The Christian Roots of Critique: How Foucault's 'Confessions of the Flesh' Sheds New Light on the Concept of Freedom and the Genealogy of the Modern Critical Attitude

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ABSTRACT

Finally published 34 years after his death, Foucault's book *Confessions of the Flesh* sheds new light on the debate about freedom and power that shaped the reception of his works. Many contributors to this debate argue that Foucault's theory of power did not allow for freedom in the 'genealogical phase,' but that he corrected himself and presented a solution to the problem of freedom in his later works, especially through his reflection on ancient ethics and technologies of the self in volumes two and three of *History of Sexuality*, as well as the concept of *parrhesia.* In contrast to this view, I argue that *Confessions of the Flesh* shows that a concept of freedom as self-critical hermeneutics that aims at identifying a foreign power within the subject was only developed in Foucault's analysis of Christian practices of penance and confession. This interpretation of *Confessions of the Flesh* opens a new field of inquiry into the genealogy of critique and both the repressive and emancipative effects of truth-telling and juridification.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The English translation of Foucault's fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, *Confessions of the Flesh* (hereafter: *Confessions*), was long and eagerly awaited by the international Foucault community and the interested public.[1] Until the recent publication of the French original in 2018, the volume was kept under wraps due to Foucault's ban on posthumous publications. All the more reason for the readership to hope that the unveiled secret would provide new insights not only into the subject of the book—the reflections of the Church Fathers up to Augustine on sexuality and subjectivity—but also on Foucault's work in general and its last decade in particular. After Philipp Sarasin analyzed, in *Le foucaldien* in 2018, how *Confessions* helps understand Foucault's critique of the occidental subject as subjected through law, I will address a very specific aspect of these expected revelations: the themes of power and freedom, which have shaped the reception of Foucault's works like no other. Hence the question I am trying to answer is the following: Does the volume provide new insights into the problem of power and freedom?

To answer this question, I first describe the book and its translations in general terms, situate it within Foucault's oeuvre, and summarize its central themes and theses. Then I reconstruct the discussions about power and freedom in Foucault's work, or more precisely, the view that Foucault's work on ancient ethics, technologies of the self, and *parrhesia* can be interpreted as a contribution to a normative concept of freedom, which is widespread today.[2] Sarasin, too, puts forward an interpretation of the ancient technologies of the self as Foucault's "contrepoint" against (Christian) law.[3] In the third section, I analyze and criticize this view with regard to *Confessions of the Flesh*. I argue that the specific form of freedom Foucauldian thinking centers on—the capacity for a reflexive critique of the self and of subjectivizing powers—has its origins in the subjectivations of early Christianity rather than in antiquity. Here, for the first time, subjectivity was constituted through a critical reflection on power. This insight, which Foucault does not formulate explicitly but can be reconstructed from his analyses, is the decisive and surprising contribution of reading *Confessions of the Flesh* from the perspective of a theory of power and a genealogy of critique.

2. BOOK AND OEUVRE

Confessions of the Flesh is an extensive work on the early Church Fathers and their problematizations of lifestyle and sexuality. Foucault covers the period from the second century to the beginning of the fifth century, beginning with a detailed analysis of the texts of Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150—215) and concluding with an extensive study of the work of Augustine (AD 354—430). In doing so, he traces the complex conflicts concerning baptism,

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1   Key arguments of this text appeared before in German, as Karsten Schubert, "Die christlichen Wurzeln der Kritik. Wie Foucaults Analysen der Kirchenväter neues Licht auf die Debatte um Macht und Freiheit werfen: Rezension von Michel Foucault: Die Geständnisse des Fleisches. Sexualität und Wahrheit 4. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2019," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Literatur* 7, no. 2 (2019), *https://doi.org/10.21827/zfphl.7.2.35687* and in a shortened version as "Die christlichen Wurzeln der Kritik. Lesenotiz zu Michel Foucaults 'Die Geständnisse des Fleisches. Sexualität und Wahrheit 4,'" Theorieblog, *https://www.theorieblog.de/index.php/2019/10/die-christlichen-wurzeln-der-kritik-lesenotiz-zu-michel-foucaults-die-gestaendnisse-des-fleisches-sexualitaet-und-wahrheit-4/*.

