes allusion to publications to come” (1994, Vol III, p. 137). A year later (20 April 1978) he is explicit: “I promised with the greatest imprudence that I would have six volumes. I certainly hope that I will not arrive at the very end, but I believe, all the same, that this problem of the history of sexuality will continue to concern me” (1994, Vol III, p. 553).

One of the most useful formulations is given in various ways in a number of places. Lecturing at Dartmouth College he said it this way: “I have tried to get out from the philosophy of the subject through a genealogy of the subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self” (1993, p. 202; see p. 225 n. 26, 1994 Vol IV, p. 170). In an unpublished discussion he declares his work is a “critical genealogy of the man of desire”.¹² In one of the many attempts at a new introduction to the series he tries to explain: “I found myself confronted with a choice which was a long time in unravelling: a choice between fidelity to the chronological outline which I had originally imagined, and a different line of inquiry in which the modes of relation to the self took precedence” (1994, Vol IV, p. 583, 1991, p. 338, 1984a, p. 13, 1985, pp. 6-7; Macey 1993, p. 416). Foucault continues: “I ended up placing the work’s emphasis on what was to have been simply the point of departure or historical background; rather than placing myself at the threshold of the formation of the experience of sexuality, I tried to analyse the formation of a certain mode of relation to the self in the experience of the flesh” (1994, Vol IV, p. 584, 1991, p. 339). This led him, he suggests, to a dramatic change in the period under consideration. “In pursuing my analysis of the forms of relation to the self, in and of themselves, I found myself spanning eras in a way that took me farther and farther from the chronological outline I had first decided on...” (1994, Vol IV, p. 583, 1991, p. 339). The period to be investigated was the period in late antiquity when the “principal elements of the Christian ethic of the flesh were being formulated” (1994, Vol IV, p. 584, 1991, p. 339). Naturally this took Foucault into completely unknown territory for him, but he felt it was “best to sacrifice a definite program to a promising line of approach”, and that books were worth writing because they taught the author things he had not previously known (1994, Vol IV, p. 584, 1991, p. 339).

According to his French biographer, Didier Eribon, there was a great deal of pressure on Foucault.

12. Discussion with Dreyfus & Rabinow, 21 April 1983, Manuscript D250(6), p. 5.

Foucault worked long and hard to put the finishing touches on this series that had been announced for so long. His lengthy silence has fed any number of rumours: Foucault was finished, he had nothing more to say, he was at an impasse... Newspapers and magazines, always ready to look for the flaw, to flush out any weakness, to proclaim failure; jubilant enemies, impatient admirers or worried friends—everyone was obsessed with the question: so, when are we going to read the rest? Foucault had the impression that they were on his heels (1991, p. 321).

Speculation in the biographies themselves for the reasons behind this long delay takes a variety of forms. According to Eribon, Foucault was disappointed with the reaction to the first volume (1991, p. 275), which was exacerbated by the criticism of his position on Iran (1991, p. 291). Various other personal and professional reasons could be added to this—Foucault was getting disgruntled with his position at the Collège de France; had contractual issues with Gallimard (1994, Vol I, p. 50); he was spending more and more time in the US; and was finding it extremely difficult to work at the Bibliothèque Nationale. It is not entirely coincidental that the turn toward classical and early Christian writers coincides with his move to the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, the library of the Dominican order in Paris (Eribon 1991, p. 291; Miller 1993, p. 326).

Both Eribon and David Macey (1993) trace the development of the series in a way that bears comparison with mine above (indeed they are valuable sources for it), and what differences there are between theirs and mine can largely be put down to the much greater amount of material that is now available. However the third biographer, James Miller, in *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, comes up with perhaps the most unusual explanation. Miller suggests that it was Foucault's visit to California, and notably an acid trip he took there, that both "changed his life" and "changed the way he had been thinking about sex and sexuality" (1993, p. 251). Miller suggests that by spring 1975, when Foucault visited California he had "nearly finished" his research and was "composing rough drafts, summing up his reading of the documents". Miller claims that by the time he returned to Paris in June he had decided "to shelve almost everything he had previously written about sexuality" (1993, p. 252).

