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JOHN BOSWELL'S HISTORY OF (EUROCHRISTIAN)
SEXUALITY AND THE CASE FOR TRANSCENDENTAL
SOMATICS

Introduction: John Boswell and his historical, social, and political context

John Boswell (1947-1994) was a Yale philologist who published two major studies between 1980 and 1994 which, considered together, constitute an extended and significant study in the history of so-called “eurochristian” sexuality.¹ *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) is a broad survey of attitudes and perspectives towards same-sex sexual and romantic relationships over nearly a millennium: from pre-Christian ancient Greek and Roman societies (approx. 500 BCE-300 CE) to Christian Late Antiquity (approx. 300 CE-600CE), and finally to the early and late Middle Ages the Early Middle Ages (10th-14th Centuries). With the caveat that levels of acceptance of same-sex relationships, eroticism, and queer persons have always been overdetermined and have varied greatly across time and context, Boswell also reaches the conclusion that European societies in the early Middle Ages were quite tolerant of homosexuality and included some well-developed gay subcultures. According to his thesis, complex social and cultural developments led to gradual tightening of sexual mores in Europe which began in the twelfth century and led to an intense almost uniformly homophobic cultural climate in Europe by the end of the fourteenth century. The implication of Boswell’s historical account is a substantial challenge to traditional arguments around “historic teaching” of the Church in matters of homosexuality. He uses empirical historical counterexample to call into question claims that homosexuality has always been regarded as unambiguously sinful in the Christian tradition.

Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe (1994) was released more than a decade later and focused much more specifically on the institution of marriage in Europe during the same timeframes, from Antiquity to the High Middle Ages. Boswell examines various pre-modern institutions in *Same-Sex Unions*, including the ancient Roman institution of adoption of adult citizens and the later Christian institution of *adelphopoiesis* or “brother making” found in Byzantium and the Orthodox tradition as well as in the Latin tradition. His

¹ I am choosing to make use of the moniker “eurochristian” put forth by Roger Green and Tink Tinker in place of “Western” or “European” insofar as it is a superior shorthand descriptor in terms its accuracy and succinctness to describe the matrix of European Christian influenced political history and history of ideas.

claim is that these provided an institutional context which same-sex couples could and did utilize to secure some of the protections and stability that the institution of marriage offered heterosexual partners. In the case of the *adelphopoiesis* or “brother-making” ritual, Boswell draws multiple parallels between its rituals and the marriage rites from the same cultural and historical contexts.² While these rituals could have also certainly provided legal advantages and protections for same-sex pairs without a sexual or amorous relationship to one another, Boswell claims that there were times in history where the Church indeed blessed these unions and finds evidence that these rituals and relationships could in some instances be understood as something akin to a “same-sex marriage”. Boswell’s thesis is that *adelphopoiesis* was an institution of Church-sanctioned life-long unions of love, devotion, loyalty between persons of the same sex. While the ritual was typically a “brother-making” ritual, there are also historical records of similar but more infrequent “sister-making” rituals.³

At the time, Boswell’s projects met with explosive controversy. It not only received scathing critiques from Christians who understood homosexuality as anathema to their faith, but also from the LGBTQ+ community who saw in his work an apologetic for oppressive Christian institutions. A concerning proportion of the critical response to Boswell’s don’t so much engage his arguments, but instead engage in *ad hominum* attacks on his person—sensationalizing his status as a young, openly gay, practicing Catholic, Yale philologist. Boswell’s works also stimulated heated methodological debates amongst historians, philologists, and theologians. Some accused him of engaging in an irresponsible form of “advocacy scholarship” which distorted the historical record in pursuit of a set of contemporary socio-political ends. Others critiqued him as employing an *essentialist* understanding of human sexuality, as opposed to a *social constructionist* approach.

Any history of sexuality must confront the problem of an overall reticence around matters of emotional, physical, and erotic intimacy in the historical record. Boswell establishes how the language around these issues is characteristically elusive, indirect, colloquial, and seldom written down. Most people in most places and times have not considered issues of sex and love as subjects well-suited to unambiguous, formal, written discourse. To ascertain the “true feelings” of deceased persons from different cultural contexts who had entered into Roman adult “adoptions”, or of

² See Boswell, John, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, New York, 1994, pg. 217.

³ Ibid, pg. 274-5

persons who had entered into a ritual relationship of *adelphopoiesis*, or even of persons who entered into Christian heterosexual marriages proves to be a nearly impossible task. Boswell develops a strategy in the face of this topical ambiguity and the relative sparseness of the historical record. He combines readings of concrete legal texts, histories, philosophical and theological treatises with surveys of the poetry, art, and literature from a given historical period. In this way he is able to make tentative conjectures around attitudes and mores around sexual, intimate or love relationships within a given culture. These conjectures must however always be limited and at least partially speculative. The reticence of the historical record, which can itself perhaps be attributed to the elusive nature of desire itself, helps to illustrate the problem of desire and sexuality as objects of philosophical discourse, which seem to elude the act of naming.

Boswell's scholarly career was cut short by his untimely death in 1994 from complications of HIV/AIDS. His insights and contributions are notably absent from most 21st century mainstream Christian and theological discourses on LGBTQIA+ issues, which tend to come to an impasse in part due to the passive and unspoken assumptions around words, concepts, and desire. A closer look at the aforementioned debates around Boswell's histories of Eurochristian sexuality will illuminate the terms of some of these assumptions and demonstrate how his approach to sexual categories and the question of universals has enduring and potentially transformative significance for contemporary cultural debates around LGBTQ+ issues.

The oblique reference to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in the title of this paper is wholly intentional. It is well documented that Foucault and Boswell maintained a collegial relationship and influenced one another's works.⁴ A classic Foucauldian strategy of ideological displacement by way of historical counter-example, is very much employed by Boswell. While this strategy has great transformative potential for cultural debates around sexuality and Queer issues, it also has its limitations – it remains a strategy of "absent bodies" and cannot alone sufficiently address the more central philosophical problem of *naming desire*. While such a problem cannot be blithely "solved", approaching its limits by a radical reintroduction of and reckoning with questions of *embodied desire*. This can provide a path beyond the banalities and

⁴. See the following interviews for Boswell's discussion of Foucault's work and Foucault's discussion of Boswell: Lawrence Mass, "Sexual Categories, Sexual Universals: An Interview with John Boswell," *Christopher Street* Issue 151 (1990) pg. 23-40. https://archive.org/details/sim_christopher-street_1990-09_12_151/page/28/mode/2up : James O'Higgins, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview With Michel Foucault *Salmagundi* No. 58/59 (1982/1983).

ressentiments of cultural, theological, and sexual politics which continue to circulate in 21st century socio-political life.

"Advocacy scholarship" and the paradoxical confirmation of Boswell's relevance

Many of Boswell's initial critics charged him with engaging in what they term "advocacy scholarship", used pejoratively to indicate scholarship that distorts the historical record to fit a set of socio-political ends. While the term advocacy scholarship has fallen out of common usage, "wokeness" could be understood as its functional equivalent in the 21st century. When a scholar or thinker is accused of "wokeness", it is often intended to indicate something thin, poorly substantiated, inauthentic, or partisan in their research or findings. While the desire to uphold standards of academic rigor and methodological transparency is often a relevant concern, it is important to understand where such accusations come from and to whom they are addressed. In many cases, and this was particularly visible in the Boswell case, the assumption is that certain mainstream perspectives are considered to be neutral and objective simply by virtue of being the majority position. What Boswell demonstrates is that the absence of discourse around same-sex affective and erotic relationships is itself the product of "advocacy", of an anti-gay socio-political agenda. The salient difference is that the anti-gay position has historically enjoyed significantly more "advocates" who were willing to suppress and alter the historical record to make it conform to their political perspectives, their theological positions, or their ideas of social propriety. Rather than being a partisan manifesto, Boswell's projects are important and early attempt to correct suppressions and oversights in the historical record which took place in a political and social context which repressed all discussion of homosexuality or of any manner of sexual or gender non-conformity. The controversies which initially played out in the reception of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and *Same-Sex Unions* are worthy of a truncated rehearsal, as the critiques themselves demonstrate the necessity of Boswell's historical contributions. Personal insults and invective were typical of both the academic and popular reception of Boswell's scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. Daniel Mendelsohn's oft cited essay makes some accusation of methodological dishonesty⁵ and

