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ACCOGLIERE LA CARNE

PER UNA VISIONE INTEGRALE
DELLA SESSUALITÀ

A CURA DI
LUCA ALICI E SILVIA PIEROSARA

EDIZIONI MEUDON

anthropologica



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EROTICS¹

GORAZD KOCIJANČIČ

Ho emòs éros estaúrotai.
My *eros* is crucified.
Ignatius of Antioch

1 | SHOULD I STAY, OR SHOULD I GO

There is no idea worse than writing on subjects that have been discussed in excess. Not only because a drop gets lost in the ocean as if it had never existed: latching on to something that is in the forefront of general interest usually only signals that we will likely get lost in the collective maze that prevents thought from being what it ought to be.

And what is more eagerly spoken and written of today than sexuality, sexual desire, pleasure and all the other accidents of this supposed human substance? Surely, therefore, any thought that deserves its name, must first take fright at the popularity of its topic. And yet – there does seem to be something substantial at stake... To be sure, we have not yet reached the stage that Herbert Marcuse dreamed of in *Eros and Civilization* – the workers have not yet evolved erogenous zones on the parts of the body used for production – and yet progress is made by leaps: at least, advertising convinces us that every activity from licking ice cream to laundering dirty shirts is erotic in the extreme. But leaving the wiles of commerce aside, let us hark to that democratic herald of truth, statistics: the average healthy young man thinks of sex every few minutes (I have forgotten the data on women, but I am sure that they have closed any gap in this field as elsewhere.) Our brave new world has not just turned this intimate secret of ours into an ideology, but into the air that we breathe, whether we want it or not. And not just the armies of libertines, but philosophers too, and even theologians, those proverbial bores. Does anyone still recall Derrida's reply to the question what most interested him about the lives of the great philosophers? (Their sex lives,

¹ This essay is a slightly abbreviated version of the first chapter in the book *Erotika, politika itn.*, Slovenska Matika, Ljubljana 2011 (translated by Christian Moe).

of course)². According to the rather racy memoirs of the wife of the renowned Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, in every town he came to, that restless traveler would first allow himself a walk through the red-light district – and that was the most innocent of the activities of the thinker who, in Germany, was advised to look for a chair at the Faculty of Arts, rather than Theology, on account of his escapades³. But that was then... Today's Protestant world sees the lush growth of so-called *queer theologies* seeking philosophical and spiritual justifications for every conceivable sexual practice and orientation⁴. Even that traditional stronghold of morality, the Catholic Church, has been flagging of late, at least in practice, if not in theory.

The *eros* is not a negligible issue in philosophical and theological thought: sexual desire and the modes of its realization are clearly an important motive power in our lives, if not the central one. Not “to be or not to be”, but “should I stay, or should I go”⁵. With whom would I do it, and with whom not. What would I do, what not. Evidence is hardly needed – even if we close our eyes to the witness of culture, subculture and anti-culture, the statistics just cited suggest that a little introspection will do. And yet, the quite obsessive thematization of the erotic phenomenon goes to show that it conceals a *quandary*, an aporia – despite the decisive tone of most texts written on the subject, and regardless of all their seeming certainty. Living sexually always implies an intimate existential controversy that only persists through all efforts to deal with it, speak about it and discuss it. We do not have to accede right away to Foucault's popular thesis that it is in fact discourse itself that produces “sexuality”: The inflationary verbalizing and theorizing about sexuality – begun in the previous century, and not yet over – does not at all excuse us from the task of thinking, but only makes it all the more urgent. If my discussion ends up in abstractions, that does not mean I am hiding away. Of course, I too am primarily interested in how to live so that my erotic life might accord with what I *cognitively* discern as the truth of *eros*. The beauty of exuberant sexual pleasure, desirous of its own eternity, also conceals a darkness within itself: Pleasure does not always remain a pleasure, however much it might wish to. The

² Cfr. the documentary *Derrida* (2002), directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman.

³ H. Tillich, *From Time to Time*, Stein and Day, New York 1973.

⁴ Cfr. G. Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007; numerous papers of this kind can be read in the journal *Theology and Sexuality*, published for the past fifteen years and currently headed by the editor of the above-mentioned anthology (cfr. the archive of abstracts: <http://tse.sagepub.com/archive/>).

⁵ The untranslatable Slovene pun on *biti ali ne biti* (to be or not to be) – *bi ali ne bi* (would I have sex or not) – is approximately rendered by the refrain of the famous Clash song.

Realitätsprinzip can be cruel or lenient. Pleasure, namely, can destroy us – and so can its denial. The balance between renunciation and surrender is therefore a constant riddle, an existential Gordian knot for each and every one of us. And philosophy is fond of such knots.

On the other level – that of Christian theology, which I will also touch on, even though it does not concern everyone and in today's Europe concerns only the (un)happy few – the question is: How to live an erotic life in accordance with the revealed will of God concerning human beings? Where these two questions overlap, I will assume that one should begin with a philosophical reflection: *Gratia supponit naturam*, as the medievals said; mercy (divine revelation) presupposes nature (whatever that means in a Christian context: certainly, revelation's Other and that which opens up to bare thought, even if the Other sometimes turns the thought on its head). This presupposition will, I hope, be justified in what follows.

Precisely because the *eros* is controversial, however, to speak of it is always to say both too much and too little. Hence it is good to hide behind the words of others who enunciate the quandary. Let me therefore first sketch the terrain through two texts, as though with two borders that enclose the area in question to the north and the south. Borders are never clear. But these two at least offer refuge to modesty (that mysterious and unjustly persecuted virtue). From there I will risk the occasional sally, digression and about-turn in a paltry effort to follow the polymorphous nature of the *eros* and emulate its hiding-games that shun linearity of every kind.

2 | HOW COULD THE CREATOR HAVE CREATED CORRUPT NATURE?

The first text is from the pen of the once infamous, now famous Marquis de Sade. The title, which also explains the scenery, is *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man*⁶. The priest is at the side of the dying man to administer the last sacraments. At the beginning of the conversation, he urges the man to repentance in «the fatal hour [...] wherein the veil of illusion is torn aside only to confront every deluded man with the cruel tally of his errors and vices». The dying man, however, does not give in. He replies to the priest that his only regret is that he has never taken enough pleasure, that he has not made the full use of those fac-

⁶ The quotes that follow are slightly adapted from the English translation at <https://eupraxisofia.files.wordpress.com/2008/01/marquis-de-sade-dialog-between-a-priest-and-a-dying-man.pdf>. The original text, *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribond* (1782), can be consulted at <http://www.sade-ecrivain.com/dialogue.html>.

ulties deemed criminal by the priest but perfectly straightforward by himself. His conviction rests on the belief that he was «created by Nature with the keenest appetites and the strongest of passions» – and that now, in his dying moments, he regretfully acknowledges that this Nature is omnipotent, yet he has himself at times resisted her... The priest seeks to convince him that these passions are but the «effects of [...] corrupt Nature», and that the “omnipotence” the dying man attributes to Nature, in reality belongs only to the Creator. The mere mention of God angers the dying man. In a rather lively way for a dying man, he argues against the existence of God with a fusillade of atheist proofs.

How could the Creator have created corrupt Nature? If he gave men freedom, he was ignorant, for he still needed to test them. Why did he not lead them to the good, if he knew in advance what the result of free choice would be? It does not help the priest to resort to the immensity and infinity of God’s “purposes” or to the incomprehensibility of the visible world. The dying man is a “*philosophe*” – someone who «sees things simply, and [...] does not go looking for a multiplicity of causes with which to obscure the effects». His maxim is clear: «It is impossible to believe what one does not understand [...] [A]nything which is beyond the limits of human reason is either illusion or idle fancy». Therefore, he can advise the priest: “Study physics and you will understand Nature better; learn to think clearly, cast out your preconceived ideas and you will have no need of this God of yours.” The *philosophe*’s worldview is deterministic – «everything in the world is necessary». This applies to all the sins, as well as to the so-called virtues. Although everything is connected through a causal nexus, the “first cause” possesses neither reason nor wisdom.

The God of the priest, too, is but «a machine which you have built to serve your own passions». The dying man, who will not entertain even the Deists’ diluted notion of a Supreme Being, is of course all the less moved by the priest’s appeal to world religions. In his eyes, they are all contemptible: «the idle fancies of Confucius» and «the nonsense of Brahma», «the Great Serpent of the Negro» and «the stars of the Peruvian», «the God of Moses’ armies» as well as all the sects of Muhammad and the Christian heresies (the self-negating multiplicity of religious phenomena is of course another topos of the Enlightenment polemics against religiosity). All the great founders of religions would have deserved the gallows. The most loathsome of them is Christianity and its founder, who was in fact «a seditious influence, an agitator, a bearer of false witness, a scoundrel, a lecher, a showman who performed crude tricks, a wicked and dangerous man». The dying man indignantly rejects the priest’s appeal to prophecies, miracles and martyrs as proofs of the truth of Christianity: it is not logical to take as proof things that

themselves need to be proved, and that are shown by skeptical reason to be not only unproveable, but either absurdly unhistorical (prophecy) and fictive (miracles) or all too understandable as the outcome of human stupidity (martyrdom). The priest's penultimate gambit, too, falls on deaf ears: must there not be «something after this life», or more precisely, are there not «a multitude of punishments for the man who has lived badly and an eternity of rewards for the man who has lived well»?

The dying man, however, believes in no hereafter whatsoever: the “system” he finds more satisfying than the priest's is «the system of nothingness», a nothingness that is «neither ghastly nor absolute» (it only refers to how everything that perishes is born again as something different: «Today a man, tomorrow a worm, the day after a fly – what is this if not eternal life?») and that therefore does not frighten him; rather, he sees it as «consoling and simple». All other concepts, in his understanding, are «the handiwork of pride», and only this one is a «product of reason». When the priest finally seeks to appeal to the dying man's conscience with the question whether even the greatest crimes should give rise to no fear, the latter replies (with a very mild argument, considering the other works of the Marquis): «Reason, yes reason alone must alert us to the fact that doing harm to others can never make us happy, and our hearts must make us feel that making others happy is the greatest joy which Nature grants us on this earth. All human morality is contained in these words: make others as happy as you yourself would be, and never serve them more ill than you would yourself be served».