Miller's sources are nothing if not dubious. His principal source is an unpublished manuscript by the professor Foucault was visiting in California, Simeon Wade.¹³ Other sources include a novel about somebody supposed to be Foucault, an interview with Daniel Defert (although Defert was interviewed by both Eribon and Macey who draw very different conclusions), and a very dishonest reading of an interview (Miller 1993, p. 439 n. 22).¹⁴ As Macey sensibly notes, "rumours abound about the acid trip; this is one of those Foucault stories that everyone seems to know. Reports from those who claim that he told them that it changed

13. Even one of his strongest critics praises Miller's uncovering of this "detailed memoir" (Halperin 1995, p. 143).

14. Miller takes a comment about a style of writing that was ruptured in 1975-1976 to apply to a *topic* of examination. See 1994, Vol IV, p. 697; 1990, pp. 242-243. For a more general critique of Miller's dubious strategies, see Halperin 1995, particularly the section entitled "The Describable Life of Michel Foucault", pp. 126-187.

his life should probably be treated with some scepticism” (1993, p. 339). Perhaps more serious the dates are all wrong. Foucault finished the manuscript of *La Volonté de savoir* in August 1976, some 15 months after the acid trip in Death Valley. In that time he had given the lectures that comprise «*Il faut défendre la société*», which deal extensively with issues to be treated in the originally proposed Volume VI. As Miller himself notes, it is in the spring of 1978 when Foucault returned to the Collège de France after his sabbatical that the real problems start to be apparent (1993, p. 299). Perhaps most elaborate, Miller suggests that the trip was Foucault’s epiphany, because he discovered previously hidden sexual desires for his sister. Miller supports this, or perhaps elaborates from this, by suggesting that “before his acid trip, the central focus of Foucault’s critical remarks on sexuality had been the prohibitions surrounding masturbation; after it, the emphasis shifted—to the incest taboo” (1993, p. 439 n. 16). That this is at best doubtful is confirmed by the *Les Anormaux* course, where both masturbation and incest are discussed as part of a complementary analysis (see 1999, pp. 218-256; Elden 2001, pp. 100-101)—before Foucault ever set foot in California.

The Problem of Confession

It seems to me that the reasons for the change in emphasis are much more mundane. Actually, it appears that fatigue was a major factor: in 1984, in two separate pieces, Foucault admits that he was bored (1994, Vol IV, p. 668, 1990, p. 255, 1994, Vol IV, p. 730, 1990, p. 47). In one of the same interviews he suggests that had he merely been an academic he probably could have gone ahead with this original project, “knowing in advance what I wanted to do and where I hoped to arrive”, but because he was also an intellectual, he was subject to change, to have his own thought altered by the process of study (1994, Vol IV, p. 675, 1990, pp. 263-264). It is this willingness to have not merely the method of inquiry but also the very subject of inquiry dictated to by the material uncovered that sets Foucault apart from many of his contemporaries.

So I changed the general plan: instead of studying sexuality on the borders of knowledge and power, I have tried to go further back, to find out how, for the subject himself, the experience of sexuality as desire had been constituted. In trying to disentangle this problematic, I was led to examine certain very ancient Latin and Greek texts (1994, Vol IV, p. 730; 1990, p. 48; see 1994, Vol IV, pp. 704-705; 1990, p. 252).

It is therefore the issue of confession, for the projected second volume, that was the real stumbling block. Confession is the theme that led him further and further back, and eventually to the Latin and Greek texts. Looking at *Les Anormaux* in the light of the later changes to the series shows why this is so. The discussion of the topic of confession here is largely unconvincing, and it seems to make sense that it was the analysis of this material for *La Chair et le corps* that

led Foucault to abandon the original plan and work more historically than thematically.¹⁵

In the discussions now available Foucault concentrates on the period after the Council of Trent, and when he discusses material before this the somewhat sweeping statements are largely unsubstantiated (for example, 1999, p. 161). Foucault trades on a fairly small range of secondary material for this earlier period, notably Lea's *A History of Auricular Confession* (1896), although the later period—from the sixteenth century on—seems better researched. In his discussions of the later period he cites some key texts, including, among others, Milhard, Habert, Charles Borromée, de Ligouri (1999, pp. 173, 176-177, etc.). But as the editors note, it is not clear that Foucault read the texts themselves, as almost all the documentation comes from Lea's research (Marchetti & Salomoni 1999, p. 324).