⁵Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Man Behind the Curtain," review of *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, by John Boswell, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, Vol. 3. No. 2/3 (1995), pg. 241-273. Mendelsohn is a trained classicist, and some claims about Boswell's misattribution of aspects of marriage rituals in the original manuscripts on *adelphopoiesis* have not been taken up by other

speculates that Boswell's entire project was rooted in a personal desire for fame or celebrity. Mendelsohn compares Boswell directly with Oscar Wilde in a long-form analogy, weaving something of a morality tale of the dangers and temptations of fame and making use of homophobic tropes in which gay men are portrayed as dishonest and hungry for attention. The review of *Same-Sex Unions* in *Christianity Today* included the following observations:

Unfortunately, the radical wing of the feminist movement has made the destruction of male society a specific policy goal. In this context, the linkage of male friendship with homosexuality is tragic, because it deprives men of the rationale they need to resist the feminist onslaught. By seeking to further this identification, Boswell is contributing to the destruction of Western culture because he cannot appreciate same-sex friendship, which he rightly regards as potentially very deep and very significant for society as a whole, in nonsexual terms. Turning friendship into marriage is just as mistaken as turning marriage into friendship; categories are confused, and both suffer as a result.⁶

These comments mix elements of blatant homophobia and misogyny while thoroughly missing one of Boswell's central arguments, that marriage, friendship, and romance have never been universally stable and unambiguous categories. Further, Boswell's projects were more than once interpreted as being motivated by "prurience", sexual desire, or a form of sexual voyeurism. Richard Neuhaus makes this very accusation in his review of *Same-Sex Unions* in *First Things*.⁷ Even more shocking is George Steiner's accusation of prurience in his review of *The Kindness of Strangers*, Boswell's historical survey of child abandonment, a study unrelated to his scholarship on homosexuality. After praising Boswell's scholarship, Steiner closes his review with the following comments,

Why, then, as one puts down "The Kindness of Strangers," is there a malaise? Much of the material is scabrous and lurid...but could it be otherwise? The problem may lie deeper. Choosing my words with extreme care, and with obvious respect for Boswell's achievement, I can suggest only that there attaches to this book a sheen of prurience—a suave clear-sightedness that verges on that of the voyeur. These are intimations difficult to define. They spring from tonality, from coloration, from acrobatics of surface logic. It may well and legitimately have been Professor Boswell's intent to leave his

scholars who have reviewed Boswell, even as these seem to be credible and worthy of further study.

⁶ Gerald Bray, "Friends or Lovers," review of *Same-Sex Unions* by John Boswell, *Christianity Today* Vol. 38 No. 14, (1994) pg. 46-7.

⁷ Richard J. Neuhaus, "In the Case of John Boswell", in: *First Things*, Issue 41, March 1994, p. 56.

readers discomfited, but the discomfort the reader actually feels may not be altogether the one the author aimed at.⁸ Particularly in Steiner's case, one might ask how he even came to the idea to associate a historical study on the abandonment of children in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages with a motivation of sexual interest on the part of the author. Given that Boswell was "out" as a gay man, it is reasonable to conclude that Steiner was making use of the popular and inaccurate homophobic trope, in which homosexuality is conflated with pedophilia. These particular reviews cannot be accurately described as anything other than homophobic personal attacks. Such interpretations of Boswell's work would have been considered not only absurd but also libelous if they had been directed at a scholar who was not openly gay. Boswell sought to trace the historical development of the deep-seated taboo around homosexuality as characteristic feature of Euro-Christian culture in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. The purportedly scholarly reviews from Mendelsohn, Neuhaus, and Steiner do not represent critical responses to Boswell's project. It is instead no hyperbole to describe them instances of homophobic outrage: that is, they make use of common and virulent homophobic tropes to express outrage that Boswell dare address issues of queer sexuality in the historical record.

The reviews themselves beg the question: what is the source of such violent reactions to the subject matter? Boswell's two projects involve an attempt to produce something like a genealogy of the Eurochristian cultural climate of homophobia. He is able to successfully demonstrate (and he is certainly not the first to do so), that such reflexive homophobia is not a human universal. It is not equally present in all cultures. Further, in attributing the origins of Eurochristian homophobia to the religiously based persecutions of "sodomites" that began in earnest in Europe around the twelfth century, Boswell demonstrates that homophobia has not always been a necessary corollary of Christian faith. At the same time, he recognizes that homophobia has been particularly strong in the Eurochristian West and has been accompanied by a theological justification. What is of interest then, is that gradual secularization in Eurochristian society did not directly result in a change in sexual mores and attitudes. Deep-seated taboos around queer sexualities are not exclusive to the religiously pious⁹ and they became no less pronounced in later secular discourses, in

⁸ George Steiner, "Poor Little Lambs," review of *The Kindness of Strangers* by John Boswell, *The New Yorker*, J. 64 Nr. 51, (1989), pg 105.

⁹ This much is apparent even in the homophobic critiques of Boswell that surveyed here—only one came from a self-consciously Christian perspective, the others were resolutely secular, published in the context of academic book reviews, and one was even produced by another openly gay scholar.

which a theological argument condemning homosexuality had ceased to be relevant. These taboos indeed remained present in the medical, psychological, anthropological, and historical discourses of the 19th and 20th centuries and Boswell is successful in documenting multiple impressive feats of obfuscation around homosexuality in the anthropological and historical scholarship the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰

Boswell is sometimes falsely attributed with single-handedly “discovering” or re-discovering the *adelphopoeisis* ritual. In fact, the ritual as it survived in Albania, Italy, Greece, and other areas of eastern Europe was well documented by cultural anthropologists during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Boswell references anthropologists of the late 19th century such as Giovanni Tamassia, Stanislaus Ciszewski as well as English anthropologist Mary Durham, the French historian Evelyne Patlagean, and Leopold Kretzenbacher of the early and mid-20th centuries, all of whom observed and documented the ritual and gave it names such as “artificial kinship”, *Wahlbruderschaft*, “artificial brotherhood”, or “blood brotherhood.”¹¹ While some of these anthropologists did entertain the possibility of an affective, erotic or sexual element to such relationships, some others firmly denied the possibility. By far the most common strategy was to tacitly avoid any question of the range of emotional or symbolic meanings of such a union. A name such as “artificial kinship” or “artificial brotherhood” serves well to obscure or avoid such questions. Boswell notes that this tacit avoidance could have been an act of self-preservation, as many of these historians and anthropologists came from countries in which homosexuality was at the time punishable by death. Understandably, these topics are taboo in such a context. Boswell also argues that these interpretations could also be the product of a kind of confirmation bias. Not only was homosexuality extremely taboo in most European cultures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it was also considered to be exceedingly rare. Indeed, the popular belief persists to this day that homosexuality and homosexual feelings are somehow a product of industrial and post-industrial cultures and that they are largely absent from more “natural” pre-industrial or “indigenous” cultures. There were then significant political, ideological, and practical factors which would have motivated anthropologists to either overlook or repress evidence of same-sex erotic or affective relationships. Boswell elaborates,

¹⁰ See particularly Chapter 8 of John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, New York, 1994.

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 267-273.

During the first half of the twentieth century, when most of the anthropological work was done on artificial brotherhoods, such severe prejudice attached to the subject of homosexuality in the cultures producing these studies that any researchers would have dared impute an erotic component to the phenomenon unless the evidence was absolutely irresistible. Evidence about emotional states are, however, almost never irresistible. Indeed, it is rarely unambiguous. It would be nearly impossible, for example, to determine whether most nineteenth-century married couples in Africa or even in Europe were “in love” with each other, but the want of the needed data would not be taken, in this case, to indicate the absence of such feelings, simply as a difficulty of research. By contrast, prior to the last decade the absence of any clear evidence of homosexual feelings would have been taken, without challenge, as sufficient evidence that the artificial relationships involved no “abnormal sentiments.¹²

All of this goes to show that it would be false to understand mainstream historical discourses on matters of human sexuality as representing some “neutral” position.