2   The interpretation entails that Foucault corrects his theory of power and freedom in his later works; that it is widespread is shown by the fact that it is presented as the only interpretation in a handbook entry on Foucault, cf. Paul Patton, "Foucault, Michel (1926–1984)," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publ., 2010). Already the anthology Jeremy Moss, ed., *The later Foucault: Politics and philosophy* (London: SAGE Publ., 1998) asks how Foucault's late work answers the problems of the works of the 70s. Some of the many articles based on the correction thesis are Hans H. Kögler, "Fröhliche Subjektivität: Historische Ethik und dreifache Ontologie beim späten Foucault," in Erdmann; Forst; Honneth, *Ethos der Moderne*; Vikki Bell, "The promise of liberalism and the performance of freedom," in *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism, and rationalities of government*, ed. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (London: Routledge, 1996); Mark Bevir, "Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy," *Political Theory* 27, no. 1 (1999); David Webermann, "Are Freedom and Anti-Humanism Compatible? The Case of Foucault and Butler," *Constellations* 7, no. 2 (2000), *https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00185*; Kristina Lepold, "Die Bedingungen der Anerkennung," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 62, no. 2 (2014), *https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2014-0022*, and, with a special focus on Foucault's analysis of parrhesia, Nancy Luxon, "Ethics and Subjectivity: Practices of Self-Governance in the Late Lectures of Michel Foucault," *Political Theory* 36, no. 3 (2008), *https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591708315143*. That this interpretation has lost nothing of its popularity is shown by the most recent monograph based on it: Richard A. Lynch, *Foucault's critical ethics,* Just ideas (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016).

3   Philipp Sarasin, "Adam und Eva: Michel Foucaults ominöser 'vierter Band' schließt endlich die Histoire de la sexualité ab," *Le foucaldien* 4, no. 1 (2018): 8, *https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.45*.

penance, confession, virginity and abstinence, marriage, and sex. The flesh is a specific concept of early Christianity, with which sexuality is problematized in relation to the other themes. Foucault delves deeply into the material, aiming to make the premises and problems of the Church Fathers intelligible for his contemporary readers. Due to the distance between the Church Fathers' thinking and our own, the book makes for an extremely laborious reading for the modern-day reader, although Foucault does an excellent job as translator and analyst of the discourses, presenting their rationalities intelligibly. Foucault is rather reserved in his own comments, interpretations, and theorizations. Particularly the themes of power and freedom are hardly ever explicitly mentioned. In relatively few of the 400 pages, he explains his own thesis: in the early Christian discussions of sexuality, a new experience of subjectivity emerges, to which veridiction (speaking truth about oneself, 111) and jurisdiction (the juridification of thought and behavior, 222) are central (286, 300).

The preface by Frédéric Gros and Stuart Elden's review from 2018 provide solid background information on the status of the text, translated by Robert Hurley, as a non-authorized manuscript, on its relations to other texts, and on the history of its origin.[4] Therefore, I limit myself to what is necessary here. After Foucault had published the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, he deviated from the original plan for its continuation, as his research took him to reading the Church Fathers as early as 1977.[5] He then wrote the manuscript of *Confessions* until about 1981/82, before writing volumes two and three of *History of Sexuality*, on pagan and Hellenistic ethics and sexuality. *Confessions* was held back from publication because Foucault realized that he had to start the *History of Sexuality* earlier, which is why his path led into antiquity. There is no introduction and no chapter on methods, and the text starts rather abruptly, because volumes two, three, and four form a larger project, which expanded and was divided among the volumes in the course of the work. Volume three has no introduction either; instead, the introduction to volume two may apply to all three volumes. The style of the fourth volume corresponds to that of volumes two and three: sober, unagitated, and detailed, Foucault analyzes the material, which consists of the Church Fathers' theological texts alone, and does not include other material, such as texts on institutional procedures.