This is not to suggest that there is not interest in Foucault's reading of the mid-1970s (that is, in the first volume and *Les Anormaux*). There are some interesting comments about the development of the practice, notably that the confessional, that is the architectural device, is only found in the sixteenth century (1999, p. 168).¹⁶ And as early as 1975, linking the then newly published *Surveiller et punir* to the concerns of the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests that "we have, opposite [*en face de*] the political anatomy of bodies, a moral physiology of the flesh" (1999, p. 180). Equally some of Foucault's comments, and certainly the editors' notes, suggest that the theme of confession was of interest in some of the earlier courses at the Collège de France, including those that largely informed the writing of *Surveiller et punir* (1999, pp. 158, 181 n. 12, 186 n. 77).¹⁷ But the discussion seems to be principally in order to contextualise the analysis of masturbation in subsequent lectures: indeed it appears that Foucault gives masturbation a privileged place in the confession of sin (1999, pp. 179; Elden 2001, pp. 99-1101).¹⁸ We should be careful here: the point is about masturbation as the privileged moment in confession of the particular sin, and largely within the context of seminaries and colleges. About sin in general, and therefore confession in general, Foucault says relatively little.¹⁹

15. For an analysis of *Les Anormaux* in relation to the destroyed *La Chair et le corps*, see Marchetti and Salomoni, 1999, pp. 325-330; Marchetti 2002; and more generally, Keck and Legrand 2003, Carrette 2000.

16. According to Marchetti and Salomoni (1999, p. 168 n. 37-38) Foucault's source may be Lea 1896, Vol I, p. 395, although his reference to the first confessional dates from 1516, while Lea's reference is to 1565. The editors have been unable to validate Foucault's earlier reference. See also 1994, Vol IV, p. 282; 1991, p. 252, where Foucault makes a brief reference to the spatial aspects of the confessional.

17. The courses in question would be *Théories et institutions pénales* and *La société punitive*, although there was analysis of juridical confession in *La volonté de savoir*. For translations of their course summaries, which rarely cover all the material to be found in the courses themselves, see 1997b.

18. Interestingly, Jean Gerson, who occupies a central place in the history of the confession of masturbation, is only mentioned briefly by Foucault in the course summary rather than the course itself (1999, p. 309). For a detailed discussion see Tentler 1977, especially pp. 91-93.

19. I owe this caution to Graham Burchell.

One of the problems of the argument of this time is that Foucault seems to think that the date of 1215 is crucial (see 1999, p. 162). As was shown above, Canon 21 did initiate annual confession and is a central pillar of the modern Church. Lea has described it as “perhaps the most important legislative act in the history of the Church” (1896, Vol I, p. 230). However, it is not at all clear that this moment was particularly important either for the idea of confession in itself or the emphasis on sexuality which Foucault accords to it. As Payer has shown, some quite serious questions can be raised about Foucault’s emphasis (1985). One of these is a direct challenge to Foucault’s privileging of the edict of the Fourth Lateran Council, suggesting that we need to go further back. The other is that the *Summae confessorum*, the penitential manuals of the subsequent period, tend to concern other sins rather than sexual ones: “consideration of sexual matters was virtually smothered by treatises on subjects quite unrelated to sex... only a selective reading of the confessional manuals after 1215 could find in them a particular concern with sex...” (1985, p. 315; Tentler 1977, p. 223). Payer, while sympathetic to some aspects of Foucault’s work, is fairly damning in his summation:

What Foucault claims for the post-Lateran period simply cannot be substantiated... Man has been drawn for twelve centuries (not three, 23 [this is a reference to 1976, p. 33; 1978a, p. 23]) to the task of telling everything concerning his sex (and concerning every other moral failure). Why should sex be singled out as holding pride of place? (1985, p. 317)

What is most interesting is that some time before these lines of Payer’s were published, Foucault had realised exactly the problems they point to. He had gone back much further than the early thirteenth century; had realised that the key concerns of the medieval period were not necessarily sex; and that moral conduct generally, that is techniques of the self, and not sexuality particularly, should be his guiding concern as he went back through history. But it is through following the theme of confession that he came to realise all these things. This working through certainly tied Foucault up for many years.

