

Exploring the Sexual Body through the Writings of Pope John Paul II and Michel Foucault

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Two men of universal acclaim, Pope John Paul II and Michel Foucault, each thought and wrote extensively about a subject important to most every person who has ever had a body: sexuality. Their claims are very different, contradicting at many points. The frameworks on which they base their propositions differ fundamentally. An indication of their dissimilar approaches is that the Pope bases his project on certain moral norms, while one of Foucault's main tasks was to criticize the use of any framework as if it were fundamental. What is common to each man's project is a certain call. Each appeals to the individual. Each invites the receiver of their words into a process that would enable one to make sexuality his or her own. Each invites individuals to own their sexuality.

This paper aims to set up a conversation between these two thinkers on the theme of sexuality. Sexuality consists of various components: gender orientation, sexual desire, the understanding and relationship we have to our body, and actual sexual practices. It is difficult to come up with a good working definition of sexuality because the claims made by these two thinkers affect the way sexuality is understood. Their claims and the processes by which they arrive at them will be set side by side and subjected to careful analysis. It is an intriguing project, one that has never been attempted before.

This is a worthwhile venture because both thinkers are incredibly influential within their respective fields and throughout the world. The Pope's influence is obvious. He was the leader of 1.5 billion Catholic Christians in the world. Proven by the multi-national and cultural attendance at his funeral, his influence reaches beyond the Catholic Church

to peoples of a collage of backgrounds. Many of his writings have yet to be extensively explored. George Weigel, a papal biographer, compares the potential of his teachings about sexuality to "a kind of theological time bomb set to go off, with dramatic consequences . . . perhaps in the twenty-first century" (Weigel, p. 343, 1999).

Michel Foucault is often cited in modern scholarship concerning cultural constructions of identity. His influence stretches across several disciplines. A Google Scholar search shows that *Discipline and Punishment*, maybe his most prominent work, has been cited over 2050 times. Foucault is definitely one of the more noteworthy scholars within the field of study concerned with socially constructed sexuality, and also figures prominently in the fields of gender studies and queer studies. The potential influences of his work are far from being exhausted.

I will focus on key texts on sexuality from each of these authors. From John Paul II, I will focus on *Love and Responsibility* and *Theology of the Body*. From Michel Foucault's writings, I will focus on *History of Sexuality*.

The Pope wrote *Love and Responsibility*, a philosophical text, as Cardinal Wojtyla. He cites his purpose in the introduction (p. 16):

The book was born principally of the need to put the norms of Catholic sexual morality on a firm basis . . . relying on the most elementary and incontrovertible moral truths and the most fundamental values or goods. Such a good is the person, and the moral truth most closely bound up with the world of persons is 'the commandment to love' . . .

Wojtyla paraphrases Kant's moral imperative to illustrate the correct attitude towards an individual person: "Act always in

such a way that the other person is the end and not merely the instrument of your action” (Wojtyla, p. 27-28, 1981). Instead of responding to a body through objectification, the only valid response to the person is love. Wojtyla explains: “Man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good” (Wojtyla, p. 28, 1981). Sexual love must follow this norm in order to ensure that one person does not become an object for another. Where conjugal love is concerned, these ends are “procreation, the future generation, a family, and, at the same time, the continual ripening of the relationship between two people . . .” (Wojtyla, p. 30, 1981).

Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan is a theological study proposing a biblical vision of the person, love, sex and marriage. The main idea of this work is that man and woman image the Trinitarian God in their bodies, by which they are able to come together and form a “communion of persons.” This communion of persons is experienced fundamentally and corporeally as man and woman give their selves to one another in life-giving love. Conjugal love is meant to be a participation in the life of God.

Pope John Paul II’s intention in both projects is to “make the objective truths of faith an experience of life, to bring about their subjective appropriation” (West, p. 38, 2003). That is, the Pope’s objective is to show how the moral norms laid out by the church are not to be experienced as external dictates. Rather, he proposes that those dictates are truths that correspond to man’s essence. He lets individuals see how to internally recognize those truths and to experience freedom by living them.