Happiness, however, is in the final analysis tied to sexual pleasure, not to say identical with it – therefore, the dying man can in the end invert the opening position by addressing his confessor and inviting him to change his ways: «These, my dear fellow, are the only principles which we should follow. There is no need of religion or God to appreciate and act upon them: the sole requirement is a good heart. But, preacher, I feel my strength abandon me. Put aside your prejudices, be a man, be human, have no fear and no hope. Abandon your divinities and your creeds which have never served any purpose save to put a sword into the hand of man. The mere names of horrible gods and hideous faiths have caused more blood to be shed than all other wars and scourges on earth. Give up the idea of another world, for there is none. But do not turn your back on the pleasure of being happy yourself and of making others happy in this world. It is the only means Nature affords you of doubling and extending your existence. My dear fellow, sensuality was ever the dearest to me of all my possessions. All my life, I have bowed down before its idols and always wished to end my days in its arms. My time draws near. Six women more beautiful than sunlight are in the room

adjoining. I was keeping them all for this moment. Take your share of them and, pillowed on their bosoms, try to forget, as I do, the vain sophisms of superstition and the stupid errors of hypocrisy». The end is predictable – where the confessor failed, the dying man succeeds. Aphrodite is too powerful to be scorned, and destroys those who look down on her, as already Euripides was aware⁷: «The Dying Man rang, the women entered the room, and in their arms the priest became a man corrupted by Nature – and all because he had been unable to explain what he meant by Corrupted Nature».

3 | WHAT IS SINFUL IN THE CONJUGAL ACT

The other text is a jotting I found in an odd Latin book, bought for a song in a secondhand book shop: the writings of St Alphonsus Liguori, *Homo apostolicus instructus in sua vocatione ad audiendas confessiones sive praxis et instructio confessoriorum*, vol. 1 (Ratisbonae, 1842). The sheet of paper – clearly authored by some promising, studious confessor – was inserted between the pages of the chapter *De usu praecepto matrimonii*, in a very detailed discussion of what is allowed or sinful in the conjugal act; the holy mind of Alphonsus here dwells on the details of all kinds of petting, anal and oral sex⁸. The jotting speaks of the wife’s masturbation during the sexual act and after (the latter was said to be permitted “if the husband spills his seed before the spilling of the woman’s seed and pulls out of her”); in this case the wife may immediately after stimulate herself with moves or touches, until she too spills her seed «*si ante seminationem uxoris vir seminet isto se retahante, potest ... uxor immediate motibus aut tactibus se excutare, donec et ipsa seminet*» – this, of course, for the curious reason held by a long-lasting school of ancient physiology that the «spilling of the woman’s seed», that is, the orgasm, was essential to conception.

⁷. *Mighty and of high renown, among mortals and in heaven alike,
I am called the goddess Aphrodite.*

[...]

*I honor those who reverence my power,
but I lay low all those who think proud thoughts against me.*

(Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1–2; 5–6, quoted after David Kovacs’s translation at www.perseus.tufts.edu, line breaks added).

⁸. Actually, I should apologize to Alphonsus for this comparison: Unlike the pastors of today, whose talk of “relations”, “feelings” etc. often masks a suffocating morality hostile to any eroticism, his role in the history of theorizing sexuality was a rather positive one: He sought to justify sexual pleasure as morally permissible without regard to the aim of procreation, and was therefore in his time accused of moral “laxism” (cfr. R.E. Obach, *The Catholic Church on Marital Intercourse: From St. Paul to Pope John Paul II*, s. 1, Lexington Books, Minneapolis 2009, pp. 114 ff.).

On a misogynistic note, he adds that the confessor should be careful not to teach women sexual desire (as in Proverbs, «the mouth of the vulva is insatiable», *os vulvae etiam insatiabilis*), and he recalls the well-known story of Claudius's nymphomaniac wife Messalina. The most interesting and personal note, however, is the following: «A certain widow, as she once told me during confession, would very often, incessantly, as she was driven by desire, defile (stimulate) herself. In the end, she went mad, I was told – though I do not know whether from a guilty conscience, because she wished to better herself but could not due to her bad habit, or because of her lack of continence or for some other reason».

4 | EROS AS A MIGHTY COSMIC, DIVINE FORCE

Let the two short texts above help us define the topic. In the following, when I write of the *eros*, I will be writing about sexual desire that is directed toward sexual pleasure and that usually, but not necessarily, culminates in orgasm.

This is not a self-evident definition in philosophical thought on the *eros*. At least since Plato, a wide variety of desires and yearnings have been connected in a unified reflection on the *eros*⁹. Diotima's celebrated ladder leads us from bodies to Beauty in itself, from pleasures to Pleasure. Its premise – if we abstract the homoerotic framework of Athens – goes more or less as follows: *eros* does not manifest itself only in the erotic in the “vulgar” sense of the word. The sexual dimension of desire is something secondary, however important a role it may have in our lives. The fire that is lit and flares up at the sight of youth and beauty, conceals something far more profound than the wish for copulation, bodily entanglement and orgasm. The ancients understood the *eros* as a mighty cosmic, divine force that ties everything to the First, to the ultimate, unknown and unknowable Object of desire, to the promise of endless pleasure anticipated in the delights we experience every day. *Eros* is present in every move made by a living being in its desire for food and drink and ultimately for life and existence. It is a fairly short step from here to theological asceticism and eroticism, as shown by the history of Neo-Platonic and Christian Platonic erotology (which forms nearly all the history of the mystical understanding of love in the West)¹⁰.

⁹ This connection may stem from a pre-philosophical linguistic usage; on this, cfr. *Temeljni pojmi Platonove filozofije* (= Basic concepts of Plato's philosophy), s. v. “prijatelj”, in Platon, *Zbrana dela II*, Mehka, Celje 2004.

¹⁰ For a brief outline, cfr. C. Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2008; for a more detailed look, the classic work of A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (1930–36),

The assumption about the continuity of various erotes, interestingly, is also preserved where there seems to be no metaphysics left: psychoanalytic conjectures about infantile sexuality, e.g., merely reflect the same conviction in the context of the naturalistic worldview. *But is this linking of needs, desires and yearnings into a single “golden chain” even real?* The apparent identity of concepts in philosophy (and theology) always causes many misunderstandings – fruitful ones, perhaps, but ultimately paralyzing ones none the less. It is good to start out cautious. The possible path to the truth of Diotima’s premise is worth revisiting. Perhaps that connecting, erotic/synoptic move was true – but philosophically, it is certainly too quick (though who could fault a priestess for that?). In reflecting on the *eros* and sexual pleasure, therefore, we unfortunately cannot find much help in theories that immediately transpose the *eros* into a more general yearning, for in that case, the object of my thought and interest becomes something else. Perhaps that strategy makes perfect existential sense, but it does not tell us much about the meaning of the sexual *eros* and pleasure that burst into view from our two initial readings.

5 | THE SECRET OF EROS

The two bits of text above, then, help us delimit the subject of the discussion. But that is not all they are good for. At the same time as they illustrate my

University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, is still indispensable; here Nygren criticizes from a Protestant viewpoint the equation of *éros* and *agápe*, the eroticization of *agápe* in Christian mysticism, which begins already in the early patristic writings. In contemporary thought, we again find a similar paradigm in J.-L. Marion’s anti-Nygrenian book *Le Phénomène érotique*, Grasset, Paris 2003, where after all the detailed analyses of “the erotic phenomenon” we return to the speculative equation of *éros* and *agápe*, which actually makes good sense in the context of the Christian transformation of the erotic in Plato (something Nygren did not quite grasp), but which, in the phenomenological analysis of the *sexual* *eros* and pleasure, largely obscures the phenomenon itself: «The *eros* reveals itself as a free gift just like *agápe*, from which it does not differ in one way or the other. One must be very naïve or blind, or to put it better, ignorant of loving and erotic logic, not to see how *agápe* possesses and enjoys just as much as *éros* gives and surrenders. It is not a question of two loves, but of two names chosen among an infinity of others to think about and express the one and only love» (*Ivi*, p. 367). The intention, of course, is good: To thematize and affirm the *éros* afresh and to banish «the oblivion of erotic wisdom» (p. 12). We find similar aspirations in various inventive Christian discussions of the *eros*, from Vladimir Solovyov (*The Meaning of Love*) and Nikolay Berdyayev (*Eros i lichnost’*, *Eros and the person*) to the Slovene poet and thinker Edvard Kocbek (*Eros in seksus*, *Eros and sexus*). The problem, however, is that as a rule they thematize the *already ethicized eros*, *the eros that ties us to a person*; the analysis does not extend to pre-personal desires. This equation with *agápe* leaves little of the *eros*’s unwise exitability, and psychoanalysis can contentedly chew on the remainder. Fabrice Hadjadj avoids this quandary better in *La profondeur des sexes: Pour une mystique de la chair*, Points, Paris 2008.

topic, de Sade's dialogue and the unknown confessor's fragment also represent a background contrast to the hypostatic phenomenology of the *eros* that I wish to develop in the following. I am convinced, namely, that the two understandings of sexual *eros* hiding in the background of these texts are wrong: *not superficially, not in this or that respect, but profoundly so.*

What does a background contrast mean for phenomenology? Certainly not anything outside its reflection on the phenomenon, but precisely that to which it attains in its analysis of the phenomenal, although with a reflexive bending of the gaze. Something other that it embraces and understands, that it is capable of grasping and shedding light on, although perhaps precisely by fixation this otherness itself. In this case, "the phenomenal" is something radically opposite, almost contradictory. The texts seem as different as they could possibly be: One naively argues for atheist *philosophie* as a presumption of libertinism; the other is a rigorist note stemming from a peculiar historiographico-pastoral desire. One would be the herald of *eros* itself, styling itself as its sincere advocate; the other would censor it, block it, prevent it. And yet, the texts not only evoke the concreteness of two different sexual pleasures, orgiastic promiscuity and masturbation, but in all their difference, they are also structurally analogous in their way.