The accusation of “advocacy scholarship” suggests that Boswell’s research was an attempt to manipulate a previously neutral or objective discourse with his own socio-political agenda. Boswell’s scholarship is much better understood as the beginnings of a *correction* of generations of obscurantist scholarship motivated by deep seated cultural taboos and personal prejudices. Some of Boswell’s individual conclusions are contestable and some have been disproven¹³, but this is to be expected of any work of historical or philological scholarship. Indeed, the fact that other scholars have seen Boswell’s material as fit to further interrogate and contest is in fact a sign of its relevance. Boswell himself indicates in his introduction to *Same-Sex Unions* that his is not a final or complete history of homosexuality, but that his intention was to set out a set of “historical pathmarks” in a hitherto under-researched area.¹⁴ The outraged response to the very existence of Boswell’s inquiries into queer history of the Eurochristian world paradoxically confirmed the necessity of such an inquiry, which sought to account for the intense and prevailing nature of homophobia in the Eurochristian West.

Essentialism and social constructivism: 20th century debates in social theory and gender studies

¹² Ibid., pg. 273-4.

¹³ has Classicists and medievalists like Claudia Rapp have since undertaken their own studies the institution of *adelphopoiesis* and have concluded that it certainly has not been an unambiguous parallel to heterosexual marriage in all or even most times and places. See Rapp, Claudia, *Brother-Making in Late Antiquity and Byzantium: Monks, Laymen, and Christian Ritual*, Oxford, 2016.

¹⁴ Cite from *Same Sex Unions*.

The essentialist and social constructionist debates that surrounded Boswell's projects prove to be of more practical and philosophical relevance than the standard culture war polemics addressed in the last section. In the decades where Boswell was active in scholarship, social constructionist theories of sexuality were on the cutting edge of social theory. They directly challenged prevailing 20th century approaches in psychology, medicine, theology and indeed in the popular consciousness, in which it was assumed that human sexuality consists of a certain "fixed essence". Influential *essentialist* discourses on human sexuality during the 20th century include a) biological essentialism, b) psychological essentialism, and c) theological essentialism. Though differing significantly in some of their approaches and conclusions, each of these discourses are founded upon a claim to a universal, natural, or *healthy* form of human sexuality which applies to all persons. In medicine or biology, the central salient feature of sexuality is taken to be the biological imperative to produce offspring. Discourses in evolutionary psychology routinely offer reductive explanations of all sexual phenomena as simple outworkings of the drive to reproduce. The subjective, social and emotional question of desire, which is all-too-frequently at odds with any straightforward reproductive imperative, is offered no place in such a discourse.

Most 20th century approaches in psychology and psychiatry took life-long monogamous male-female pair-bonding as the paragon of "healthy" human sexuality. The heterosexual nuclear family was the touchpoint of this psychological essentialism and any deviation from this norm was understood as a form of perversion or psychopathology. Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a mental disorder in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1973. Today, it is a matter of consensus in Eurochristian societies that "conversion therapy" is a cruel, fringe, and increasingly illegal practice. Today, conversion therapy is rare, usually organized by Christian groups, and seeks to "correct" the sexual orientation of non-heterosexual persons.

What is largely overlooked is the fact that this was the *mainstream approach* of secular psychiatrists and psychologists until the mid-1970s, who understood homosexuality to be a mental disorder to be corrected. Here we find an unexpected and disconcerting convergence of psychological and theological essentialisms regarding human sexuality, which might suggest a certain harmony or mutual influence which we may be reluctant to admit. While these *essentialist* approaches to human sexuality do not agree with one another in their exact content, they do share a *univocal* approach to

human sexuality—the belief that it has only one possible meaning, one possible proper expression.

The most obvious arguments for theological essentialism are of the *sola scriptura* variety—that is, claims that biblical texts forbid homosexual activity.¹⁵ However, Christian arguments against Queer sexualities and non-traditional gender expression frequently go beyond the perceived scriptural interdiction to include appeals that mirror biological or psychological essentialism.

The most recent official Catholic Church position on issues of sexuality, procreation, and contraception can be found in the *Humanae Vitae*. In this Vatican II text, sexual activity is understood to be permissible in the context of marriage alone and then only for the purposes of procreation. Here the principles of biological and psychological essentialism are coupled: marriage between a man and a woman is considered a Sacrament in the Latin Church.¹⁶ The marriage relationship is, as such, understood to have an essentially redemptive or salvific significance, analogous to the discourses of “health” found in psychological essentialism. Beyond the argument of scriptural interdiction, there is also a common appeal to the consistency and authority of the *historic teachings of the Church* on matters of sexuality. Through the historical work in *Same Sex Unions and Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Boswell calls this argument around the Church’s historic witness into serious question. While it is true that Christian and Jewish teachings frequently privilege and center procreative sexual relations in the context of a male-female marriage relationship, this emphasis is not without its ambiguities. The Hebrew Bible and ancient Jewish culture was also distinctive in its strong emphasis on heterosexual and monogamous life-long marriage. There are Levitical prohibitions against homosexual acts, contraception, and a particular emphasis on child-rearing.

Still, a look at the narratives and histories of the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that not even the heroes of the faith and tradition (e.g., David, Esther, Ruth and Boaz, Abraham and Sarah, etc.) were particularly good exemplars of these religious ideals. The Epistles clearly privilege and center monogamous and heterosexual marriage¹⁷, but they say little about procreation. Indeed, Paul seems to locate the highest moral virtue in a non-procreative state of celibacy, which was his own practice.¹⁸ Jesus of the Gospels, while vocal about divorce and adultery and while demonstrating a warm and

¹⁵ See Lev. 18:22, Lev. 20:13 and Romans 1:26-27.

¹⁶ See *Humanae Vitae. Encyclical Letter of the Pope Paul VI*, July 1968. DOI = https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html

¹⁷ See for example Eph. 5:22-27.

¹⁸ See 1 Cor. 7:1-11

positive orientation towards children, is also largely silent on issues of procreation.

Boswell suggests that the Alexandrian Rule of the third century AD, which forms one of the earliest Christian arguments that fundamentally link sex and procreation in a moral teaching, was not originally developed as a sacred dogma, but rather as an archaic kind of *public health policy*. Clement of Alexandria promoted this sexual ethic, upon which *Humane Vitae* so relies, as a form of contraception and poverty alleviation.¹⁹ Unplanned pregnancies and child abandonment were the source of great human suffering in Late Antiquity, a topic which Boswell documented in his 1988 work *The Kindness of Strangers*. Boswell argues that early Christian sexual ethics were much more a response to these realities than they were the expression of theological essentialism around heterosexual pair bonding. Boswell holds that the sacralization and romanticization of heterosexual marriage is an ideological attitude which would have been quite foreign to the early Church. It is in this way that the unambiguous theological essentialism of mainstream Church teachings on human sexuality fail to stand up to serious scrutiny of the sacred texts and traditions.

Social constructionist theory developed as an answer to essentialist theories of sexuality and sought to demonstrate the variety and complexity of approaches to sex, reproduction, love, gender, and marriage have been throughout human history. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* series and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* are two significant and rather famous texts in this tradition. Foucault's *History of Sexuality pt. 1* involved an extensive analysis of the scientific and medical discourses around in the 19th and 20th centuries, arguing that they should be interpreted as discourses of *power* rather than accepted at face value in their claims to scientific objectivity. These discourses around sexuality were meant to influence the behavior of persons and populations. Foucault understood them as a secularized transformation of previous religious and clerical discourses of power around sex. Whereas in previous centuries one might have confessed their sexual desires and behaviors to a priest, moderns simply reorient their confessional practices to doctors, psychiatrists, or therapists. Foucault argues, "The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth."²⁰ The

¹⁹ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago and London, 1980, p. 161-2.

²⁰ Foucault Michel, Robert Hurley (transl.), *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, New York, 1978, pg. 56.