This is not only evident in the works which were either part of, or directly shed light on, the *History of Sexuality*. Confession also plays an important role in some of Foucault’s minor works. It helps to explain his interest in the confessional memoirs of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin, and the collection of *lettres de cachet* he presented with Arlette Farge (1973; 1978b; Farge & Foucault 1982).²⁰ Foucault mentions these three projects as demonstrating the interplay of “types of understanding, forms of normality, and modes of relation to oneself and others” (1994, Vol IV, p. 681; 1991, p. 336). In a revealing interview given in 1981, at the time of the ‘*dire-vrai*’ lectures in Louvain, Foucault expressed both his interest and his confusion.

20. On *I, Pierre Rivière* as confessional, see Tambling 1990, p. 129; Hepworth and Turner 1982, pp. 93-96. On the *lettres de cachet* project see Macey 1993, pp. 452-456.

I constantly come up against confession and I wonder whether to write the history of confession as a sort of technique, or to treat this question in the context of studies of the different domains where it seems to play a role, that is in the domain of sexuality and that of penal psychiatry. (1994, Vol IV, p. 658)

It appears therefore that Foucault was not interested in completely abandoning the earlier plan, nor that he felt that all of his previous work had been misjudged. For example, on 22 June 1982 he uses examples of children's masturbation and hysterical women to illustrate the thesis that sexuality has not simply been repressed:

These two examples show, of course, repression, prohibition, interdiction and so on. But the fact that the sexuality of children became a real problem for the parents, an issue, a source of anxiety, had a lot of effects upon the children and upon the parents. To take care of the sexuality of their children was not only a question of morality for the parents but also a question of pleasure. (1994, Vol IV, pp. 530-1; 1996, pp. 375-356).

This pleasure was one of "sexual excitement and sexual satisfaction", for the parents themselves, a kind of "systematisation of rape". As he continues:

To intervene in this personal, secret activity, which masturbation was, does not represent something neutral for the parents. It is not only a matter of power, or authority, or ethics: it's also a pleasure... The fact that masturbation was so strictly forbidden for children was naturally the cause of anxiety. It was also a reason for the intensification of this activity, for mutual masturbation and for the pleasure of secret communication between children about this theme. All this has given a certain shape to family life, to the relationship between children and parents, and to the relations between children. All that has, as a result, not only repression but an intensification both of anxieties and pleasures. (1994, Vol IV, pp. 530-1; 1996, pp. 375-376)

These remarks are extremely close to ones delivered on 5 March 1975 on the "epistemophilic" incest of contact, observation and surveillance and its role in the foundation of the modern family (1999, p. 234). Similarly, the original time period is still of interest. In a remark cut from the "On the Genealogy of Ethics" discussion with Dreyfus and Rabinow, Foucault notes that in relation to the Middle Ages, where there was an equilibrium between regulations concerning food and sex, he has "a lot of pages about those techniques of the self".²¹

Foucault's interest in confession might move from a concern with its modality of power to its role in the production of truth (see Adorno 1996, pp. 86-87), but it remained at the centre of his concerns. It therefore seems likely that the unpublished *Les Aveux de la chair*, the projected fourth volume of the second plan, even though it treats a different historical period to *La Chair et le corps*, is the key to the whole *Sexuality* series. That is, confession is the crucial element in both the abandoned and unfinished plans. Future lecture courses

21. D250(3), manuscript p. 3. The remark is cut from 1994, Vol IV, p. 384; 1991, p. 340.

will doubtless illuminate the path retraced in this discussion, but the key themes now seem to be in view. It was the problem of confession that caused the failure of the original plan, but in realising that failure, Foucault was able to move his research into new and productive avenues.

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