They are like inverting mirrors: suicide at the beginning, madness at the end; an entirely liberated libido at the end, a transgressive – at least to itself – *eros* at the beginning. And they mirror each other in a fundamental point: the key aporia of the *eros* lies in denying or postulating *something transcendent, that enters into my world from outside and crosses sexual desire.* Neither text wishes to do so merely to justify and glorify its own desire; *they wish to reach the other:* to emancipate or enslave, as appropriate, *the other's* sexuality. In other words: both texts start from the conviction, that *I know the truth of the other through my own experience of eros.* That the universal horizon for understanding the other opens up in my erotic *pathos.* In the first text, this understanding is "confirmed" by the priest's assent to the orgy (let us hope it ended without bloodshed, unlike de Sade's other orgies); in the other, by madness, which is the predictable consequence of the "sin" (the confessor does not even need to mention the death of the widow, as on the spiritual level, it is already encompassed by the act of "pollution").

In my view, this feature is not just a characteristic of these two texts; in its vulgarity it expresses a *general feature of Western reflection on eros.* If Lacan's "Kant with de Sade" is a combination that works out only in wishful thinking, not in proper hermeneutics, our Anonymous fits better into the phrase than Kant. Namely, both texts, regardless of how they are determined by history, model two conceptions of the lasting sexual desire that recurs, in an oscillating fashion, in

all sorts of “sexual revolutions”, regardless of how religious society actually is. The texts are a good point of departure for reflection because in their apparent extravagance, they are actually the condensed versions of two attitudes to *eros* that determine our lives. The first is undoubtedly victorious in the West today. De Sade’s text makes explicit the logic that hides behind every discourse of “sexual emancipation” and behind every practice of its emancipated nature: the foundational texts of the “sexual revolution” of the Sixties, from Wilhelm Reich onwards, only repeated it *ad nauseam* and enforced it “democratically” – even though, in the end, this supposed social emancipation has degenerated into a perfect handmaid to the capital that grows fat on profits from prostitution, the pornographic industry and swingers clubs. Yet even today, the other logic has a not inconsiderable reach. The problem of masturbation, of course, seems quite obsolete intellectually, a souvenir from the “dark Middle Ages” or a puritan bourgeois morality; not only is auto-eroticism today strenuously and “scientifically” promoted as healthy recreation, the ratings of Onan (whose Biblical sin of course has nothing to do with masturbation, but rather with disdain for the levirate) are falling even in the Churches; in philosophy it is mentioned only in bizarre contexts, e.g. in Onfray’s introduction to philosophy: «Why don’t you masturbate in the high-school yard?»¹¹. But the confessor’s jotting is valuable precisely for being so alien: on the one hand, by stressing the “sinfulness” of solitary, lonesome sexual pleasure, it distances the problem from ethics; on the other, in its attitude to the pleasure of strangers, the suspension of ethics (those who pleasure themselves usually do no-one any harm) paradoxically works for an entirely ethical problem: what attitude do I have and should I have to the pleasure of the other (the confessor, after all, is writing down his own position of censuring the other)?

Here, our Anonymous expresses the logic of domination over one’s own *eros* and that of others, which is not just a matter of decadent religion, Catholic and Puritan rigorism, or the emblematic excising of the clitoris in certain Islamic settings: just think of the socialist sexual morality, which could become very rigorous after the first years of wild erotic experimentation following the Russian Revolution (this rigidity is bizarrely echoed today in the words some neo-leftists use to indignantly reject capitalist sybaritism and exalt *la Loi*)... But even in “liberal” democracies there are recurrent calls for “moral order”: in 1987, for example, the State of Georgia criminalized oral and anal sex between husband and wife; the legal prosecution of “sexual harassment” in Western countries takes on ever more comical forms. We witness the spread of the universal suspicion of an undefined

¹¹ Cfr. M. Onfray, *Antimanuel de philosophie*, Bréal, Paris 2001, p. 50 (Onfray here of course refers to the Greek Cynics, who gleefully violated this public-decency taboo, too).

(and of course hypocritical and self-doubting) *moral majority*, the uncontrolled return of repressive sexual morality, schizophrenically and hypocritically coupled with a total permissiveness¹².

Yet when I deal philosophically with thought that is convinced it understands the *eros* of the other, it is not about analysis and criticism of the politics of the body, the social expression of that cognitive paradigm. When we think about sexuality, of course, we all too fast slip into politics. The question of what to do with our desire changes into the question of how to regulate the desire of the other, particularly when we are convinced that our horizon of understanding, experience and valuation of desire is universal. Still, *philosophically* it is crucial that we separate this political question from the philosophical reflection on the *eros*. For me, myself, to live the truth of the *eros*, it is not necessary for others to be living it. In the last instance, my wish to control the desire of others might mean that I am not as assured of my own truth as I would have liked.

Where, then, lies the problem of the *eros*, if we extract it from the social question and wish to glimpse it in its truth, philosophically, in radical self-reflection? De Sade's "erotic materialism" (as Alister McGrath calls it in his *Twilight of Atheism*)¹³ immediately directs us to the center. *Eros* enables us both to affirm the "system of nothingness" and to exit it, it allows our selfness to spring forth or to disappear. *Eros* is the performative of the most intimate worldview; our attitude to it is our metaphysics incarnate. The confessor's jotting, too, is just the incarnation of a poor metaphysics – the conceited mind that sets itself up as the knower of God's plan and will, and goes on from there to derive its own system of commandments and prohibitions, down to the concreteness of individual desire: casuistry seems like the last station reached by the train of onto-theology¹⁴.

A phenomenology that seeks to understand this mirror-like contradiction and reduce it to its roots, therefore, is not simply a search for some "third way" that would transcend the two metaphysical extremes by some kind of "mediation"; rather, it tries to *develop a hermeneutical matrix that thinks the truth of its own eros – and thus allows us, on the ontological level, to unmask the logic of understanding*

¹² On these processes, cfr. J.-C. Guillebaud's excellent book *The Tyranny of Pleasure*, Algora Publishing, New York 1999.

¹³ Cfr. A. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: the rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world*, Doubleday, New York 2004.

¹⁴ In this regard, similarly to ontotheology, it offers very different figures as argumentatively obvious, e.g. everything from the conviction that "the world is already too full of people", as the Church Fathers taught, to the struggle for larger families and "pro-life" ideologies, which are historically recent and stem largely from the nationalisms of the 19th and early 20th century. Cfr. Guillebaud, *From the Plan for Immortality to Demographic Fears*, in Id., *The Tyranny of Pleasure*, pp. 233–253.

of eroticism – the logic that lies hidden in its antithetically/symmetrically mistaken conceptualizations.

The secret of the *eros* is precisely that it is prior to his own forms, that it is essentially ambivalent and unclear. It is splendid, beautiful, it brings and promises pleasure, life itself brimming over – and at the same time, it is the possibility of total loss, unhappiness, emptiness, missing the mark. The life of almost every one of us can probably serve as proof: life with its ineradicably metaphysical character.

6 | THE EROS WRITES HISTORY, BUT IT DOES SO AS SOMETHING PREHISTORICAL

Despite its pretense to be phenomenological, the analysis of the phenomenality of the *eros* that I will briefly present does not fit into traditional phenomenology to the extent that the latter, as the thematization of the *logos* of that which appears or presents itself, sought to be a *science* (or the foundation for one). My first thesis, namely, reads: *We cannot speak of the eros in a scientific way*¹⁵. I know that these words make me seem to bury my head in the sand like an ostrich. Is it not precisely modern physiology, endocrinology, and neurology that tells us the most about sexuality and sexual desire¹⁶? Do we not know at least the main contours of the material mechanism of desire itself, its rootedness in our body, which we can subject to scientific methodology as our object of study? Phenomenologically speaking, we first have to rid ourselves of this prejudice, of all its traces and especially its roots. If psychoanalysis had any merit, it lay in at least briefly transcending the naive scientific paradigm that had previously dominated the study of man – and holds dominion again today.

The question is whether we can ever root it out, however cogent our arguments. It is not just that “science does not think”, in Heidegger’s pithy phrase, but something more primal, more *erotic*: before any “scientifically objective” knowledge, we have many ideas in mind as to what sexuality might be as a subject of our thought, many pre-cognitive metaphors and convictions that we do not *want* to get rid of. From the oldest and the hardest to root out – say: sexuality is a matter of the body, a function of our material nature and biological constitution, the *eros* is a matter of our “animal nature” (supposedly separate from our reason) – to the

¹⁵ For my understanding of the scientific project, see *Razbitje. Sedem radikalnih esejev*, Beletrina, Ljubljana 2009, pp. 197–274.

¹⁶ Cfr. B.S. Low, *Biological Bases of Sex Differences*, in F. Malti-Douglas (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender. Men and Women in the World’s Cultures*, Macmillan, New York 2003, vol. I, pp. 27–33 (with further bibliographical sources).

more modern myths, including the psychoanalytic ones – such as the conviction that sexuality is somewhere at the back of our mind as an incognito of the unconscious, or that there is a clear divide in our being between our biological reality (sex) and all the socially conditioned models and patterns of behavior and feeling we are trained in by civilization (gender) – and that sexuality emerges precisely in this cleft (ontologically understood in advance). I do not know how far one gets by entreaties in such cases, where desire suspends thought, but I do nonetheless entreat the reader to forget for a few moments this whole stew of preconceptions.

The quoted texts might, by their very difference, help the reader towards such a prejudice-free self-reflective turn (if the reader is not himself capable of becoming directly aware of the total subjectivity of desire). It takes no particular perspicacity to see how de Sade's fascination with "physics" stems from the erotic, and not the other way around. The same goes for the naive certainty of the confessor and his teacher, who drag physiology and even theology into the (anti) erotic, even though they understand it as its foundation. Regardless of the pretensions to objectivity or the rhetoric of persuading the other, each text is merely a statement in which the ineffable center realizes itself: the center of an idea that coagulates out of some understanding of the *eros*. Desire *knows itself* (feels, perceives, understands itself – which metaphor is appropriate here? And which one is merely a metaphor?) as desire. The *eros* is the own inner "intelligibility", the self-willed, pre-logos logic that can turn into its contradiction: the self-understanding and self-feeling of the *eros* as the dim translucence of the organic, the ungraspable effectiveness of the biological, is merely the culturally mediated effect of the "strategy" of erotic logicity. *Just as every expressed desire is already logicized, every logos is already erotic* (including the logos of this essay, no doubt – and let this admission be the first in a series of radical disagreements with the premises of psychoanalysis, which, for all its stress on how culture is rooted in drives, never cared to hold up the mirror of the erotic to its *own* activities...).