History of Sexuality series is an attempt to trace the historical relation of sexuality and truth in Eurochristian discourses dating back to Antiquity. One effect of such a history is to demonstrate how multiform, contingent, and flexible such claims around the relationship between truth and sex, or the truth about sex can be.

Judith Butler develops and radicalizes this social constructionist position in *Gender Trouble* by calling into question the distinction between *sex* and *gender*, which itself has only arisen in recent decades. The conventional terms of the distinction are as follows: while sex is considered to be a biological or natural reality which precedes cultural assumptions, gender is understood a socially-constructed system of cultural assumptions and practices which develop in response to this biological reality. Butler contests this traditional understanding, arguing that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘pre-discursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.”²¹

Butler’s is ultimately an argument against any claim to nature unmediated by culture, against any assertion of truth which finds its legitimization in a pre-cultural or pre-discursive reality. For social constructionist, culture and discourse are always prior to any claim of truth, there is no truth to be found outside of discursive practices. Boswell’s historical approach is then in many ways influenced by the insights of social constructionists. He employs careful attention to the historical and linguistic incongruities on language of love, sexuality, and affect across the ages to destabilize essentialist narratives about the incompatibility between Christianity and homosexuality. He uses Christian history to destabilize what is considered by many to be irrefutable Christian dogma and seeks to reclaim evidence of tolerance and affirmation of same-sex relationships in the ancient world. Simultaneously he seeks to reclaim evidence of homosexual relationships in European history. Finally, Boswell provides compelling evidence that such relationships have been intentionally obscured by historians and anthropologists in recent centuries.

With this background, the accusations from queer theorists that Boswell was engaging in a form of essentialism might come as a surprise. The social constructivist critique of Boswell takes place at a much more technical level, it is ultimately a contestation at the level of theory of language, which takes issue with the use of general definitions which

²¹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, 1991, pg. 11.

frame Boswell's historical inquiry. Boswell posits that general concepts like *homosexuality* or *marriage* can be usefully employed across cultural and historical contexts. For Boswell, to be gay is to be a person "conscious of erotic inclination toward their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic"²² and he claims that such persons have existed in varying degrees as a something approaching an *empirical universal* across human civilizations—that is, he claims that something akin to this preference can be found in nearly all cultures throughout history. His provisional definition of marriage takes a similar approach by establishing a *Familienähnlichkeit*²³ (family resemblance) between various historical, cultural, and legal conceptions of marriage, arguing that most share the features of "a lifelong, committed bond between two partners" involving a merger of legal status or property. He argues that these are more stable attributes of marriage than the common modern expectation that the partners be in some way "in love". It is in this way, by establishing this manner of family resemblance, that Boswell argues that *adelphopoiesis* can be understood as a kind of marriage.

The radical social constructionist argument against Boswell can be put rather simply and provocatively: if homosexuality as a concept didn't exist before the 19th century, then it must follow that homosexuals also did not exist before the invention of the term. So understood, it is an invalid anachronism to posit that gay people existed before the coining of the word "gay". The category would not have made sense to persons in the medieval or ancient world, and some posit that the very idea of sexual orientation or sexual preference is a modern invention and that these are ideas with no currency prior to the 19th century. A very strict social constructionist position would hold that there are no sexual or social categories which exist outside of the precise vocabulary used to describe them in a given culture or language. In this view, Boswell's attempts to control for anachronism in discussions of human sexuality are insufficient; the chasm of culture, language and context is insurmountable and gay or Queer history is, as such, impossible to undertake in a historiographically responsible manner.

3. Boswell and the critique of "neo-nominalism"

²² Boswell later changes his position by omitting the conscious aspect of same-sex attraction as a necessary component of gay sexuality. Rather than needing to be conscious of their erotic inclinations, the unconscious or semi-conscious presence of erotic inclinations towards one's own gender also fits into his understanding of gayness. See Boswell, John, *Christianity, Homosexuality, Social Tolerance Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago & New York, 1980 pp. 44. See also John Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals, Sexual Categories," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman et. al., New York, 1989, pg.26.

²³ See Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1971, pg. 48-53.

Boswell himself addresses these methodological issues in his 1989 essay *Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories*, in which he compares the substance of essentialist/social constructionist debates to the universalist/nominalist debates of the High Middle Ages.²⁴ Ultimately both are debates about the structure and function of language. For the universalist or essentialist, human categories assign names to already existing structures of reality. For the nominalist or the constructivist, categories are only names agreed upon by humans and “the ‘order’ [that] people see is rather their *creation* than their *perception*.²⁵ Mediations between these positions have been at play in most of the history of Western philosophy. Kantian critical philosophy for example seeks to synthesize empiricist and idealist epistemological positions in a system in which *both* human construction of categories and human perception of transcendentals shape their complex interactions in the world. Kant’s critical mediation of empiricism and idealism addresses the same epistemological issues inherent in the nominalist/universalist debates that preceded it as well as to the social constructionist/essentialist debates which followed.

The problems of strictly essentialist approaches to human sexuality have already been demonstrated – even a cursory historical study will make clear that attitudes, mores, and categories of gender and sexuality vary and fluctuate across time and communities. Regardless of the dogmatic claims of many Christians, there is no historical or theological consensus within Christianity on the “right” way to be sexual or the “right” way to inhabit a gender. On the other hand, a social constructionist position, like that of Butler’s on gender and sex, holds that there is no such thing as a pre-discursive sexual reality. In some sense, this is true. All persons are always already immersed in language and culture, there is no human reality fully untouched by these structures. However, an extreme nominalist position leads to difficulties in explaining who the agent is in the generation of a new concept and who is acted upon. Many social constructionist positions suffer from a significant contradiction: if persons are passive recipients of socially mandated categories, something like homosexuality or heterosexuality are not questions of biology or agency or preference but of suggestion. But who does the suggesting? How are already existing sexual or relational categories generated?

If an extreme essentialist position leads to unfounded dogmatism in matters of human sexuality, an extreme social

²⁴ William of Ockham and Peter Abelard are two of the most well-known nominalist philosophers from this period.

²⁵ Boswell, John, “Revolutions, Universals, Sexual Categories” in Duberman, Martin (Ed.), Vicinus, Martha (Ed.), and Chauncey Jr., George (Ed.), *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, New York, 1989, pg. 2. Emphasis my own.

constructionist position leads to an intractable skepticism, in which no 'object' of thought (or of desire) might ever be admitted. The question of interdiction is the structuring principle to essentialist approaches to sexuality: *What is permissible? What is forbidden? What is the telos of sexuality and how do I conform myself to it?* In this approach, another set of highly relevant questions regarding sexuality and eroticism are conspicuously avoided: *What do I desire? And why?* Those who would forbid or stigmatize Queer sexuality through a theological essentialism reduce all questions of human sexuality to the relation to a scriptural interdiction: homosexuality is forbidden because it is written in the Holy Text. The enduring hermeneutic problem, is of course, that the Hebrew Bible and New Testament are by and large not the kinds of texts that lend themselves to easy or unambiguous judgements on permissible and forbidden actions. Even the Torah, which contains the most straightforward ordinances on ritual and moral behavior, has been subject to many centuries of debate about its proper practicability. Add to that the ambiguities of culture, context, translation, and it becomes clear: there is no unambiguous textual ordinance to which one can simply submit oneself and thereby avoid the questions: *What do I desire? And why?*

Though utilizing different epistemes, biological and psychological essentialisms operate under the same framework: What is permissible (or recommended)? What is forbidden (or not recommended)? What is the *telos* of sexuality and how do I conform myself to it? Such sexual essentialisms are, at the end, a naturalization of normative imperatives that pretend to be observations, the *should* posing as the *is*. Boswell himself employs the strategies of the social constructionist, in *Christianity, Homosexuality, and Social Tolerance* and *Same Sex Unions*: he destabilizes theological essentialisms around sexuality by exposing their origins and providing credible historical counter-examples. Such counterexamples reveal the contingency of essentialist-normative approaches to sexuality, which pretend to be indisputably universal. Boswell was amongst the earliest historians who succeeded in calling the bluff that the Christian scriptures unambiguously forbid all forms of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive sexual activity, and in doing this he followed the example of Michel Foucault. However, this strategy alone can only go so far. To simply deny the terms of the interdiction does not go far enough, it remains at the discursive-negotiative level in which lines around what is forbidden and what is permitted are arbitrarily drawn and redrawn, potentially *ad infinitum*. Boswell himself described the most extreme forms of social constructionism as a form of "neo-nominalism", they preclude any possibility of *naming desire*. What lacks in these approaches is a coherent approach

to the fundamental issues of Word, Concept, Body, and Desire.