Foucault writes as an historian of philosophy, less as a genealogist of power. Anyone who expects a similar reading experience to that of *Discipline and Punish* (1977) will be disappointed. The text is not hyperbolic, it does not exaggerate, nor suggest or frighten. Similar to *The Order of Things (1970)*, the main work of the early archaeological phase, Foucault barely addresses material and institutional aspects. Combining the discursive with the question of power and subjectivation in institutions is the innovation that characterizes the transition to the 'genealogical phase' and the 'analysis of power.'[6] That Foucault neglects or forgets the question of power in his 'ethical turn' was an early suspicion voiced with regard to volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality*.[7] Irrespectively of the conclusion one reaches regarding this question, *Confessions* can be clearly assigned to the late, ethical phase because of its style and method—which are interrelated—although it was written before the other two volumes. Viewed as an independent text, *Confessions* does not consist of a contribution to a genealogical critique of power, of which, according to Martin Saar, a specifically hyperbolic style that exposes power is characteristic.[8] However, in the context of Foucault's oeuvre and the debates about

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4   Stuart Elden, "Review: Michel Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair," *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, 7–8 (2018), *https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418800206*.

5   Elden, "Review," 294.

6   See for a critique of the dominant periodization in the secondary literature based on the new insights of Foucault's "Last Decade" Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 4.

7   Hinrich Fink-Eitel, *Foucault zur Einführung*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Junius, 1997), 94–112; Axel Honneth, "Einleitung: Zur philosophisch-soziologischen Diskussion um Michel Foucault," in Erdmann; Forst; Honneth, *Ethos der Moderne*.

8   Martin Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik: Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault,* Theorie und Gesellschaft 59 (Frankfurt: Campus, 2007).

freedom and power, *Confessions* appears as part of Foucault's genealogical project and offers new insights into a Foucauldian conception of freedom.[9]

The book is divided into three parts. Some of the titles were given by the editors and not by Foucault—I will neglect these and other editorial details in the following, because apart from a certain general caution in dealing with the text, nothing further can be deduced from them. There are no notes commenting on the translation. The English translation (2021) is lacking some separators of passages (lines or asterisks, for example on 157 and 167) and some headlines of subdivision that are present in the French original (2018) and the German translation (2019) and that help structure the text. There is also at least one omission of text in the English translation (see below). The inconsistent translation of the French "la pénitence" (German "die Buße"), that is mostly rendered as "penance", yet at times as "penitence" and "repentance" (French "le repentir", German "die Reue"), without any explanation for these decisions by the translator, may lead to confusion.[10]

The first part, "The Formation of a New Experience" (approx. 110 pages), deals with Christian penitential practice and examination of conscience. It begins with a chapter on Clement of Alexandria, whose rules for moderating sexuality are, according to Foucault, continuous with those of the pagan philosophers. At the end of this section, Foucault explains the thesis of the book: sexual morality changes from pagan moderation in Clement to strict purity and total renunciation in Augustin, who perceives mankind and its sexuality negatively, based on the Fall of Man (34–7). This transformation is not, however, primarily one of the codex, that is, of the areas of regulation and their strictness, as is often claimed, but "it's a different type of experience that is being formed little by little" (35). The practices of penance, monastic asceticism, and confession lead to new forms of technologies of the self, to a new form of subjectivity characterized by the fight against evil and telling the truth about oneself. This is already the definition of the flesh that gives the title: "a mode of experience," that is, "a mode of knowledge and transformation of oneself by oneself" (36) that is based on fighting evil within oneself through self-examination, penance, and confession. Thus, Christianity entails a wholly new type of subjectivity that is constituted through the relation of "wrong-doing" and "truth-telling" (36) in the "manifestation of truth" (37) about oneself. The concept of flesh forms part of Foucault's overarching thesis on the history of sexuality: the area of experience and the problem that we call 'sexuality' today only emerged in the course of the 18th century; its predecessors were first the ancient *aphrodisia* and then the Christian flesh.

The remainder of the chapter explains through the reconstruction of Tertullian and Cyprian how penance—first in preparation for baptism, then increasingly independently from it—becomes a more and more complex technique of self-examination and reflection aimed at fighting the inner evil. Here Foucault states for the first time the central theme of the previous chapter, the "juridical avowal" (68, French: "l'aveu juridique"), but only in the French and German versions—in the English translation this sentence is omitted. Regarding Cassian, Foucault shows that the leadership practices and techniques of the examination of conscience (the French "l'examen de conscience" is weirdly translated as "soul-searching" (80), or "spiritual examination" (81)) in Christian monasteries (87–8) originate in pagan philosophy. Christian practices of direction—in contrast to ancient ones—aim at the renunciation of one's own will and not at the sovereign exercise of the will (96–7), and are performed through unconditional submission and obedience (92–5). A hermeneutics of suspicion is formed, with which the Christian subject constantly examines itself for foreign, diabolical elements of evil within itself. In this way, a new kind of subjectivity develops in relation to truth.