The *eros* is a privileged topic of thought not only due to its influence on life, but also because it hides behind my thought. I am not thinking only of the simple fact that we see, conceive and express the world a little differently after a wild night than after a longer or shorter abstinence, when deprived of pleasure or when sated, when our experiencing revolves around artificially created sexual needs and imposed "standards": the very thematization of *anything* – to repeat, this of course includes the philosophical treatment of the *eros* – is, as the act of a sexual being, already pre-subjectively determined by the fundamental erotic movement in the background of thought. *Every thought of an ensixed being in this world is wholly erotic*. When I think – and also when I think about the *eros* however much I may

strive for “objectivity” – I think sexually, I think erotically. I can never turn the *eros* into my object. The *eros* is always behind one’s back, as our two texts illustrate. Mechanistic materialism or moral theology, stylized as the knowing of “causes” without regard to the person and their concrete suffering, their passion, pleasure, pain and yearning; both these “sciences” spring up already in the prism of desire, and their supposed purity inscribes itself in the erotic horizon.

The considerable banality of the two above writings is no counter-argument to this. The same, namely, applies to quite sophisticated social science, historiography and scientific reflection on the genealogy of sexuality. This is my second heretical claim. So far, we have been circling around texts that have arisen in history. From my descriptions, the *eros* itself might seem an eminently historical phenomenon; moreover, we might well think that – as the Greek thinker Stelios Ramfos has written in his original book *Philosophical and Divine Eros* – «only the *eros* has the extraordinary privilege to transcend necessity and electrify existence, which is then felt in its materiality as the extremely spiritual: *the eros writes history*»¹⁷. And yet, here I am concerned with something more anterior yet.

The *eros* is undoubtedly historical in its forms; one might even claim that it is the writer of history – but I wish to show that all these forms presuppose unchanging structures. *The eros writes history, but it does so as something prehistorical*. From this perspective, the tons of contemporary books on the history of sexuality in “neutral” style only represent learned strolls along objectivities held together by the author’s prior understanding of the *eros*: these strolls emerge from permutations of a priori structures that might form the subject of ahistorical and pre-historical philosophical studies. In short, in their conceptualizations of thought, all histories of the *eros* stem from the only deep empirical evidence they can have: the authors’ *experience of their own eros*.

7 | EROS PRECEDES COSMOS

If a method for grasping sexual desire is to be strictly philosophical, it must take as its points of departure the hypostatic turn in ontology and the phenomenology of the emergence of the *ethos* in ethics and concretise them.

For when I see that the world in its worldliness is always mediated by hyposta-

¹⁷. S. Ramfos, *Philosophos kai theios éros. Apò tò Sympósio tou Plátonos stoùs Hýmnon theíon eróton tou hagiou Symeón tò epiklen Néou Theológou*, Tenos, Athens 1989, p. 9.

sis, with my hypostasis as its only being¹⁸, I cannot understand the *eros* as any kind of trace of the cosmos in myself, as my own realization of the cosmological (ontological, ontotheological, scientific...) paradigm. *Diotima's ladder is broken in the solitude of my-ness.*

A general theory of the *eros* is impossible precisely because the *eros* is so closely connected with hypostatic being. *Eros precedes cosmos*, just as it precedes history. It is the simmering, the eruption – or the tranquil homeostasis – of my being, the only being. The meaning of the *eros* is therefore as unclear as the meaning of being; philosophical thought can only see the structure of this inconceivability. And yet, it is also narrower than being, and in the case of *eros*, therefore, thought has the privilege of mytho-logic: into the slit between the pure being of hypostasis and the *eros*, between these two inconceivabilities, a tale must be inscribed, a

¹⁸ Cfr. Kocijančič, *Razbitje*, pp. 33ss. Here I must briefly explain my peculiar understanding of the concept «hypostasis» (which has of course a rich and complex history in the philosophical and theological thought – history that I am aware of). Hypostasis is not “something that has been hypostatized” and is therefore not real, but – on the contrary – it is my experienced reality itself. I am what I am. This concreteness I call “hypostasis”. *And that I am what I am means at the same time that I am everything.* This is not the question – I hope – of solipsistic sophism or of some frivolous tautological “axiom”. Hypostasis finds its fulfillment in the awareness of its own *totality*. This is a matter of obviousness that I experience in the feeling of my radical finitude. *If I am not, then nothing else is going to be. When I was not, nothing was. If I had not been, there would have been nothing. What exists, exists only through the contact with me.* When I stumble across this limit of groundless groundlessness from which I originate and in which I find my end, I become aware of myself as the whole world, the “inner” and the “outer”, of myself as the self-world. This insight can – of this I am sure – in its radicalness surpass the Greek – or Helenomorphic – radical enlightenment and also various forms of transcendentalism that could be found in classical idealism or in its phenomenological transformations that always tend to *generalize* hypostasis. Hypostasis has got *in itself, in being as being, the relation to being as such*. Even more radically: the hypostasis is being as being (and I ask you to take away any kind of generality from this statement...). Being itself does not disclose itself to the hypostasis; it discloses itself to itself. To understand oneself by recognizing this relationship as the relationship towards one's own being (and by that to understand oneself as “some being”, although excelling in its ontological structure) is already to forget this originary “evidence”. To step into the realm of *common sense*. The self that is discovering its own endlessness at the same time experiences its radical limitation – and in the limited endlessness it experiences its radical finitude. The world is all that I experience from the moment of my emergence from nothingness. And it is all that I shall experience, all that I could experience. The world is all possibilities that are hidden in every moment when I gather all views and attitudes, all thoughts, all traditions (accepted and rejected, scientific and unscientific). *All this remains the contents of myself.* The endless contents that is defined by the form with its own *esse* – and as a form it trembles because of the non-apprehension of its own formation. As the hypostasis, as being of the totality “I am” unutterable and unknowable. Any kind of reflective definitions push my mystery into the realm of beings. The other side of this reality is the radical transformation of the notion of subject. *The hypostasis is not a subject in modern sense of the word.* A subject is always connected with knowledge, thought, consciousness, self-awareness. The hypostasis is the bare *esse* though which and in which everything that is exists. The objectivity in its own thusness and the subjectivity of the subject demand passivity which surpasses the opposition to the activity. I am given to myself in my own being as the subject – thinking, creative subject that is aware of itself. However, I am *given* to myself. *Esse* of the “subject” itself is hypostatic, which means that it is passive through emergence of the objectivity in the hypostasis from the other of its own – and only – being.

mythos, one we already know does not correspond to reality, but is nevertheless essential, in a special way, to the extent we want to understand ourselves.

And therefore, my desire too is ontologically *the only one*, regardless of what mytho-logic I indulge in myself or share with others. Erotology is radical differentiation of fundamental *mores* (raz-nravje). I can neither describe nor understand libidinal events from the outside. I have to recognize my own solitude and the singular occurrence of the erotic experiment – and the singleness of the mythologizing thought that seeks to shed light on it. To the other, my desire is always incomprehensible, silly, crazy (this is another reason why I write so harshly about de Sade and the confessor...). To the stranger's gaze, which fixates me as an object of some kind, it is always excessive – and it is excessive too in my own view, as far as it fixates me as a kind of object. The objectification of desire has nothing in common with its very reality. It is always only I myself that knows (or fail to know) my desire. Only I know how it pulsates before it becomes an object and before I become an object for myself. The form of the *eros* is connected with the image of reality behind my thought, which I can only internalize if I renounce its essence.

The quandaries do not end there. True, beneath our skins we are all blood-stained – and yet the color of our blood may vary. But it is also true that the color of our blood *changes*.

8 | WHO AM I IN RELATION TO MY DESIRE?

What are we left with, then? Little – and everything. A desiring “body” in time. Mine, ever mine. The ebb and tide of erotic desire. My body, which is not in the least corporeal. A soul-body. A desiring “body” that is the living metaphor of myself in my concreteness. A desiring body that is nothing like an object, as it does not inscribe itself into any already understood scientific or historical context but inscribes everything into itself. Only its self-contemplation makes possible the kind of understanding of its be(lov)ing that opens our selves up to the radical diversification of the erotic – and to its levelling. Faced with the differences and peculiarities of *erotes*, philosophical thought *must trace the conditions for the constitution of their difference, which concretely means: the possible contradictory diversification within the one and only eros*.

We arrive at this pursuit through the question: *Who am I in relation to my desire?*

But to this question, for better or worse, we can never have an unambiguous or permanent answer.

1) *First approach*: I desire. I desire sexual pleasure. The very desire gives it, but it demands more. It gives it as a disquiet that wants fulfilment. Desire takes place without me. Beyond the I. And yet in the perfect transparency of feeling. Due to the pleasure that awaits me, I desire. And I already take pleasure in the desire, although it also hurts. Desire never eludes me into the unknown. It is never unconscious, though fond of its twilight. It moves the field of consciousness in *its own* light. It may be a matter of imagination, of fantasy images, of the contemplation of images or of an actual “bodily” ecstasy. In any case, it is not that the subject out of its inner univocity passively experiences this or that so that the layers of suppressed animality or corporeality are awakened in the mental, spiritual self; it is always a question of the *ontological event of establishing a different world*: a world that is different in the suchness of its *being*.

The *eros* is most closely tied to reality. It is woven together with it. It is given to us in such a way that, in its simultaneous yieldedness and submission, it configures the different images of the real. If the inner core of my-self becomes a desire, if I hand over my own “to be” to the *eros* without reflexively folding it, then being itself becomes attractive – pulls me into it – as being without taboos, outside every commandment. *Every being of myself in nearness of myself, every “interior” appears as something non-existent*. But at the same time that different being of the world that is established by the promise, by the attractiveness of vitality and fullness, pleasure and loss of self, already in the moment it is established already creates a distance to the orgiastic/ecstatic fusion realized in the outflow of desire. It becomes a void. An anguish. A thirst. A wish for this “more” and a resistance to it. For its life and for maintaining its intensity, the unconditional giving in to the *eros* demands as its food the hypostasis itself, its ontological dignity. The *eros*, twin of pain, absorbs the hypostasis into itself. From a being of totality for itself, the hypostasis becomes a flickering *thing*.