I will study and present Foucault’s three-volume *History of Sexuality*. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

Foucault’s main scholarly project consists in exhibiting how the different truths reported by the human sciences are not scientifically-grounded but rather “just the outcome of contingent historical forces” (Gutting, n.p., 2003). The bases of his methodology is that systems of knowledge are governed by rules “that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period.” His methodology is primarily historical. He shows how different bodies throughout histories have constructed certain norms and how these socially constructed norms come to be generally understood as inherent knowledge.

In volume one of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that his central concern is

not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. (p. 11)

Foucault’s aim is to historically show how society has constructed sexual norms. If Foucault can show who formulates sexual norms, and how and why they do it, he may establish that there is nothing intrinsic about our understanding of sexuality. He may show that everything thought and propagated about sexuality is social creation. Foucault shows how within the last few centuries the medical field, government, psychology and the Church defined, classified, normalized and thus institutionalized sex. Foucault proposes that it is not only these external organizations that have exerted control over sex, but individuals also participate to limit their own sexual possibilities. This happens as “individuals internalize the norms laid down by the

sciences of sexuality and monitor themselves in an effort to conform to these norms. Thus, they are controlled not only as *objects* of disciplines but also as self-scrutinizing and self-forming *subjects*” (Gutting, 2003). The problem with the institution-alization of sexuality is that individuals lose their freedom to explore and create their own way of life. In society, people are rewarded for adhering to a prescribed set of sexual practices. One example is the fact that individuals in a heterosexual marriage receive many benefits that homosexuals and people that choose other sexual lifestyles do not receive. Foucault means to open up the possibility for individuals to explore their bodies and their sexuality against the norms society dictates. He proposes resistance to and liberation from these socially constructed norms.

My interest with this theme stems from my own encounter with Pope John Paul II’s thought. I was amazed when I heard what the Pope proposed about sexuality. I realized that sexuality, the body, and the person are of inestimable worth. I heard an integral vision of the person, one that does not separate the spiritual and the carnal. I found out that sexuality was so wonderful that, if we ask for the eyes to see, it may actually reveal to us the meaning of life, which is love according to the Pope who follows the Gospel of Jesus.

In the university I was exposed to the work of Michel Foucault. Admittedly, my exposure to his thought is currently limited. I am intrigued by how his work positively affects people like Ladelle McWhorter, the Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Richmond. She writes of the transformative effect of Foucault’s works in her book *Bodies and Pleasures*. McWhorter has intensely struggled with being homosexual. She realized and admitted she was homosexual. At the same time, she realized that in most people’s view “a homosexual is a dense, silent object without an interior, without any connection to

anything human” (McWhorter, 1998, p. 5). She did not struggle with the fact that she was homosexual; rather, she struggled with being a homosexual in a society that does not understand her as a person but as something strange, as a threat. Reading Foucault, she recognized what she before “believed it was impossible to hear: the articulation of a homosexual point of view” (McWhorter, p. 9, 1998). Earlier, she thought that the only way to be homosexual was to be objectified. Being objectified, a person who is homosexual does not have their own voice; a homosexual is that intolerable thing, which McWhorter described. In Foucault, she discovered that sexuality, including a homosexual identity, has been historically constructed. With Foucault, McWhorter has found liberation by realizing that one may be a person and homosexual at the same time, the one not ruling out the other.

I do not hide my inclination towards Pope John Paul II’s thought. However, I aim to honestly and accurately represent each man’s views. The conversation between them may prove to be very fruitful. It will at least prove to be interesting. The distinction in their thought is obvious. Pope John Paul II claims that even the meaning of life may be discovered by a study of sexuality. Foucault claims that historical analysis shows that meaning is created.