The second part, "Being Virgin" (approx. 80 pages), traces the development of virginity in the third and fourth centuries to a form of life that goes far beyond pure abstinence and strict

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regulation of sex. Here, too, Foucault emphasizes that one does not fully grasp this development if one only notes the increasing strictness of the codex. Rather, the Church fathers interpret individual sexuality in light of the history the Fall of Man and salvation. Therefore, the life form of virginity becomes a crucial concern (145–54), which explains the Christian 'upvaluation' of sexuality, through which the latter attained a significance never seen before (155–7). A complex technology of the self is evolving, in which the inner knowledge of the self and the struggle against the flesh (the foreign, evil element within the self) are integrated in complex relationships with others to whose power and direction one must submit in order to survive in this struggle (167–91).

In the third part, "Being Married" (approx. 90 pages), Foucault turns his attention to marriage and analyzes, based on Augustine's writings, how it was subjected to more complex regulations in the fourth century. According to Foucault, in Augustine's reflections on marriage, a process of juridification begins that characterizes Christianity up to the 20th century (279) and that Foucault wanted to analyze in the planned fifth volume of *History of Sexuality*. In contrast to virginity, asceticism, and penance, which are based on veridiction, that is, speaking the truth about oneself, in married life spouses are conceptualized as legal subjects with mutual obligations and debts (214–22). Foucault traces the complex theological considerations that led to the creation of the legal subject: free will, a will that is independent of God, arises with the Fall of Man and is henceforth internally divided, because libido and desire now form part of it (270–8). That following one's desire is an act of free will is the foundation of the juridical principle of guilt and of the juridification of marriage (280–6). The autonomy of the will constitutes the legal subject.

The main text is followed by four appendices, which could not be integrated into the main text, yet enrich the material. The second appendix is relevant from the perspective of power analysis. Here, Foucault discusses the development of Christian pastoral power from the 7th century onwards. In this text, the connections to already published ideas, which accordingly have already influenced Foucault's reception, become clearer than elsewhere in the book. Pastoral power is the specific form of power and government that is spread by monastic life, that became central to the history of the Occident and is still effective in today's governmentality (296–9). The modifications of the exercise of power that Foucault analyses in *Confessions* are crystalized in pastoral power, which is why the book is so important for us today. These developments entail governing and monitoring people "through the manifestation of their individual truth" (313), and judging them as part of complex groups. In this second appendix, therefore, Foucault discusses more clearly than in the main text how Christian confessional practices fit into the history of Western mechanisms of government and repression, which can be traced up to contemporary biopolitics.

3. POWER AND FREEDOM

What can we learn from *Confessions of the Flesh* regarding the problem of power and freedom? How does the book relate to the debates about how Foucault developed his thinking on these issues in volumes two and three?[11] The problem of freedom consists in a social-theoretical description of subjectivity in which subjectivity is determined by power, which is why there can be no freedom and no resistance. While Foucault never took this position explicitly, and, in reaction to such reception even emphasized that he conceptualizes power and freedom as equiprimordial,[12] social philosophical readers interpreted his works as leading to this problem. This, as I argue elsewhere,[13] is neither Foucault's nor his readers' 'fault', but rather due to the fundamental difference between the systematic methods of these social philosophers and Foucault's genealogy as critique; furthermore, it is a sign of the enormous productivity of Foucault's work that was able to provoke rich research on the concepts of power and freedom,

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11   For a reconstruction of this social-philosophical debate about freedom in Foucault's works, see Karsten Schubert, *Freiheit als Kritik: Sozialphilosophie nach Foucault* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018) and, with a detailed analysis of Foucault's *The Subject and Power* Karsten Schubert, "Freedom as critique: Foucault beyond anarchism," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 2020, *https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720917733*.

12   See Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Dreyfus; Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2. ed (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1983), 208–26.