Semiotic problems/Somatic problems

In his introduction to *The History of Sexuality pt. 2*, Michel Foucault provides an illuminating reflection on the motivations for the project:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple... It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.²⁶

For all the novelty and potential of such a strategy it is necessary to point out that the body is this approach, also somehow absent. The archaeological method shared by Boswell and Foucault might be understood as a kind of *askesis* – through the careful examination of *absent bodies* of the past, one seeks to stray afield from oneself, to escape or transcend restrictive beliefs about sexuality, to see the world through the eyes of an absent Other, and as Foucault expresses, through this experience or undertaking, to *change*. The manner of change to be effected remains unseen and unknown at the initial moment of inquiry. Foucault isn't seeking *sexual liberation* exactly. Rather, through his research, he is seeking an epistemic liberation on the issue of sexuality. It would go perhaps too far to accuse him of *merely* intellectual exercise. One can also detect an existential element in this quote- the questions he is posing around desire, pleasure, and sex are brought to bear on the entire person and not just the "mind". But the desire for knowledge Foucault expresses here is a remarkably disembodied knowledge. Which is paradoxical, as the topic is itself *sexuality*.

The third volume of Foucault's History of Sexuality series, entitled *The Care of the Self*, closely scrutinizes the ways in which Antique men cared for themselves, related to themselves, and constructed a coherent subjectivity.²⁷ This is ostensibly undertaken as a part of a critique of transcendental

²⁶Michel Foucault, Robert Hurley (transl.), *The History of Sexuality Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, New York, 1985, pg 8.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, Robert Hurley (transl.), *The History of Sexuality Volume III: The Care of the Self*, New York, 1988.

subjectivity, but one cannot help but note the echoes of the 'self-help' genre in both locution and topical orientation. While he tends to emphasize the contingent and non-elective factors which indelibly influenced the construction subjectivity in the western tradition, even this intervention, Foucault's inquiry into the "care of the self", cannot fully exclude the reality one's reflexive and elective participation in the construction of subjectivity. Foucault and Boswell's interventions involve a method of rethinking sexuality by way of historical proxy. This approach may eventually affect the body, but it does not take as its starting point the body of the questioner, the body that is present.

It is culturally unseemly to admit that personal fears and desires play any role in discussions of LGBTQ issues. Appeals to law, appeals to dogma, and appeals to tradition are rhetorical tools which enable one to take a position on admissible desires, while simultaneously avoiding any indication that the speaker is herself a subject of desire. A minimum veneer of disinterested objectivity serves as an unspoken term of admission to most forms of public debate. The paradox lies therein, that the failure to address the question of desire ultimately renders all discussions of gender and sexuality superfluous. When so conducted, debates around Queer and LGBTQIA+ issues are devoid of any real content, significance, or relevance to the lived experience of the interlocutors. Without acknowledgement of desire, these are only *differential disembodied positions*, or *identity politics*. Frequently, discourse on Queer issues has little at all to do with the topic of sexuality, the rights of sexual minorities, erotic expression, or the pressing questions of reproduction and intergenerational politics. Stripped of any real content, these become culture war discourses centrally (and futilely) concerned with expressing a sentiment or position which distinguishes one as opposed to their opponent. Such discussions are redundant, devoid of real referent, and wholly unproductive on the socio-political register.

Through their historical interventions, Foucault and Boswell provide a truly innovative contribution first to Queer and Gender studies and derivatively to the political struggle for LGBTQ visibility and rights. These inquiries remain, however, on the culturally approved registers of disinterested historical inquiry. While their use of historical proxy is successful in destabilizing essentialist certainties, such interventions do not constitute a successful interrogation of desire, they only create better conditions for such a task. Boswell's historical inquiries are an exemplary intervention which call the bluff of the essentialist discourses around sexuality which dominate both the secular and religious scenes, while avoiding the neo-nominalist and self-referential excesses of some social constructionist discourses. Boswell's

archaeological method, inspired by Michel Foucault, falls short of an *embodied discourse*, that is, a discourse that implicates and interrogates the bodies and desires of the interlocutors. A disembodied discourse will always fall short of formulating a coherent sexual ethics. Indeed, the failures of theological, ethical, and social conversations on human sexuality, their disintegration into culture war polemics which eventually lose sight of their referent, might be attributed to their inability to locate the body, to *in-carnate*, so to speak. The only path out of such culture-war dead-ends is the establishment of an embodied discourse, which a re-locates the embodied, desiring, speaking subject and calls the bluff on the tactic of avoidance present in the extremes of essentialist and social constructionist approaches. Both the absolute submission to interdiction and an absolutely *laissez-faire* attitude to sexuality share the great advantage of never requiring one to pose the question: *What do I desire, and why?*

Foucault gets at something very important in stating that, in the nineteenth century, "sex was [re]constituted as a problem of truth."²⁸ If there is a truth to be found in sex, the greatest problem with the modernist essentialist approaches lies in a misapprehension of the structure and function of truth. The truth of sex cannot dispense with the realities of the body. In his 1996 *Fire and Roses*, Carl Raschke proposes *transcendental somatics* as an approach with the potential to transform the parameters of what embodied or incarnate discourse might entail. Boswell and Foucault's clever inquiries into the practices of absent, historical bodies provide an initial destabilization of the reductive absolutisms which govern essentialist approaches to sexuality. Raschke's transcendental somatics then, provides conceptual tools to ensure against the spiral into self-referential triviality which so plagues social constructionist discourses on sexuality.

Transcendental somatics as the framework of embodied discourse

The call for a rejection of the mind/body dichotomy frequently forms the basis for discourses around embodiment or somatics. In order to correct the disembodied excesses and ills of the Western tradition of Cartesian subjectivity, we are urged to take the human body as a focal point, to center the body, and talk about the body. Transcendental somatics nuances such approaches by way of a crucial but subtle assertion; Raschke understands the mind/dichotomy as the *double sentence* of Western (or Eurochristian) culture.²⁹ The

²⁸ Foucault Michel, Robert Hurley (transl.), *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, New York, 1978, pg. 56.

²⁹ See Carl Raschke, *Fire and Roses. Postmodernity and the thought of the body*, New York, 1996, p. 33-4.

double sentence, more commonly known as the *Freudian slip*, is the apparently misplaced speech act; that which appears to be either an embarrassing or irrelevant error is a complex, but crucial subjective process of simultaneous compromise and self-assertion. The Freudian slip is the subject's attempt to simultaneously contend with and submit to social expectations. At the conscious level it is an acquiescence to interdiction but at the unconscious level it is the insistent assertion of desire.³⁰ In regards to contemporary debates around LGBTQ issues, we can take this to mean: when we speak of sex, we don't mean sex. When we don't speak of sex, we often actually refer to sex. Sexual education or public health discourses, for example, directly address sexuality and sexual acts while employing a clinical and regulatory distance. These factual discourses discuss sexual acts in the most explicit manner, while maintaining an almost prudish reticence regarding sexual desire, that is, the complex and idiosyncratic motivations and contexts which lead people to engage in sexual acts. On the other hand, many discourses which seem to be a level of abstraction beyond mere sex talk are frequently brimming with erotic subtext. Countless discourses purportedly about *something else* are shot through with desire and questions relevant to desires of the body, the coupling or connectivity of bodies. This is indeed the principle which undergirds the entire advertising industry, it lurks in concepts like commodity fetishism, and it unavoidably colors political discourse.