If, as Pope John Paul II believes, sexuality holds the key to the meaning of life then it would hold that one’s understanding of sexuality determines how they will interpret all of life. Our views on sexuality and how we live our sexuality will inspire the way we see ourselves, the way we see others, and the way we will treat ourselves and others.

Foucault critiques the notion that sexuality is the essence of who we are. By showing how our sexuality has been constructed and normalized by discourse, he shows the process of how we have become so consumed by sexuality that we believe that sex is some

type of “universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends” (Foucault, p. 69, 1990). He says we believe that by studying sexuality we may come to know “the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness” (Foucault, p. 69, 1990). The reason we believe this about sexuality can be traced to practices that have inundated us with discourse about sexuality.

This is the hinge of their divergence. Pope John Paul II contends that sexuality reveals to us a great secret. Michel Foucault means to displace the notion that we can find such a secret harbored in our sexuality. He means to displace any social framework for interpreting sexuality by showing how such a framework is a contingent manifestation of a particular cultural mindset at a particular point in time.

Foucault shows how the role of confessing or telling one’s sexual desires and practices to another has produced knowledge about sex, which then leads to its being identified, interpreted, and dictated. His first example of this process, discussed in volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, is the Church’s practice of confession. Here is yet another point of dialogue and debate between Foucault and Pope John Paul II. Foucault claims the Church, as one among a number of

organizations, has created and normalized sexuality primarily through its practice of the confessional. Pope John Paul II asserts that the Church uncovers essential truths about sexuality. His assertion about the role of confession will prove intriguing when juxtaposed with Foucault’s argument.

There are numerous points of conversation between these two thinkers. They express similar goals of opening up the possibility for us to experience our sexuality internally instead of as a series of external dictates. This project may bring out other similarities, such as their respective criticisms about the objectification of individuals. Their projects also differ fundamentally. By analyzing their different approaches, I will examine questions about the role of pleasure and about their respective conceptions of sexual freedom. I will also explore each scholar’s conception of what is at stake for us if these respective claims about sexuality are not heard.

This is a subject important to anyone who has thought about their own sexuality. A careful study of these respective views should allow the reader to see side-by-side differing claims about the meaning of sexuality. The reader should be able to examine his or her own life choices in light of the thoughts of these two hugely influential thinkers.

References

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Pope John Paul II examines some of the "major anxieties of our time" and says that God's mercy is what is needed in the world "at this hour of history." There is a sense, he says, in which mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission. He explores the attitude of Jesus toward women in the Gospels which show that "in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to it, the pope writes. Some of his themes include the exploitation of women, marriage, motherhood, the value of religious consecration, virginity, women who suffer, distinct feminine gifts and why women cannot be ordained to the priesthood. Based on the words of Jesus, John Paul II's famous reflections on the body and sex take us to the root of the modern crisis and chart the path to an authentic sexual liberation. Yet the Pope's dense scholarship often intimidates the average person. In his book, *Theology of the Body Explained*, Christopher West offered a more detailed, six-hundred page commentary on John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Here, he provides a short and popular summary of the Pope's revolutionary teaching. What is the meaning of life? Why did God create us male and female? Pope John Paul II was criticised, amongst other things, for lack of any response to sex abuse of children in the Catholic Church. John Paul II was also criticised by members of the abuse victims' group Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), for failing to respond appropriately to the sex abuse crisis. In 2002, he wrote that "there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young". The Church instituted reforms to prevent future abuse by requiring Paul II gave to his seminal work on the bodily dimension of human personhood, sexuality, marriage, and celibacy. First written while he was Archbishop of Krakow, then later revised and delivered as a series of catecheses after he became pope, John Paul himself referred to this work as "theology of the body." Introduction by Michael Waldstein. THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION was heralded by its advocates as a breakthrough for human development, for the freedom and happiness of the person. John Paul II's argument has a compelling self-evidence because he allows love itself to show its beauty.