The *eros*, namely, is given to me in the same way as the world as a whole, and yet its givenness is peculiar. It is neither the givenness of an object, a body that comes toward me or crashes into me, nor is it the perfect spontaneity of an act for no reason; rather, it has its place in *the intermediacy between the reality of the object and myself*. Out of the other of my being, it gives itself to me as that which is and is not mine, that which is to some extent within my power, yet at the same time utterly eludes it. In the I-world, in the hypostatic totality, there takes place a *páthos*, a woundedness with something partial: at the exterior, but at the same time from an interior that is deeper than me. The *páthos* can subvert the conception of reality, down to its very deepest layers – but only if I “assent” to it (and that is of course the difference into which every ascesis, be it philosophical or

religious, drives its wedge). What goes on is here, but it is not separate from me. I am involved in it in a strange way.

This passivity that has not yet become an (ethically evaluated) “passion” is not – to stress this again – the violence of affect in one or another of the instinctual dimensions of man, in the lasting, predictable coordinates of the world (although we *can* always continue to understand ourselves that way); rather, it is a *change in the suchness of the world itself*. The brittleness of being as a whole – my unique being – opens into a gap, a center of attraction within being. Consciousness, “I”, merely trembles with the reverberations of this event, which is far too profound for it, and yet it participates in them – and is nowhere else but there. This event – the metanarrative of the I/world itself in its woundedness with the object of desire – can only be described analogically, with metaphors taken from the world of objects and emotional experience. The *páthos* of being wounded by the *eros* is outside every causality. And yet: If I cannot think about it by analogy with passivity in the experiencing of “objective” reality, it also is not simply a matter of subjectivity. *In erotic passivity the ontological structure of hypostatic experience is turned on its head.*

In the geography of the common world, of common sense, in the life-space where the hypostasis is the engendered I among I's and the body is a sexual body among bodies – here, *to be becomes to have*. The hypostasis, as the being of the totality, disappears only for itself, while its basic sense of self asserts itself even more aggressively. To sexual pleasure in itself, everything is *mine*. Pleasure forces its (onto)logic on me. Its foundation is the total “egoism” that we have already encountered in reflecting on the birth of the ethos¹⁹. I see what belongs to others as something of mine. I usurp it in my imagination or in reality. Which means that *everything is present as a possible object of my enjoyment*. The being of everything is to be consumed in my enjoyment. Sexual desire, paradoxically, is not something “too sensual”, but “too spiritual”, that which prevents sensuality from being at all.

The problem of the *eros*, therefore, lies not in being the victory of body over reason or of the unconscious over consciousness, but in being *in itself radically unethical*. In other words: sexual desire is always radically and incurably *impersonal*. To desire, the concreteness of the erotic object is always a moment in an unending series. Temporary erotic fixations do not disprove this; they confirm it. Impersonality is seen in the unimportance of the face, in its replaceability (which is why de Sade's girls, waiting for the dying man in the room next door, have no faces – what matters is that there are six of them, and seven would have been better yet).

19. Cfr. Kocijančič, *Razbitje*, chapter 2.

But it is not just about promiscuity, a prostituting exchange or its pornographic iconography, the effacement of the face by a mask.

We need not strain with the senses awake to see this. We can see it just fine even in sleep. *Dreams, to the extent we can access them, reveal the eroticism of our naked "I am": In their transhistorical amorality, I step not only into a world without prohibitions, I experience a descent into my pure ontology. The amorality of dreams is a regression into the truth of being.* In erotic dreams, the faces sometimes fade into each other. It is not, I repeat, about corporeality. Sex in dreams is indeed sometimes "ideal" in the sense that the intensity of the enjoyment is freed of substantiality, of the revolt of the flesh, without in any sense losing its radical materiality. In dream sex, an imaginative synthesis of substantiality and insubstantiality, an incorporeal ecstasy, actualizes itself into a place before prohibition: into the primeval – peculiarly essential – space of irresponsibility.

Every real sexuality that is acted out "orgiastically" – whether in history, reality or virtual representation – is but a poor replica of this dreaming. And yet, it is precisely in the geography of the *common world*, the world of common sense and shared experience, that my desire, which turns the other into myself and makes everything an object of my enjoyment, runs into resistance. It is confronted by another desire. Another uniqueness. Another – one and only – hypostasis. The *eros*, therefore, is also always frustrated. Thwarted. In the common, "historical" world, enmeshed in social taboos and regulations, it is always dangerous to desire. My *eros* does not see *and cannot see* others as anything but an obstacle. A limit to the expansion of its own being. In this world, therefore, the *eros* is always violent – and fortunately repressed. Its release is not an orgy that leaves everyone blissfully worn out, but a rape camp. *The eros is the secret of violence against others* (therefore, I am not convinced that de Sade's orgy ended without bloodshed – nor that the widow's madness was no fault of the confessor's...)

2) *Second approach*: The pure reflexivity of reflection separates itself from desire. To put it better: it is in this reflection that it springs up. Does desire thereby *split itself in two*? Certainly, it is only with the springing up of selfhood as desire's other that *passions qua passions* appear. *Páthe, passionnes*. But it is just this that also reveals the ambivalence of pure *eros*. As a being that is entirely mine, the only being, it is not my possession, but it is a "given" in its identity with myself, and it is also the irruption of the erotic force, the preservation of this "reflexivity" with its lack of direction, that which constantly directs me to the source of desire and being itself. It is an address to which I can only respond by asserting "myself" through the annihilation of desire or by annihilating myself in desire's self-assertion. The erotic gives rise to no ethics – and yet, erotic experience itself faces me

with the possibility of reinforcing my own selfhood, which is separate from desire. *The erotic gives rise to the possibility of selfhood.* In its presence, a fissure eats into me: a crack that makes ethos possible.

Erotic “energy” (like objectivity or its logicity that transcends me) irrupts from that “place” before being that transcends the identity of the subject and the totality of existence in its suchness. And yet the fact that this energy enters me from elsewhere, from before me, does not make the *eros* metaontological, as it is still essentially folded in its experiential actuality, in accordance with the original tendency of my hypostasis. Despite the otherness of its origin, the *eros* exists in the way of my – one and only – being. But the cut is not final. Had there not been this “reflexivity” apart from desire, desire would not have noticed itself. It would not have become visible. Desire manifests itself in its separation from this “reflexivity”. This does not mean that the “self” was before or behind desire. *The eros is the secret of violence against oneself.* But this violence is not something alien. It is only through it that the hypostasis can become aware of what it deep down is; by reining in the *eros*, it intensifies itself.

9 | THE ANSWER DOES NOT LIE WITHIN MY POWER

The first and second approach differ; they may become entirely opposite, but to philosophical thought, neither is real. They are both possible and always actual again. The *eros*, in its radical my-ness, always oscillates between the one and the other in each moment. This fourfoldness –crossedness, cruciformity – of a double negation and a double affirmation, which no *secundum quod* can soften, circles around an empty space, and is therefore the frame for thought of sexual desire. All the images of the *eros* in history are oscillations traced by a seismograph in the ever singular being, the hypostasis. If we wish to determine the content of the *eros* positively, we can only do so with the metaphor of *original freedom before the emergence of freedom.* This “freedom” is not a decision based on some reason; it lacks the seal of clear rationality, but it is the oscillating, thoroughly uncertain ec-stasis out of the abyss before the incomprehensible. We have met this figure before. But as the figure of the *eros*, it becomes radically concrete, “made flesh”.

With the *eros*, the burden of this trepidation shows us that “something once was wrong” (a mythology that is concretized in the tale of the pre-historical fall of the soul) or that “something is wrong now” (a mythology of sexual repression and the necessity of liberation). In either case there is nothing we can grasp philosophically. Incomprehensible desire is the serial possibility of its redirection, its

transformation – or of the erasure of selfhood. The transcendentalism of the *eros* does not afford us a grasp of the other, but rather the insight that we lack this grasp. The structure thus established is not an underlying thing that provides strong foundations, but rather a mental motion capture in the ever-repeating *kairos* before the slip into radical hetero-onticity. At this point, on a more abstract level, the vital question we started with reappears: What direction should I take? How should I live erotically in accordance with that which is apparent to my thought? Phenomenologically, it is clear that I do not know the answer. *That it does not lie within my power.*

10 | TRANSGRESSIVENESS

Still, we cannot get out of understanding the direction of the *actualization* of the *eros*. Herein lies the fundamental paradox of our eroticism. We always act without knowing. We enjoy without being sure if it is good or bad. What, then, is the nature of this understanding of direction in directionlessness? It is certainly always *transgressive*. Do I want this? What if I wanted that as well? What if I went beyond that? This transgressiveness does not denote the exterior of the Law, but the chasm between knowledge and desire. The actualization of the *eros* even in perfect solitude never truly “knows” which direction is the right one or not, truly good or not, real or not. What is it that *truly* brings pleasure? True, full pleasure? What is truly mine? What is only the trace left in me by society? Can I deconstruct what is mine? Or that which is merely social? What if those two are one? All these questions are too weak for the reality of desire. Therefore, philosophical reflection on the “transcendental” framework of the constitution of the *eros* means neither legitimation of whatever desire and enjoyment, nor justification of its rationally evident subjection to the Law. But the reflection is not exhausted with this skepticism. The place of the disappearing selfhood between its disappearance and its rise through self-distancing from the *eros* in regard of the Other shows us at the same time *the (a)theological topos of every ethics of desire*: a direction from elsewhere that strides into directionlessness.