Such persistent double sentences cannot be explained by the concept of repression alone. In a crucial sense, they are matters of *transcendence*. In his transcendental idealism, Kant endeavored to establish the necessary parameters of reason which could function independently of the accidents of empirical experience. The great headache of the history of Kantian interpretation arises from exaggerated misapprehensions about the nature and purpose of such an independent reason. This independence should not imply that Kantian critical reason is an "island unto itself", utterly isolated from the realm of empirical experience, nor should it imply that the world of empirical objects is in some way, irrational, or an inadequate object of rational faculties. Rather, the Kantian critical project seeks to establish a reason which can operate autonomously of the accidents of circumstance, experience, or appearance; it establishes an independent basis of reason, but it would be a mistake to seek to separate reason and experience into two utterly remote fields. As Raschke puts it, "The great, yet inchoate discovery is postmodernist theory

³⁰ See Sigmund Freud's "Lectures on the Psychology" of Errors in: Sigmund Freud, G. Stanley Hall (trans.), *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, digireads, 2019.

as a whole is that any ‘transcendental analytic’ in the Kantian sense and a transcendental somatics are one in the same. Both, in fact, constitute the groundwork for a totally new ‘empirical’ approach to knowledge.” The Enlightenment philosophical tradition too often fails to recognize the *Knower* as also always and already *Agent*. The Knower or Reasoning subject is constructed as passive observer of the world around him and not as always and already *subject to, products of, and agents in* the empirical world which he seeks to Know, a world which consists of *both* substance and accident. This leads to a well-documented solipsistic tendency in the western construction of subjectivity. Such a distortion has significant consequences for the aforementioned debates around human sexuality.

If the mind/body split as the double sentence of Western culture, as Raschke argues, or double sentence, the Freudian slip, is not a sickness to be diagnosed and cured. It is simply a symptom of our subjective constitution. The double sentence is a product of subjective processes, analogous to the way that burping, blinking, or falling asleep are symptoms of our physical constitutions, products of physical processes. This double sentence, the mind/body split, is a symptom of the play of potentiality and actuality to which each person is indelibly subject. This double sentence is the *interstice* of mind/body and potential/act; this interstice, indeed, constitutes desire itself. While the reflexive differential subjectivity of Western philosophical subjectivity (a tradition initiated by Descartes) utterly misses the body, a transcendental somatics replaces the *cogito ergo sum* with the *somatic a priori*. This involves the recognition that the fundamental condition of embodiment is to be subject to desire and finitude.

Crucially, transcendental somatics is not *naval-gazing*. This is to say that it is no reductive materialism of the body which takes anatomy as its exclusive point of focus. In his 1990 work *The Absent Body*, medical doctor and philosopher Drew Leder provides an account for the curious phenomena of “body-forgetfulness”. In everyday life we frequently forget that we are bodies. Rather than diagnosing this as dysfunction or sickness, Leder accounts for this forgetfulness, arguing that the body recedes from view precisely because the body is always oriented to that which is outside of itself. The body is understood as an organ which transcends itself, which is utterly oriented for connectivity with its environment.³¹ That is not to say that the human person cannot take her body as object. This is certainly possible—and frequently necessary—but it is not our default orientation. The body is oriented outward, it is given over unto its environment and this *given-over-ness* is indicated by its very anatomical structure and

³¹ See Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, Chicago & London: 1990.

function. The body is finite. The body transcends itself. Transcendental somatic recognizes the body as oriented toward transcendence and it is in this way that Raschke can state, "sexuality signifies the interconnectivity of bodies."³²

Sexuality signifies the interconnectivity of bodies. The body, the person, is also a signifying entity. In *Fire & Roses*, Raschke makes brief but important reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *primordial perceptual milieu*, which constitutes a field distinct from the field of linguistic signification.³³ The world of signs and signifiers draws loose connections between distinct perceptual milieu, or lifeworlds, which would remain remote from one another without this linguistic intervention. Systems of signification (i.e. language and speech) connect by way of displacement. Signification is a complex and generative process; it cannot be reduced to a simple one-to-one correspondence to the signified lifeworld. Language and speech are categories of transcendence because they alter and transform the perceptual milieus from which they initially arise. Systems of signification describe, transcribe, and translate lifeworlds, and in this process these lifeworlds are inevitably also transformed. To speak at all is to express a desire and connect to a listener. The speech act instigates some manner change –an alteration or intervention into a situation-- and it implicates a listener into this intervention. This fundamental desire holds for even the more abstract speech acts; speech remains speech inasmuch as it seeks out listeners, recipients, or interlocutors. Speech is always related to a desire, a *willing*. If, as Raschke argues, sexuality signifies the interconnectivity of bodies, speech signifies an indispensable mode by which persons connect with one another. These persons who seek to connect by way of signification are always already embodied. It is in this way that we can say that *discourse itself is erotics*, at least in an extended sense. Reference to desire and reference to the body, and particularly the desire of, for, and between bodies, is that which makes something erotic. Speech cannot but participate in both.

Essentialist and social constructionist discourses on sexuality lose their coherence precisely inasmuch as they seek to debate what one should be allowed to do with her body, while seeking to thoroughly circumvent the erotic. This amounts to a misapprehension of what the body is and what the body does. Discourses that operate under this misapprehension are, in a manner of speaking, a *waste of breath*. Raschke calls for a transition from a regulatory discourse oriented around the *body politic*, to a transcendental

³² See Carl Raschke, *Fire and Roses. Postmodernity and the Thought of the Body*, New York, 1996, p. 43.

³³ Merleau-Ponty's primordial perceptual milieu owes, of course, much to Edmund Husserl's concept of *Lebenswelt*.

somatics oriented around the *body erotic*, which simply recognizes the (living) body as a finite entity which seeks to transcend itself. This drive towards self-transcendence is what we call *desire*, and one of the crucial things which bodies desire is connection to other bodies. This is emphatically true of humans, that most social of animal. It is such that discourses on sexuality are always discourses about the connectivity of bodies and always implicated in desire. Transcendental somatics offers the conceptual groundwork adequate to an interrogation of desire. As such, the interrogation of desire is not a lapse into trivial hedonism, because this transcendental framework for somatics recognizes that desire is not merely the wish for pleasure. The body does not seek only stimulation. The body seeks to transcend itself. An indispensable aspect of that self-transcendence is the *connectivity of bodies*.

How to talk about sex: a beginner's guide

I'm suggesting that we start over, that we shift the cultural conversation around sexuality onto an entirely different axis. We have demonstrated that the conventional 20th century paradigms of essentialism and social constructivism are inadequate to meaningful discussions about sexuality because they seek, in their very methodological foundations, to circumvent and avoid any engagement with the question of desire. This paper has sought to recover the all-too-often overlooked contributions of John Boswell to Christian theological debates around sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues. These are somewhat dated studies in church history; multiple individual findings have of course been contested and/or updated. All the same, Boswell's contribution is hard to underestimate, as his very approach to this kind of history continues to provide a challenging and important resource for Christian theological reflection on questions of human sexuality and sexual ethics. The influence of Michel Foucault's historiographical sensibilities helped Boswell to destabilize Christian theological essentialisms "from the inside out" — that is to say, by working within the tradition itself. When Foucault graspingly described the desire to "stray a field of oneself" as motivation for his life's work, he indicated a desire to lay bare the harmful and indeed arbitrary nature of the interdiction essentialist discourses around sexuality effect. While Boswell and Foucault's historical interventions provide a necessary and liberating *ideological displacement*, a transcendental somatics can build upon this contribution with a subsequent and equally necessary *subjective re-orientation*.

The familiar critique of social constructivism is, of course, the accusation of relativism. Social constructivist interventions are famously adept in calling cultural

assumptions into critical question. However, after effecting disillusionment with what Foucault terms “discourses of power”, the curtain drops. This post-critical reticence is indeed the cause of the familiar critique of social constructivism as relativistic.³⁴ Ideological displacement is not liberating on its own; it hardens into cynicism and hopelessness if a re-orientation cannot be achieved in its aftermath. To follow Foucault’s metaphor, “straying afield of oneself” may be exciting for a time, but if one strays too far into the woods and never succeeds in orienting herself, the euphoria will eventually wear off. As the sun begins to set, one eventually needs to have an answer to the question, “Where do I go next?”