13   See Schubert, *Freiheit*, 34–7, 251–66.

which goes beyond Foucault and is an important contribution to social philosophy in its own right.

This reading of the problem of freedom was put forward in relation to Foucault's archaeological and genealogical works.[14] In the archaeological phase, the problem is related to language and thought. Foucault argues that the possibilities of thinking are determined by a historical a priori, the so-called episteme, and thus also fundamentally limited. In the genealogical phase, Foucault expands his social theory and increasingly examines institutions, power technologies, practices, and bodies. *Discipline and Punish* (1977) is both a genealogy of the modern prison and a critique of modern capitalism, since according to Foucault, modern capitalism is based on the same technologies of power that are developed in prison to discipline and oppress individuals. Due to his rejection of the methods of normative social philosophy, which would make it possible to differentiate between liberal and repressive aspects of modernity, and the lack of a concept of socialization that could explain how subjects develop their own capacity to act, *Discipline and Punish* was interpreted as amounting to an image of modernity as total oppression. That there is no outside of power and that power is productive and not only repressive are the central critical and innovative ideas of Foucault's intervention against classical state centered and juridical theories of power and against liberal normative political theories. However, despite developing a concept of power as productive, he focused on the repressive sides of this productive power. Therefore, many commentators saw no place in such a theory for freedom and the associated concepts of resistance and emancipation.[15]

One claim that is widespread in secondary literature is that the solution to this problem is to be found in Foucault's late work, the so-called 'ethical phase,' especially in volumes two and three of *History of Sexuality*. Here one finds terms that could provide hope for overcoming the one-sided focus on the repressive side of productive power: technologies of the self instead of technologies of domination, care for the self and aesthetics of existence instead of discipline and bio-power, ethical choice instead of moral regulation, and resistance against power through *parrhesia*, speaking the truth with courage. In particular, the distinction between a morality based on ethical relationships of the self with itself and a morality based on moral codes, which Foucault develops in the Introduction to the *Use of Pleasure* (Foucault 1990, 29–32), is understood as the foundation of a normatively substantive concept of freedom that can serve as a basis for the critique of power relations.[16] Foucault argues that there are various dimensions of morality, especially the moral code and associated sanction-proven rules, as well as "the manner one ought to 'conduct oneself'—that is, the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code" (Foucault 1990, 26). Foucault very cautiously suggests that this second, "ethical" dimension of subjectivation tended to be central in ancient morality (Foucault 1990, 29), in which wealthy men freely adhered to the moral code and shaped their lives, described by Foucault as an "aesthetics of existence." Christian (sexual) morality was based more on strict adherence to the code and corresponding institutions. Despite Foucault's cautious and balanced description, the distinction was often understood to mean that there can be, and

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14   See Thomas Lemke, *Foucault's analysis of modern governmentality: A critique of political reason* (London, Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019), 108–18 for a detailed analysis of these problems, which are evoked by many commentators, for example Nancy Fraser, *Unruly practices power, discourse, and gender in contemporary social theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1989), 17–66; Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen,* stw 749 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988); Axel Honneth, *Kritik der Macht: Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie,* Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 738 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000); Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (1984), **https://doi. org/10.1177/0090591784012002002** and Peter Dews, *Logics of disintegration: Post-structuralist thought and the claims of critical theory* (London: Verso, 1987), 155–70.

15   Of course, these social-philosophical attempts to systematize a theory of power and freedom from Foucault's analysis and to debate its coherence were not only widespread, but also contested. Petra Gehring, "Foucault'sche Freiheitsszenen," in *Parrhesia: Foucault und der Mut zur Wahrheit*, ed. Petra Gehring and Andreas Gelhard (Zürich: diaphanes, 2012) and Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2005) for example show that and how conceptions and scenes of freedom can be found throughout Foucault's oeuvre.

16   The clearest interpretation of ancient ethics as a normative counter-concept to modernity is found in Wilhelm Schmid, *Auf der Suche nach einer neuen Lebenskunst: Die Frage nach dem Grund und die Neubegründung der Ethik bei Foucault* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000). But even authors who are justifiably cautious with such normative attributions find building blocks for a theory of freedom in the distinction between moral code and ethics and the subject-theoretical description of self-relations, see for example Lemke, *Foucault*, 265–83 or Saar, *Genealogie*, 251–75.

has been, a freer ethic of self-practice in antiquity, as opposed to Christian repressive morality. *Confessions* ultimately complicates this overly simplistic picture.

4. THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF CRITIQUE

It is not surprising that a schematic reception of the difference between ancient, ethical, and free ethics on one hand, and modern, Christian, juridical, institutional-repressive morality on the other emerged before the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh*. The *History of Sexuality* was at the time incomplete,[17] with only the end and starting points available: the description of modern repression together with the relative freedom in antiquity. With the now published link, *Confessions of the Flesh*, not only the greater historical continuity between antique and Christian subjectivations becomes visible, but also the systematic complexity of the subjectivation processes that Foucault meant to capture with his analytical categories from the introduction to volume two. Furthermore, in *Confessions of the Flesh*—or more precisely, in the confessional and penitential practices described therein—the origin of an alternative concept of freedom can be found, which, along with the ancient concept of freedom, plays an important role in current debates on freedom along Foucauldian lines. The core of this concept of freedom is the critique of power that works within subjectivity, which is why it is better suited to resolve the Foucauldian problem of freedom than ancient ethics. I will explain these three aspects in the following.

Firstly, historical continuity. While the dual typologization of free ethics in contrast to repressive morality has shaped the reception of Foucault, the new volume shows one thing above all: historically, the two forms cannot be strictly separated. Rather, there is a continuity between Christian norms and subjectivations and ancient ethics. Foucault develops this thesis in the first chapter and often emphasizes this continuity within the slow process of transformation. This gradual transmutation characterizes not only the continuity of the code, that is, of the areas of regulation, concerns, and prohibitions; Foucault repeatedly emphasizes in particular that the developments cannot be interpreted as "reinforcement of prohibitions" or "greater strictness in morals" (35). Furthermore, the transformation of the modes of subjectivation, whose gradual change Foucault traces, takes place through continuous development. The experience of *aphrodisia* slowly and seamlessly develops into the experience of the flesh.

Secondly, the complexity of subjectivation. The continuity of the history of sexuality after antiquity makes it even clearer that Foucault's central critical method is to demonstrate the "relentlessness of historicity" through genealogical analysis.[18] The great contrast in method, style, and theme between the first and second volumes of *History of Sexuality* could still tempt some readers to view Foucault's perception of antiquity as fundamentally different from that of the following periods in terms of power and to interpret the analysis of ancient modes of subjectivation as contributing to the development of a systematic concept of freedom. But the tedious and stubborn continuity of Foucault's historical-philosophical analysis, which stylistically and methodically simply continues where volume three left off, makes clear how strongly the supposedly free subjectivation of antiquity itself is bound to historically contingent forms. Subjects are bound by their respective historically valid forms of self-relation, even if these emphasize free ethics rather than adherence to moral codes, as stated for the case of antiquity. In short, free and ethical subjectivation is also a matter of power, imposed from the outside, even though it demands care of the self and aesthetic choices. For this reason, a concept of freedom that would help to solve the problem of freedom cannot be found in a specific ethics of free choice, but rather in questioning the historicity and subjection of ethics in its entirety, and in developing a critical relationship to it. Such a concept of freedom as critique, in which freedom is understood as a practice of critique of power and historical regimes of subjectivation through which subjects can reflect their 'inner unfreedom' and thereby potentially

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17   It is still incomplete today, as a first manuscript for a volume on the *Children's Crusades* is still in the *Bibliothèque nationale* and will probably never be published.

18   Ulrich Brieler, *Die Unerbittlichkeit der Historizität: Foucault als Historiker,* Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur Bd. 14 (Köln: Böhlau, 1998).

transform themselves, is found in Foucault's late reflections on the concept of critique and his own method of genealogy as a historical critique of power and subjectivation.[19]