Does this mean that we have to end the theological-metaphysical dispute before we can deal with the erotic? Not necessarily, perhaps it is the other way around: *Due to the meta-ontological structure of the hypostasis, philosophical discourse on the eros remains eminently theological, although it strives to be nakedly philosophical.* Every understanding of the *eros* is already a fundamentally metaphysical thesis, an inscription of the Other into being. Now, I hope, it is becoming clear

why I chose to delimit the philosophical reflection on sexual desire with two (a) theological texts exhibiting a(nti)theology and bad theology. If the *eros* becomes the suchness of being in the drama of selfhood, which could lead to my being deluged so that I lose my speech and my freedom, the fact of this drama nevertheless affirms the selfhood in its original openness to the Other of being. In its struggle with the *eros*, the selfhood established through its ability to limit the *eros*, control and redirect it, always constitutes itself – as an act of primal ethos – with regard to something pre-ontological and meta-ontological. *The theological nature of the erotic stems from the meta-ontological structure of the erotic drama itself.*

The suchness of the *eros* boils up from its simultaneous pre-giveness and reversibility. If *sexus* derives from *secare* – to break apart, to split – the *eros* is at the same time a sign of separateness and a series of attempts to connect. But connect to what? As we have seen, the *eros* in itself is without direction. Erratic. It does not know what its direction is, even when it does know with all the clarity of experience – and not only when it loses itself in the delusions of its own “gender identity” that are so popular today. I can eroticize anything, but my power does not extend to eroticization itself. I do not know if I am right even when I form it in culture and take over the patterns of its direction: a self-aware desire is condemned to radical fragility precisely because in its becoming aware of itself, it is separated from ethical knowing. The two texts – de Sade’s and that of the anonymous shepherd of souls – are symptomatic precisely in the hurry with which they pretend to a knowledge that directs the *eros*. Hypostatic phenomenology must forget this hurry.

11 | AS HYPOSTASIS I AM ENTIRELY NONSEXUAL

But let us continue the speculation, even though it, too, may seem hurried in its outlined features.

Why is the *eros* directionless in the ethical sense? Because my fundamental – essential – constitution eludes the dichotomy (or trichotomy, tetrachotomy – let us not forget that already on the biological level, sexuateness eludes the logic of the predominant binary opposition²⁰) that is inscribed in the body, and is – metaphorically speaking – the relationship between all and nothing.

To the extent that, as a mortal being, I am the being of the totality, I am al-

²⁰ Cfr. the rabbinical struggle with the question of how to fold hermaphrodites into the binary biblical logic, as analysed by S. Greenberg in *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2004, pp. 188f.

ready in a relationship with the Other of being. *My deepest “identity” is nonsexual.* The hypostasis has no gender, because in this primeval deep it is not a part, but it is the *being* of the totality in its relation to its other. *Whoever understands himself in his own utmost depth as someone determined by sexual desire, in fact reveals that he does not think.* That is: he does not think about himself as real, as delimited by the Other of being, as hypostasis. He does not think about himself in his solitude, in his nakedness without anything else. *In this solitude without duality one sees the primal truth of a desire torn apart from sex.*

Where do we see this? Is this merely a new dogmatic claim? No, if we are not avoiding the obvious, we *have to see it*. And what is obvious here is death. In other words: *what is obvious is the Other of being*, whom I have not already in beforehand locked into the “system of nothingness” (de Sade) or transposed into the predictable machinery of reward and punishment (Anonymous), but who appears to me as a total mystery. In reflecting on the *eros*, too, philosophy has to be reflection on death thus (not) understood. In becoming aware of our own mortality or in the *kairos* of becoming aware of our own springing from nothing, that is, in the moment when the epiphany of the totality as the content of hypostatic being takes place, there also takes place an *epiphany of completeness that annihilates gender*. Gender, namely, is a matter of being-just-a-part, a matter of dividedness; we cannot hide from this fact in the modern metamorphoses of gender, however wacky. *As hypostasis I am entirely nonsexual*, because I contemplate myself in my uniqueness. Without duality.

My engenderedness, as such, is a matter of secondary givenness, which is given essence-free to me – as the eroticized me/world in its liminal point, the body – from out of my own Origin. In this twist we can see that whereas the “I” is – I am – filled with sexual desire, the hypostasis is not. Already on the level of reflexive consciousness as transparency to the hypostasis, to my – one and only – being, deep down I have no sex²¹. *Sexuality, en-gendered desire, is only given to me together with a body/feeling that is utterly subjectivized and embedded in social relations, whereas I am – without essence, in the naked eideticity of unreal things – rendered unto myself in en-hypostatization.* When I spring from the Other of being, I myself - as Being - en-hypostatize my sexuality (this eidetic-objective dimension

²¹ Here we can see the relevance of the Greek Fathers’ thoughts on a “double creation” (in which a body with sexual difference only came about after the fall of the first parents of humanity – this was supposedly hinted at in the report of Genesis that these first parents put on “coats of skins”): sniffing at the mythological nature of this discourse only points to our inability to understand that one can *only* speak of such events in a mythologizing way. This was known not only to the Fathers, but also already to the Greeks (cfr. Plato’s “reincarnation” myths) and the Jews (cfr. the asexuality of a godlike “idea, or a genus, or a seal” in human beings in the thought of Philo of Alexandria, e.g. in *De Opificio mundi?* 134).

of sexuality has of course become quite epiphanous in genetics, which cannot however know anything about sexual desire, let alone about desire in general).

The truth, which is death, gives the lie to all those strategies of sexual desire that would set themselves up as something fundamental. This holds both on the “objective” level – sexuality as a power that gives rise to other beings in the succession of generations, always casts merely mortal beings into a terrifying entropy that ultimately leads to the cosmic annihilation of any form – as on the level of subjectivity: the Dionysiac ecstasy protects me, like a narcotic, from the actuality of my exposure before the Other. But this protection can itself become a danger.

For this reason, traditional ethics was well aware why it always called the safety fuse against the turbulence of the *eros* an “awareness of (our own) death” – *mnéme thanátou*. It is not simply about soothing, controlling, intimidating and repressing the violent, impersonal and ruthless *eros* on the reflective level due to belief in and anticipation of some “future punishment” for “prohibited sexual pleasure”, but about something that can be experienced in the present: What happens through the reminder of death is not that alien Law shoves itself into our own flesh, but rather that just the naked reminder of death, apart from any imaginative representation, becomes the place of the asexual *integration* of the hypostasis. This integration is a mirror, a point of reflection shining with both the depravity and the purity of desire, which is radically nonsexual. *Memento mori* is the victory over desire, the victory of Desire itself – the victory over desire, whose victory over us is paradoxically precisely in the “sting of death” (let us eat, drink and have sex, for tomorrow we shall die, to paraphrase Paul the Apostle), *which actually means forgetting my death*.

The fundamental problem with sexuality, then, does not stem from our psychological, cultural, civilizational or biological traumas, but from the ontological Ur-divide and the incomprehensible story in its background; it swirls around the secret of death and the fundamental questions of appearance and (absolute) reality that it raises. The psychic traumatism in whose origins we so often find sexual problems, are basically always problems of the soul’s total immersion in *dóxa* and consequent existential disorientation. The rejection of one’s own engenderedness (e.g. by self-identification as homoerotic or transsexual) is deep down an ontological problem of ingratitude: of a non-eucharistic attitude to the givenness of being out of its Other, of an ungrateful desire that is prior to every “nature and culture”.

This desire, which is too profound for anyone to have the right to condemn it, though we must shed merciless light on its metaphysical genesis, stems from the hypostasis’s inability – an inability that is at the same time an unwilling more primal than “will” – to open up to the ultimate Reality that it deep down finds evident;

Paul's lucid reconstruction of the origin of homoerotic practices at the beginning of Romans agrees (in the linguistic code of religion) perfectly with this thought. The dilemmas of sexuality do not stem from the alien Law incising itself into the flesh and hurting it until it suddenly heals itself by expelling the Law or reconciling itself to it, but from something prior. Sexuality is tied to the mystery of my *presubjective responsibility for the essential constitution of the life-world*: the world of *dóxa*, the world of the mysterious spell. Of an image that is here to perish.

12 | STRONG AS DEATH

But let us also consider the imperishable. How does the nonsexual hypostasis come to be in a “desiring” relationship with the Other of its being? Not to say: how come that it has to be in this relationship? And what connection does this have with the *eros*? Does it not follow from the reflection so far that such a relationship is impossible? Based on the analysis of the phenomenality of the *eros*, a speculative answer that forsakes the phenomenal imposes itself: if sexuateness is a matter of sex, polarity, divides, then the difference between the hypostasis and the I/world – the difference, that is, that generates “ontological difference”²² – is erotic only in an extremely analogical transposition of the concept of *eros*, *which no longer has anything in common with sexuality (as commonly understood)*.

Whence, then, comes its symbolic power that is confirmed again and again in the history of mysticism in various spiritual traditions? We have seen that *Thanatos* concerns the totality in its being. It concerns my “I am”, which, in relation to death, reveals itself in its sexlessness precisely as the being of the totality. The *eros* – “strong as death”, as the Song of Songs puts it, the spiritual *eros* – deserves its name only if it has passed through the gates of anticipated annihilation, that is, to the extent that it participates in the impossible. If my sexual *eros* is still a matter of my partiality, it is narrower and weaker than death. But if it becomes total, it becomes liberated precisely in its radical finitization, as a true metaphor of a relationship with Life. *When we “love” the origin and the end of ourselves and of everything – the Other of being, the ab-solute, that, which is free of all determinations – more than everything, there is no trace of sex in this eros, and yet on the other hand it contains everything – including that which fueled the sexual desire.*

In the privileged moments of existence – existence before death, existence in truth – we experience our – one and only – being as asexual, as we open ourselves

²² Cfr. Kocijančič, *Razbitje*, pp. 40ss.

up to the unreality of supposed reality. At the same time, these are not moments of sexual impotence, weakness or emptiness. In these moments, we as hypostases bear the entirety of existence, its fullness. It is a question of our *profound(est)* reality, which shines through into our soul – and *is* our soul. And of course, a question of an entirely *different* pleasure that corresponds to radical desire. In the anaphoric movement, we bring the whole – including our own entire erotic dimension – and place it before the other of our own being. The privileged moments of which I speak are therefore beyond the sexually enchanted veil of *dóxa*.