Transcendental somatics can provide a sound basis for a reorientation of Christian theological discourse on sexuality. The philosophical and methodological sensibilities of transcendental somatics prevent it from hardening into yet another ideology or essentialism. These same sensibilities make it conversant with secular discourses. Indeed, one need not embrace Christianity at all to affirm the philosophical entry point of transcendental somatics. It recognizes the person as fundamentally embodied and finite.

Simultaneously, it recognizes that these finite bodies seek, always, to transcend themselves. The very anatomical structure of the human animal indicates its orientation beyond itself. The most basic functions of our bodies –our eyes ears and other sensory organs, hunger and digestion, procreative impulses and desires, our sociality – indicate both our finitude and our drive to transcendence (to engage beyond ourselves). The human animal’s extremely advanced capacity for signification sets it somewhat apart from other animals, with whom we share so many other basic attributes.

Sexuality signifies the connectivity of bodies, signification the connectivity of persons. In an important respect, the mind/body dichotomy is a function of a human’s simultaneous participation in potentiality and actuality. The complexity of desire can be attributed to its participation in both corporality (actuality, finitude) and signification (potentiality, transcendence).

These are a set of deceptively simple axioms, anthropological reminders that can radically re-center discussions of sexuality. Transcendental somatics can provide for both precision and nuance; combine ethical seriousness with appropriate respect for human freedom. Such a basis contrasts with discourses on matters of sexuality in the *body politic* to which we are

³⁴ Indeed, some of the confusion around the structure and function of language in social constructionist theory examined in this paper indicates that the accusations of relativism are not completely unfounded.

accustomed, which so frequently take questions of interdiction, obligation, coercion, and hierarchical or regulatory power as their point of departure. The suggestion of a move from the *body politic* to the *body erotic* is to suggest a fundamental change in orientation in public discourse, in which we regard ourselves and our interlocutors not as regulatory objects, but as desiring subjects. Transcendental somatics is a background that can help us to account for a set of fairly universal concerns that are implicated in any manner of “sex-talk”, these can be articulated as concerns around a) Pleasure, b) Procreation, c) Precarity, and d) (in some cases) Piety. Under no circumstances should these four concerns be understood to be *imperatives*, but rather more as a heuristic set of issues in which human sexuality is necessarily implicated. They are particularly relevant for Eurochristian and post-Christian cultures but might certainly also find resonance in cultural contexts where the role of Christianity is less central. Attention to these four features is beneficial in that it makes clearer some of the main issues of contestation in culture war debates about human sexuality while serving as a stopgap against the impulse of identitarian posturing. Pleasure, Procreation, Precarity and Piety are concerns that are simultaneously extremely general and extremely personal. Naming them as issues allows us to *name desire* in a way that can de-venomize cultural debates on sexuality and gender. I close with a short reflection on each of them, which might serve as an opening and model for the kind of public discourse in which landmark works like those of John Boswell might be adequately received and reflected upon.

Pleasure

The Sexual Revolution represented a major turning point in Western or Eurochristian culture, and even 50 years later, Christianity continues to flounder in its response to these developments. Hormonal contraception, which was first became available in the 1960s, brought about major changes in family planning. For the first time, it became possible for women and heterosexual partners to completely and reliably separate questions of sexual procreation from matters of sexual pleasure. The affirmation of pleasure as a relevant and legitimate aspect of sexuality was an important and transformative achievement of the sexual revolution. However, the drift into the extremes of hedonism is a critique often leveled against it. Even as it engendered a cultural climate which afforded greater respect for individual freedom, choice, and autonomy in which movements for women's and LGBTQ+ rights began to flourish, it did not spell the end of patriarchy. When sexuality is reduced only to the question of pleasure, stimulation, or physical relief, we have often seen a premium placed on satisfaction and drives of (cis)hetero white men, at the expense of the autonomy, dignity, and safety of

other people. The rapid growth of a globalized sex industry in the past fifty years, indelibly marked by sex trafficking, coercion, and abuse, is a dark testament to this reality.³⁵

Sex is never only about pleasure simply because pleasure is never only about pleasure. Psychoanalytic discourses provide us significant but undervalued insights into the ambivalences and sorrows inherent to human sexuality which resists a reductivism which would only have sex be a matter of stimulation or biological imperative. Even while this is the case, the affirmation of pleasure, delight, and joy in sexuality is in an important sense, indispensable. In understanding pleasure or erotics in the broader sense on offer through transcendental somatics — as participation in one's lifeworld and embodied connection to community — it is possible to even speak of a person's *right* to pleasure. This also has background in discourses of natural and human rights, following the language of the "pursuit of happiness" or the provisions for things like leisure, family, private, and community life provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³⁶ The development of a coherent sexual ethics cannot dispense of the question of pleasure. This may be why traditional Christian sexual ethics, in their frequently exceptional degrees of prudishness, have been so inadequate in their response to the Sexual Revolution. To speak of pleasure and each person's right to pleasure is to raise a radically humane concern which is so often lost, both in our obsession with utilitarian and profit motives as well as in the "queasiness" around pleasure and the body. The question of pleasure challenges us to *name desire* in so many crucial ways. We might ask critical questions about whose desires are indulged in our societies and at what cost? Who and what are exploited in our microcultures of hedonistic excess? We might ask what role pleasure plays in our personal lives? If it takes a back seat to other concerns, why? We might ask why it has been so socially important, for so long, to deny the legitimate desire for pleasure and companionship to LGBTQ+ persons?

Procreation

One of the realities of Western, post-Industrial, and post-Sexual Revolution societies is the reality of declining birthrates. More family planning options have resulted in more people starting families later in life and having fewer

³⁵ A dated but well-respected inquiry into this global problem is from Nicholas D. Kristof & Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky. Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*, New York, 2009. See also the latest of annual reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, (United Nations publication, Sales no.: E.23.IV.1.)

³⁶ See Article 12, Article 16, Article 24, and Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR).

children overall. Further, cultural, economic, and political developments have made the idea of foregoing marriage, childbearing and childrearing altogether attractive for an increasing number of people. While these developments, in many respects, are either positive or neutral, they do point to a demographic paradox: if people in all countries were having children well below the replacement rate, which is the case in much of the rich post-industrial world³⁷, humanity would have some serious demographic issues. These include strained systems of elder care, destabilized economies, and in the most extreme and hypothetical case, questions about the future of humanity. While European and North American are broadly aging populations, birthrates in the Global South are not slowing at all. According to the UN, 70% of people in sub-Saharan Africa are under the age of 30³⁸ and World Bank data indicates many countries in this region have a birth rate of over double the replacement rate. Growing populations also face social and economic challenges, and these demographic questions are compounded by the climate crisis. We face serious issues regarding the Earth's carrying capacity compounded by the massive biodiversity loss currently taking place.³⁹ Climate collapse is a real possibility, and even if it is avoided, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) projects that 1.2 million people will become climate refugees before 2050.⁴⁰

The point is that sex and sexuality cannot only be reduced to matters of individual pleasure, it is also crucially linked to questions of procreation, and these are of social and political relevance. This is not to suggest that individual choice in matters of reproduction is negotiable. Reproductive and medical decisions always belong to a mother or childbearing person; sexual ethics based in transcendental somatics can only affirm the basic principles of human rights as a minimum standard of ethics and behavior. If there is a critique to be made, it is of the tendency in post-Sexual Revolution cultures to refuse to see reproductive questions through anything but the lens of hyper-individualism.

The hyper-individualist *Zeitgeist* involves a denial of intergenerational responsibility, which is perhaps most

³⁷ See the data on birth rate per country made available by the World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>

³⁸ See the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*. UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO.3.

³⁹ See "Summary for Policy Makers in: S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Dias and H.T. Ngo (editors), *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES Secretariat, Bonn, Germany .