Thirdly, the Christian roots of the critique of subjectivation. Reflections on this concept of freedom as critique are not explicit in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Yet Foucault's analyses offer astonishing insights into the genealogy of this critical capacity, despite the fact that his objective is to show how we are still bound today by technologies of power that originated in early Christianity. Foucault's central thesis is that Christianity constitutes the legal subject to whom autonomy and thus also responsibility for its desire is attributed. According to Foucault, the legal regulation and subjectivation, the juridical forms and their knowledge/power complexes, which are of enormous significance for the present day, have their origins in the problematizations of marriage and desire by the early Church Fathers, and in the Christian confessional and penitential rituals. Not only is the Christian pastoral power one source of contemporary (neo-) liberal governmentality. By forcing the subject into a coherent self-identity in order to hold it accountable and responsible, the confession is also an original scene of contemporary "ethical violence", according to Judith Butler.[20] The violence lies in binding the subject to specific, historically contingent regimes of subjectification: "If they become naturalized, taken for granted [...], if they become the terms by which we do and must live, then our very living depends upon a denial of their historicity [...] In Foucault, it seems, there is a price for telling the truth about oneself, precisely because what constitutes the truth will be framed by norms and by specific modes of rationality that emerge historically."[21]

It is this problem of unfreedom due to the subject's constitution within historically specific regimes of subjectification, its being formed by the social norms in place during the historical period to which it belongs, to which Foucault's freedom as critique and his method of genealogical critique reacts. And in addition to the genealogy of the Christian "ethical violence", *Confessions* also entails a genealogy of such critical reflexivity as originating in the emerging Christian subjectivity. In the "telling-the-truth-about-oneself" (54) of the Christian penitential ritual, a practice of critical reflection on power emerges for the first time. The self is supposed to keep itself pure, and in order to do so it must constantly search for and critically examine foreign, diabolical powers within itself. This practice of critical examination of internal heteronomy by external powers with the goal of autonomy and transformation bears significant systematic similarity with the critical practice of Foucault, the central difference being that it is not a historical-genealogical critique of power and subjectification, but rather a theological-ethical one. If the contemporary legal subject can be traced back to the early Church fathers, as Foucault claims, it is plausible that this also holds for the contemporary form of critical subjectivity, which is constituted and transformed through reflexivity with regards to inner foreign power, the inner other:

> What is at issue, in fact, is the form of subjectivity: the exercise of oneself upon oneself, knowledge of oneself, the constitution of oneself as an object of investigation and discourse, the liberation or purification of oneself and salvation by means of operations that carry light to one's innermost being, and drive one's deepest secrets up to the light of redemptive exposure. It is a form of experience—understood both as a mode of presence to oneself and a program for self-transformation—that was developed in that period. (36)

A further aspect of modern critiques of power, which is already rooted in the Christian experience, is the realization that questioning the other's inwardly working power is necessarily an endless activity.

> If there is a subjectification, it implies an indefinite objectification of oneself by oneself—indefinite in the sense that, never acquired once and for all, it has no end in time; and in the sense that one must always push one's examination of thoughts as far as possible, however tenuous and innocent they may appear. Further, this

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19   Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997); Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997). For a systematic conceptualization of Foucault's freedom as critique, see Schubert, *Freiheit*, 305–12; Schubert, "Freedom," 9–15.

20   Judith Butler, *Giving an account of oneself* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), 42.

21   Butler, *Giving*, 121.

subjectification in the form of a quest for the truth about oneself is carried out through complex relations with others. And in several ways: because it's a matter of ridding oneself of the power of the Other, of the Enemy that hides beneath the appearances of oneself. (191)

Christianity—and not ancient ethics or *parrhesia*[22]—practices subjectivity for the first time as critical self-reflection of foreign and inwardly acting power (evil) and continuous self-transformation (truth). This is where the basic elements of the modern hermeneutics of suspicion arise that critically examine the own and seemingly free thinking with regard to heteronomy and repression. This hermeneutics cannot come to a standstill because there is no free core of the subject at which criticism would come to an end.[23] For subjectivity is only conceivable with and through others, that is, constituted through power; this remains the core of Foucault's concept of subjectivation.