To put it metaphorically: *Bernini's Theresa takes a little too much pleasure, and infinitely too little*. In these moments, namely, the only duality that “analogically” eroticizes the pure hypostasis is the radical – at once radically asymmetric and therefore infinitesimally dwindling – duality between it and its Origin/End. To be slightly more concrete: The eroticism of the Song of Songs is not the analogical transposition of sexual eroticism, but first places the eroticism of being and of the apophatic Origin of everything on an entirely nonsexual level – thus showing that *totality is merely a part*. Here we encounter an *eros* that is absolute. *The hypostasis – being toward the apophatic Nothing*. The erotic is the dwindling weak metaphor of the mystical, and not the other way around. This heralds a hope that is realized in the hypostatic turn of the hypostasis itself: the dwindling totality of everything is entangled in the “transsexual” *eros* with the Other of being to the point of a possible fusion. The framework of freedom before freedom, which is a sign that “something was wrong”, becomes an act of freedom above freedom, which turns the freedom thanks to which I can “sin” at any moment, into the eschatological promise of freedom, which is precisely “inability to sin”. The eschatological embrace – *éros* and *thánatos* becoming one – means the preservation of the (divine as well as human) hypostasis in the ineffable mystery that God may be “all in all”.

Thus, Diotima's ladder is once again – by the grace of the “deification”, preservation and unthinkable transfiguration of everything human – mended.

13 | EROTOLOGY, THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY

Have we taken this speculative turn only to arrive at the logic of the unknown confessor? Disdaining the *eros*, unmasking it as a menace and a disposable thing of secondary importance? To the contrary, I would say – if that had not meant that we had arrived at the logic of the Marquis de Sade.

The absolute *eros* may take place outside of time, but still always in its crack. It is the utmost deep, whereas we are superficial. No-one lives it constantly; there are

but a few who live it often. Our living body exists in time. Therefore, the question of the sexual *eros* and pleasure is not solved by this breakthrough into our ultimate sexless identity and by mystical transposition; rather, it is posed all the more acutely. Erotology is not just the concretization of metaphysics, and thus also of theologic; it is tied to the very moment of its arising. More importantly: *if philosophical theology necessarily enters into erotology at the point of its arising, erotology too enters into theology – as a contribution of philosophy.* The concrete prescriptions on desire and sexuality that we can read in various sacred scriptures are not merely at the mercy of different interpretations; these interpretations also stem from a certain prior view of the *eros* and how to think about it, which thanks to the paradoxical indeterminacy of selfhood and desire is *always already philosophical.*

As a Christian, I will limit myself to Christianity, although I could at least find parallels for my arguments in other cases as well.

The New Testament has very few concrete “instructions” for a sexual ethics, in fact hardly any – but precisely therefore, they indicate a lasting *conditio sine qua non* of the Christian sexual *ethos*. They confirm the Old Testament prohibition of *moichēta*, the breaking of interpersonal commitment by sex; they warn against the pernicious effects of *porneia*, that is, any sexual practice where pleasure becomes a “commodity”; they explicitly reject homoeroticism, which means the non-eucharistic rejection of the body one is given, and thereby rejection of the Giver – and everything else is merely a semantic atmosphere, a textual tracing of the rays radiating from the sun of the believed-in Event, the epiphany of the absolute hypostasis of the Logos, who loses himself in his deifying *eros* toward everything in existence – a “manic *eros*”, as the Byzantine mystic Nikolas Kavalas would later put it – and is gathered again in the victory of the Resurrection over death, and of course from our changed self-perception, the discovery of our godlikeness and the eternal promise we partake in.

This atmosphere is not propositionally stated; there is hardly any casuistry in the sacred text. Therefore, the sacred text does not help us put the sexual ethos in more explicit words, yet alongside spiritual experience *we need thought*. And this has been – and still is – where (good or bad) philosophy comes in. The Church Fathers had to latch on to one or another existing model for understanding sexuality if they were not philosophically willing or able to formulate one of their own. By opting to formulate the sexual ethos by means of the imaginary of an ideal Stoic sage freed of all “passions”, and the Platonic (though certainly not Plato’s) model of withdrawal from the sensual to the intelligible world, they traced a pattern that no doubt possesses great dignity – but that also conceals severe problems, particularly when it becomes a universal prescription for those who have not

wanted to be Stoic sages or philosopher-kings, but would like simply to live out the truth of divine revelation.

The dark brightness of sweet torment that takes me apart and puts me back together again in pure transport, namely, is never gone from our lives. The erotic is pure play, an indeterminate algebra of pleasures, a dance of images and feelings that spring up without any order or control; it is a striving that loses every object save for the entanglement of its own enjoyment and sometimes another's – two enjoyments that are – in their entanglement – again ever mine. To impose order, intention, purpose or meaning on this meaningless dance would be a death sentence for the erotic. And if we do not opt for such a sentence, but still insist on stamping sense into it, we condemn ourselves – to *hypocrisy*, to *insincerity*. For pleasure – any pleasure, not least the sexual kind – is robbed of any semantics on its own level, where selfhood sinks in pathos and is replaced in consciousness by orgiastic life-force. It has no meaning. *Precisely in being without meaning, it is above meaning*. It is precisely in its “dissoluteness”, which takes place beyond good and evil and is only aware of its own absoluteness through its senses, that it becomes something separate from the whole of the meaningful.

It is for this reason that sexual pleasure became something sacred *par excellence* in paganism (and is becoming so again in pseudo-spiritual neo-paganism). Already the Jewish gesture, and much more so the Christian one made a justifiably radical cut here. A break. Opposition²³. In the Judeo-Christian perspective, namely, the absence of semantics from pleasure, its auto-semantics, does not mean its sacredness; instead – in the redirection of the *eros* where selfhood distances itself from its own erotic givenness and reflects it – it becomes only a sign of what pleasure is: its radical *profanation*. The Holy God is entirely otherwise and entirely elsewhere: holy, *qadosh* – that is, separate from immanent experience, however intense. The distancing from one's own *eros* from which selfhood springs, has two meanings: the *eros* remains separate from the last things, its sensing of itself is *not the epiphany of the Absolute* – and selfhood itself must sublimatorily inscribe it into semantic contexts by “redirection”. But *this changes nothing in the ontology of erotic pleasure* – even though ignoring this fact and seducing others to ignore it would remain the greatest temptation for theological thought from Antiquity to the present day, from the Church Fathers to the theology of John Paul II.

Erotic pleasure does not cease to be erotic pleasure devoid of intrinsic meaning just because I inscribe it into some context or other. Just as the other of selfhood, which can only spring up by distancing itself from it, remains devoid of

²³ Cfr. my introduction to St Maximus the Confessor's *Centuries on Love*, in M. Spoznavalec, *Izbrani spisi*, Mohorjeva Družba, Celje 2000.

self. Therefore, it can drive us to gnostic rationalism, which is two-faced: we can declare all “bodily” pleasures – along with all of creation, with every domain of sensual experience – to be a bad thing, and we can “abuse” it in libertine fashion (a more pleasant variety of the heresy of Carpocrates) or we can succumb to the ultra-ascetic mortification of all pleasures (a more unpleasant variety, particularly because it is hypocritical, unless it leads to immediate suicide). But it can also lead us into a more rarified *temptation*, one with which we are sadly still dealing today: into attempting, through the inscription of the *eros* into various semantic contexts, to deprive it – not only in theory, but also in practice – of its otherness, to abolish its radical difference, to inscribe its nonselfness into selfhood itself.

This decision, again, has many faces, but it has a simple point: that the right attitude to sexual desire and pleasure is simply their denial or their transposition into the spiritual *eros* toward God. Everything else is from the evil one, save to the extent it is intended for the conception of children, “open to life”. The hypocrisy of this position, which – let me stress this again – does not have theological, only philosophical foundations – lies in the following: such an abolishing semanticization of the *eros* is not just at loggerheads with actual sexual practice (in which case we might say: too bad for practice), but – as we have seen – with the logic of the given in all of human existence. With the ontology of myself as hypostasis. With the patency of myself as soul. The multiplicity of pleasures – e.g. breathing in fresh air, enjoying food and drink, aesthetic enjoyment etc. – ontologically has just the same status as erotic pleasure. In and of themselves we can neither semanticize them nor abolish them, strive as we might. As if we had spent all our lives – or *might* have spent them – in rapture without sleeping or eating, without being angry or sad, without seeking entertainment and amusement, as if our thoughts had not a thousand times a day slipped away from God to creatures and returned to Him only by in roundabout ways, and grateful for it...

Why, then, such a panic over the *eros* from Antiquity to the present? For no reason? Not at all. There are two problems with it – and actually, neither one has anything to do with sexual desire or sexual pleasure.

Outside the sphere of the various forms of auto-eroticism (which in the Christian view is certainly “sinful” in the ontological and spiritual perspective sketched above, which the confessor did not even want to talk about), erotic pleasure places us in *the most intimate relationship with our fellow human being*. With the synhypostasis. With the only being that, in the theological view, is likewise the icon of the Absolute. *The erotic problem is the problem of the ethical attitude to the other.*

The tension between our being sexless deep down, and the reality of our erotic passion, which is neither good nor bad but is before all ethics, means that

our engendered ontological exclusivity is in full swing; it means simply that: *We can only appreciate the eros to the extent it takes place in an ethical framework, with which it can never be equated, as it is not in itself ethical.* On the experiential level, this ethical relationship lights up when one falls in love, which is – to the extent it truly is falling in love as a spiritual phenomenon and not a feeling of attraction, which is a most ephemeral experience (“I fall in love five or six times in three minutes”, sings the Serbian rocker Bora Đorđević) – precisely the *momentary suspension of the erotic*. I always fall in love sexlessly, with the person, with her ultimate depth. In the first moment that I am in love I *cannot* desire her sexually²⁴.

For the spiritual – and in my perspective, also the philosophical – understanding of the *eros*, this is an important indicator: the erotic is a relationship with the synhypostasis, that is, a relationship between myself, as the being of everything with just the same kind of totality, who compels me, in the ethical relationship, to recognize her in her exclusivity, to open up to her at the price of my own self-annihilation – but it is a relationship in which the other hypostasis in her bodily and sensual being after the momentary suspension of the erotic also becomes an “object of meaningless pleasure” to me (and the other way around; alone with enjoyment I become an object of enjoyment, or at least so I always hope). *The erotic relationship, then, has a paradoxical structure: Its framework must be ethical, because it is a relationship with the synhypostasis, and yet it is never as ethical as it is erotic.*

This paradox, which in its drily rational formulation leads us to the realization that “the sexual relationship does not exist”, as Lacan’s provocative maxim has it, cannot only always be solved by “good sex”, where we not only preserve but make deeper the ethical relationship in the midst of the non-semanticized erotic; it is also philosophically thinkable, to the extent we are able to renounce the naïve transpositions of our logic and truly enter into the school of Christian thought. In its profanity, the structure of the paradox thus delimited reflects the logic of the basic mystery of the Christian faith: the union of divine and human nature in the one hypostasis of the Son of God. In the erotic relationship, the paradox of the ethical relationship between the two self-abolishing synhypostases holds the place of an icon of God’s nature, whereas erotism holds the place of naked humanity.