⁴⁰ See Institute for Economics & Peace. *Ecological Threat Report 2022: Analysing Ecological Threats, Resilience & Peace*, Sydney, October 2022. DOI = <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources> (Accessed 10. May 10, 2023).

painfully apparent in the climate crisis.⁴¹ If we understand sexuality to be a matter of the connectivity of bodies, then the task of naming desire must come to terms with the question of procreation, the intergenerational connectivity of bodies. Both biological and theological essentialisms surveyed in this paper would reduce sex to only questions of reproduction, as exemplified by the Vatican II position in *Humane Vitae*.⁴² By contrast, more hedonistic and hyper-individualistic tendencies in post-sexual revolution cultures would reduce sex to pleasure. The former extreme leads to coercive and oppressive societies, which deny particularly the dignity and humanity of women and LGBTQ+ persons. The latter extreme leads to utterly dysfunctional societies with no orientation towards the future. An ethically responsible transcendentally somatic public discourse on sexuality cannot afford to ignore the reproductive aspect of human sexuality. This need not mean a biological essentialism which reduces every person to their reproductive capacities or denies the value of persons who are unable or unwilling to reproduce. It would, however, call upon persons – especially those living in post-Sexual Revolution, post-industrial, wealthy, and polluting cultures – to seriously interrogate their responsibility to future generations. We are indelibly connected and bear responsibility for the world we leave to these generations, whether we bear children or not.

Precarity

The previous section addressed the issue intergenerational precarity, which is related to human sexuality in ways that are not so obviously apparent. But there is also another form of precarity in sexuality and eroticism which is worthy of attention. A mark of post-Sexual Revolution cultures is an undeniable crisis of meaning on matters of sex, eroticism, marriage, partnership, family, and belonging. A significant problem with a hedonistic approach to sexuality is the emotional trivialization of sex. Sex is indeed about pleasure, but it is not only about pleasure and indeed pleasure is not always straightforward. Sex is also related to the desire for affirmation, emotional intensity, companionship, and belonging. *Casual sex* indicates the kind of sexual relationship which disavows these emotional elements. It is a mainstay of post-Sexual Revolution cultures, even when there is tremendous ambivalence around it displayed within these

⁴¹ The criminal negligence on the climate issue is not just to be leveled against Eurochristian cultures, complicity in this negligence that sadly holds across cultures, continents, and economic classes.

⁴² See *Humane Vitae. Encyclical Letter of the Pope Paul VI*, July 1968. DOI = https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html

cultures. Cultural conservatives or religious traditionalists might condemn it outright as sinful or unnatural and thus forbidden. On the other hand, those with a simplistically hedonistic or biologically reductive understanding of sexuality might reject any desire for emotional or spiritual fulfillment through sexual relationships as sentimentality or esoteric superstition. These attitudes towards the issue, which appear to be so incompatible, share one important feature: none allow any place for the emotional risks of erotic relationships.

While sex can be casual and relatively devoid of emotional investment, rare is the person who never seeks emotional fulfillment in erotic relationships. The desire for affirmation and emotional connection, the risk of it not being reciprocated, and the risk of losing an established emotional connection to apathy or habit, abandonment or neglect, make up much of the drama of amorous relationships. When these needs for companionship, belonging, and affirmation go unmet—for whatever reason—people suffer great emotional pain. In his *Symposium*, the philosopher Plato offers a mythological genealogy of the god Eros as the child of Poverty (*penia*) and Expediency (*poros*),⁴³ a brilliant indication of the kind of existential desperation present in erotic pursuits. A strange sort of interdiction is at play in the denial of the precariousness of sexuality, a cultural pressure to repress or deny one's emotional experience. A transcendentally somatic intervention into the issue would, of course, encourage the *naming of desire*. If sexuality is about the connectivity of bodies, then questions of companionship, affirmation, belonging, and emotional affect are of course relevant to it. Emotional resonance and fulfillment can be found in all kinds of human relationships, it is not limited to merely (hetero)sexual unions. Understood from the broader perspective of transcendental somatics, erotics implies the desire for many other kinds of human companionship and friendship. Affirmation of and respect for the emotional needs of all persons for companionship and belonging would be a refreshing improvement to public discourse on the politics of sexuality, family, and community.

Piety

Christianity currently finds itself in the middle of a massive sexual identity crisis. Uncompromisingly stringent and essentialist interpretations of Biblical mandates have allowed

⁴³ See Plato, *Symposium*, 203d-e.

the Church⁴⁴ to a) systematically exclude LGBTQ+ persons from Christian fellowship and to b) impose a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on sexual minorities who remain in church—demanding a dehumanizing silence as the price of acceptance in the *ekklesia*. All the while, the exposure of countless internal sexual abuse scandals and their cover ups have severely damaged the credibility of the Church in this area. It is unavoidably clear that what is marketed as the “Historic Witness of the Church” or even the “Divine Will of God” in matters of gender and sexuality is in most cases the corrupt, idiosyncratic, and internally conflicted will of *men*. If the Church is to recover any credibility in this area, if it is to flourish or even survive in the future, it will need to find a new way to engage in the public sphere on gender and sexuality issues.

Transcendental somatics offers an orientation to sexuality equipped to affirm the finitude, precarious, and dignity of the human person. It also recognizes her desire for transcendence. This transcendence need not be understood on some mystical or religious register. It is rather closer to what Foucault expressed as, “the desire to stray afield of oneself”. Transcendence can be located, quite simply and empirically, in a human person’s fundamental orientation outside of and beyond himself; it is indicated in our very anatomy, by the structure and function of our systems of signification, in our being subject to a future, which is, by definition, beyond and unknown. This *somatic a priori* does not require any ‘leap of faith’ to affirm. Neither does it conflict with any serious Christian theological teaching. It provides a common ground for believers and non-believers to engage in humane dialogue about sexuality and the socio-political matters related to it. It serves as a corrective to the reductive, essentialist, hyper-individualistic, misanthropic, and solipsistic distortions present in eurochristian cultures after the Sexual Revolution. This transcendental somatic approach also *humanizes* – it affords a dignity to the needs, desires, pleasures, and joys of the human animal which has been sorely lacking in mainstream Christian discourses on the issue, but which is fully in line with Christian theological teachings about the orientation and concerns of God.

John Boswell’s historical scholarship revealed that the historic witness of the church on issues of sexuality is anything but univocal. He was himself a person of faith and his understanding of the Christian theological tradition greatly outpaced that of those contemporaries who sought to intimidate and silence him in the name of Christian piety. The

⁴⁴ I speak of the Church in the most broadly ecumenical sense, including the Latin, Orthodox and Protestant traditions as well as less well-known confessional orientations.

word piety shares a common origin with the word pity in the Old French (12-14th century) *piete*, which indicates mercy, tenderness, or compassion. This itself stems from the Latin words *pietatem* and *pius*, whose range of meaning include dutiful conduct, kindness, respect, religiousness, gentleness, mercifulness, and faithfulness to communal ties. What counts as *piety* in many Christian circles on LGBTQ+ issues strays far from this understanding. If we are to speak of a Christian approach to these issues, the question of faithfulness must be reoriented away from the question, “What does the text forbid”, and towards a theology which takes seriously God’s desire for the flourishing of the Creation, of His People or Body, of our bodies. Flourishing is not a punitive concept, nor is it linear or mass-producible. It requires the reflective participation of the believer, the embodied person. Here we are invited to pose the question – “What do I desire?” – without fear, but with an eye to our responsibility to the flourishing of others.

God ends each day of the Creation narrative in much the same rhythm. From day one to day six, God appreciates and affirms the Creation, *He saw that it was Good*. Starting on fifth day, God begins to also *bless* the Creation. The blessing is a send-off, a promise of goodwill, an affirmation of the goodness of all living creatures. This send-off urges animals and humans to go forth and inhabit the Earth, to be fruitful and multiply.⁴⁵ To be *pious* must mean to live in this affirmation, and to strive to extend it to others. This is the mystery of our *participation* in human flourishing. Might we follow the lead of the Beloved in the Song of Songs, when she suggests: *Let us go out early to the vineyards/and see whether the vines flourish, /whether the grape blossoms have opened/and the pomegranates are in bloom. /There I will give you my love.*⁴⁶

May it be so.

⁴⁵ Genesis 1: 3-33.

⁴⁶ Song of Songs 7:12.