In *What is Critique,* Foucault argues that critique as a "critical attitude" or "the art of not being governed like that"[24] developed in the 15th century as a counter-movement to the governmental intensification of Christian pastoral power. He also sees the origins of the critical attitude in the questioning of the Christian doctrine and in the development of a newer, purer relationship to the Bible.[25] *Confessions of the Flesh* shows that the foundations of critique lie much earlier, namely in the Christian experience of the flesh and its connection between subjectivity, truth, and critique. Because it was already constituted by critically examining the relationship of truth and power, Christian subjectivity was able to turn the critique of power against the Catholic Church during the reformation.[26] This interpretation shows how Foucault's analysis of the critical hermeneutics of Christian subjectification in *Confessions* makes intelligible the connection between Christianity and the will not to be governed that he describes in *What is Critique*. Of course, this does not mean that the confession is an emancipatory practice in itself. It is ambivalent and, especially as part of conservative church politics, repressive; however, the Christian self-reflective subjectivity also prefigures the critique of subjectivation that later becomes central to social and political critiques of the social norms of "ethical violence".[27]

For the contemporary social-philosophical reflection on power and freedom, this means that not only the repressive power that normalizes and subjects us can be traced back to antiquity. The origins of the emancipative and rebellious side of critique, as well, reach far back into the past. The current reception of Foucault's late works tends to locate freedom in antiquity and detects the origin of critique in *parrhesia,* following Foucault's own genealogy of the modern critical attitude. *Confessions of the Flesh* may help to revise and complete this genealogy of critique, which contains a gap: The truth-telling through ancient *parrhesia* is grounded in the subject's courage and does not rely on a hermeneutics of self-reflective critique that is central for Foucault's freedom as critique. On the contrary, doubting and questioning if one's own truth might be constituted through foreign power seems to severely limit the confidence, commitment, and courage that define *parrhesia*. The question thus is how through the transformations of *parrhesia* from antiquity to modernity, the hermeneutics of suspicion became part of the modern critical attitude. Foucault's analysis of the Christian penitential practice suggest that they might be the missing link, as they bring about self-reflective and

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22   Reconstructions of Foucault's genealogy of his own enterprise of critique that he undertook in his last years, such as Andreas Folkers, "Daring the Truth: Foucault, Parrhesia and the Genealogy of Critique," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2015), *https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414558885*, should be extended and corrected accordingly. Although Foucault begins the genealogy of critique with the ancient *parrhesia*, fearlessly speaking the truth to political authorities, constituting truth through the courage and the self-transparency of the protesting subject, this is precisely *not* the critical hermeneutics towards one's own subjectivity that is so crucial to Foucault's concept of freedom of critique. Such reflexivity originates in the Christian confessional practices.

23   Schubert, "Freedom," 11.

24   Foucault, "Critique" in *The Politics of Truth*, 45.

25   Foucault, "Critique" in *The Politics of Truth*, 45.

26   See for an analysis of Foucault's interpretation of Christianity that stresses his affirmative stance towards the reformation as begin of the enlightenment Friedemann Voigt, "Genealogie der Lebensführung. Michel Foucaults Deutung des Christentums," *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte (Journal for the History of Modern Theology)* 14, no. 2 (2007), *https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTH.2007.008*.

27   The ambivalence of the confession as both repressive and potentially emancipative is also subject of progressive theology, for example Gunda Werner, "Specifically Catholic: At the Intersection of Power, Maleness, Holiness, and Sexualised Violence. A Theological and Historical Comment on Power," *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 27 (2019), *https://doi.org/10.2143/ESWTR.27.0.3286560*.

self-critical subjectivity—a hypothesis that Foucault himself did not develop, possibly because of his premature death. One important consequence of such a revised genealogy of critique would be that reflexivity and being bound to truth-telling that became the dominant modes of subjectification through Christianity are not problematic in themselves. Rather, the problem lies in the specific naturalist and ahistorical forms they can take as "ethical violence". As a critique of subjectification that tackles the historical contingent regimes of normalizing power to engage in emancipatory truth-telling about oneself, ongoing reflexivity is key for freedom and political emancipation.[28] *Confessions of the Flesh* thereby opens a new field of inquiry into the genealogy of critique and both the repressive and emancipative effects of truth-telling and juridification.

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28 Guillaume Le Blanc, "Why Read Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh Today? (English version) – Critique 13/13," accessed October 28, 2020, *http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/guillaume-le-blanc-why-read-foucaults-confessions-of-the-flesh-today-english-version/* makes this argument with regards to contemporary regimes of truth-telling about diverse sexual subjectivities in his comment on *Confessions*.

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