The two take place on radically different levels, but are connected for that very reason, because – as I have demonstrated elsewhere – the opening of the ethos to the other presupposes the penetration of the Absolute into me, or my “love of God” (subjective and objective genitive). In the world of *dóxa*, *eros* always catapults me as hypostasis towards the syn-hypostasis, although in and of itself

²⁴ This was pointed out by P. Evdokimov in his excellent *Sacrament de l’amour: Le mystère conjugal à la lumière de la tradition orthodoxe* Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1980.

it only wants pleasure. When I enter into a sexual relationship, however much I might negate the other and turn her into my own phantasm and mere material for my own enjoyment, I am really in a relationship with a human being, who *is* a hypostasis. Nothing needs to be done; I only have to admit it. The very penetration of energy that forcefully attaches me to the partiality of the other as existing in my world and nullifies her hypostatic nature, can gain its full meaning only in the intensity and exclusivity of an ethical, personal relationship of love, in which my own hypostatic nature is subverted. *This* is what the New Testament calls *agápe*²⁵.

In an act of ontological idolatry, the hypostasis touches flesh, penetrates into another's body, caresses it, kneads it and presses it, wounds the flesh that is the outer limit of his entire I/world. But the forcefulness of passion thus lived out only confirms the supralogical, paradoxical constitution of reality – the hypostatic pluriverse. Although the radical impersonality of the sexual *eros* can elude the person to the point of ending up in the fetishism of some sexualized *object* or other, in *agápe* the impersonal *eros* always leads us to the *person*. It takes place entirely in the soul and opens us to the other soul. The *eros* is impersonal, but with its unreflecting forcefulness after it is filled with ethos, it leads to a glimpse of the hypostatic dimension of other as the one and only being and opens us up to radical otherness. Through *agápe*, the *eros* is theological – and only through *agápe* is the full *eros* even possible. *Agápe* restores the *eros* to its truth.

«Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart...». Is this a threat? Or a prohibition? No, it is a divine statement of the limit of being, which is not the limit of the *eros*. As our perverted signature can be seen on the murderousness of the *eros*, the original signature can be seen on its agapic prefiguration. Through it, sexual pleasure is not resacralized, but there remains the other selfhood, the otherness, that can never in its phenomenal suchness be reduced to any modality of the ethical: only by

²⁵ This is why the analyses that Slavoj Žižek has lately devoted to “Christian love” in a series of texts are so irrelevant: His (admiring, not accusatory) claim that this love is “intolerant” and “violent” (cfr. e.g. *Ljubezen in teror*, in A. Badiou, *Hvalnica ljubezni*, Ljubljana 2010, p. 69): «Christian love is a violent emotion that introduces Difference, a gap in the order of being, and that privileges and gives priority to one object at the expense of all others» simply indicates a misunderstanding of the dialectics of *eros* and *agápe* in the Christian understanding of the love relationship. The *eros* is no doubt always more or less violent, as we have seen, and we have also seen why. However, *agápe* is never violent. This is precisely why it is so demanding, so hard to achieve, because it is not a given, but the outcome of an ascetic existence that presupposes faith and hope – it is the habitual outcome of a hard and long-lasting spiritual struggle with one's own passions, especially anger, aggressiveness and resentment. For authoritative support for these claims, let me again point to Maximus the Confessor's *Centuries on Love*, which sums up the Christian tradition on love in its erotic and agapic aspects. But in the end, this is not a tragedy, at least not theoretically: Those enthusiastic about violence and intolerant love will just have to find some other inspiring tradition – and there are many to be found.

being perichoretically inscribed in the covenant of ethical love that in Christian terms we call “marriage” is sexual pleasure in its entirety “saved”. In other words, and more concretely, this means that in the ethically framed relationship of love, everything is “permitted” in the erotic field that does not destroy the relationship itself. «The marriage bed is undefiled» (Hebrews 13,4) – to the extent that it is marital. And spoken against the tradition that elevated a Stoic sage into the ideal of the Christian erotic: there is no such thing as too fervent a lover of his wife, there is no such thing as too fervent a lover of her husband²⁶. Even the most “transgressive” erotic embraces within the *agapic* covenant of *ethos and love* do not transgress the commandment of love and are never “defiled”; profoundly defiled is the moralizing that even dares to think such a thing.

To summarize: correctly understood, Christian discourse about sexuality is not a prohibition or an injunction, but a *promise*. It is salvific *advice*, speaking not about the multiplicity of sexual desires, which are an unavoidable part of life, but about the danger of an identification with them that would mean losing myself. Listen to the fundamental ethical teaching of Paul the Apostle: «All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any»²⁷. This says everything that needs to be said to lay the foundations of the entire Christian sexual ethics. For the eros, too, is part of “all things”.

The *eros* in its entirety is “lawful” to me; it is my ontological possibility (*exeînai*) and thus a gift – but it is not expedient, it does not “bring together” (*symphérei*), inasmuch as it is separated from the opening of *ethos* to the other. For in its play, an “I” plays out that is not a fiction of the subject, but the transparency of the hypostasis that faith is about: the subject of salvation itself. If I surrender myself to the rule of the *eros* so that it holds sway over me outside the covenant of *ethos*, so that it nullifies my “myself”, my I – and this always happens when I actually break the covenant of the flesh – my eschatological *soteria* is endangered, because it no longer has a subject. For the subject of salvation is never a substantial thing. Again, this is not a threat, but a description. In this submission to the *eros*, “I” already become an illusion, a figment, a secondary thing. *And I “am” without my origin. Without an end. And therefore, in delusion. My death is forgotten.* The “real” has become something else – something that, deep down where there is no delusion, I know is dwindling away with the “image of this world”. Only

²⁶ *Adulter in suam uxorem amator ardentior* (Hieronymus, *Adv. Jov.*, I, 49); *Omnis ardentior amator propriae uxoris adulter est* (Peter of Lombard, *Sententiae* 4, 31, 5).

²⁷ Πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν· ἀλλ’ οὐ πάντα συμφέρει. πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν· ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐγὼ ἐξουσιασθήσομαι ὑπὸ τινοσ (1 Cor 6,12).

the infinite grace of God can offer me a path out of this total perdition, a radical rethinking, a *metánoia*, a turnabout – *teshuva* – of being itself: «Go, and sin no more ...» (John 8,11).

As we have seen, the *eros* is a principle of expansion, consumption, unlimited enjoyment – and because in a common world it runs into other erotes, other desires, it is always and in its entirety also a principle of violence. The other principle, *agápe*, rests its undoubtedly erotic quality on kenotic relinquishing, the free, voluntary relinquishing of a pleasure that would destroy the relationship: a relinquishing that rests on the radical freedom triggered by the glimpse of godlikeness, and not on any kind of internalization of a social norm. But we cannot relinquish the erotic expansiveness unless we relinquish our own being. We have also seen that the *eros* must be saved – and that this salvation is possible. The true kenotic “limiting of desire” is not the negation of the *eros*, but its transformation.

To put it better: the true meaning of the *eros* is not an expansion that destroys every tie; rather, it is precisely the paralogical tie with the other in the exclusive frame of the *ethos*. The ethicization of the *eros* is the squaring of the circle, but this *adýnaton* is possible because the *ethos* takes place on a different level than ontology: in the covenant of *ethos* I suspend myself as being in openness to another human being. To the extent that it enters into that relationship, erotic desire and erotic pleasure is “good” in its entirety, but to the extent it becomes a weapon of domination and violence, exploitation and inflicting pain, it is “bad”. Before the wild amoral nakedness of the *eros*, then, stands the synhypostasis, which irrupts into me in its threatening exclusivity. A body that exists through me and in me, but is a symbol of the whole world: of the other – one and only – being. A symbol that attracts my desire and crosses it at the same time.

Then comes the moment when I can hear – or overhear – the oneness of the commandment “thou shalt not kill” and “thou shalt not covet”.

14 | CONCLUSION

Could one curb de Sade with this philosophical-theological diatribe? Could one curb the unknown confessor with it? Fat chance. Perhaps, after all these turns and twists, we just have a better idea why it is not possible. And why curbing them would not amount to anything.

For every expression of desire, though it suggests or speaks between the lines of selfhood vanishing in pleasure, is already a surrender to the logos. It is a gesture that, however self-assured its pose, nevertheless reaches out to the other and seeks

to convince him, and thus indicates the space of the mystery of desire. I noted that the “reflexivity” of my selfhood is desire. But texts such as those of de Sade and the confessor only communicate the character of their desire between the lines, and always incompletely even so: the selfhood that has lost itself in the *eros*, cannot express itself any longer, nor does it want to. *The consumption of the ethical is the absence of the word, the absence of that reaching out to the other that is text.* As soon as the *eros* is written out in words, it is on some level already committed to being ethical – and that commitment is profoundly destructive to the desire that affirms its own abolition of the logos of selfhood.

Because the *eros* pulsates in the totality of the hypostasis, before the word and during it, it can only be expressed by a way of speech that allows the aposiopesis of the logical. If we remove the hidden folds of the ineffable, in which the seal of totality is concealed, and – ignoring the obvious – we subject the *eros* to the logos, then nothing will be left of it.

This is why the first part of de Sade’s story is quite unerotic, even though it argues for the *eros*; the voids of the argument gain their charge only with the final *peripeteia*, which is a simulacrum of literature. And this is why, in the confessor’s note, the *eros* comes from somewhere else entirely, from ourselves. Perhaps it is not there at all. As if it were some gigantic misunderstanding, which nevertheless shows us a future in which a speechless pleasure, a silent, dark pleasure without an I, will subsist on the suffering of a logos which will express itself without words and preserve the last traces of purity.

It is quite likely that this future has already begun.