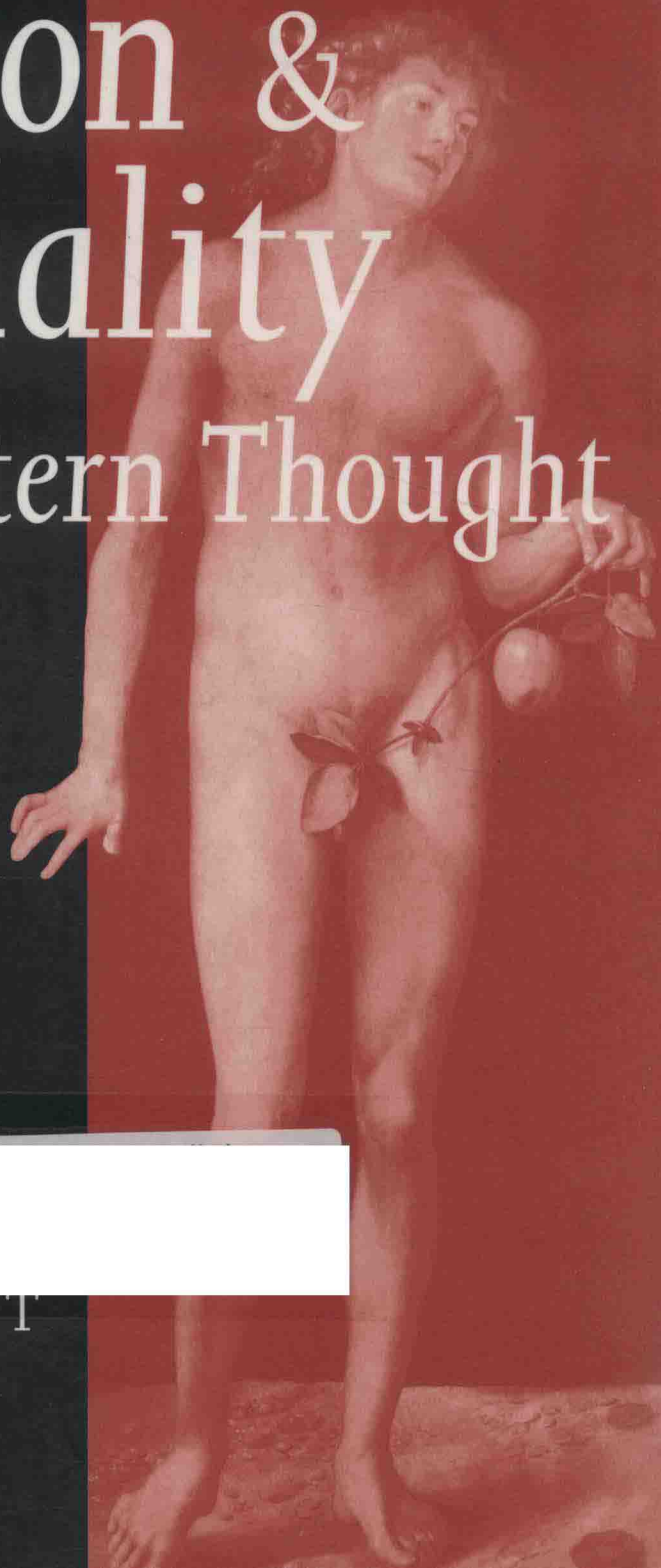


Reason & Sexuality in Western Thought



ID WEST

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David West

polity

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Reason and Sexuality in Western Thought

For Paul

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Ascetic Idealism of Reason	9
1 Eros and the Idealism of Platonic Reason	9
2 Aristotelian Virtue, Love and the Ends of Nature	18
3 God, Will and Unruly Sex	26
4 Divine Order of Nature	33
5 Intolerance of Universal Reason	40
2 Rationality in the Service of Desire	48
1 Epicureanism and Sexual Realism	48
2 Renaissance and the Humanization of Eros	54
3 Hedonism within the Bounds of Rational Order	61
4 Progressive Rationality and Sexual Reform	70
5 Libertinism at the Limit of Rationality	79
3 Passion beyond Reason	87
1 Mystical and Courtly Love	87
2 Romantic Critique of Rationality	95

3 Romantic Philosophy as Religion of Love	104
4 Death, Fantasy and Indifferent Nature	111
5 Freud and the Sexual Unconscious	118
4 Perspectives on Reason and Sexuality	125
1 Holism of Human Experience	125
2 Metaphysical Unity of Body and Self	132
3 Love and Reason within History	138
4 Subjective Existence and the Sexual Self	145
5 Phenomenology of Sexual Experience	152
6 Sex and Oppression	159
7 Eros and Civilization	165
8 Politics and Anti-Politics of Sexuality	170
Afterthoughts	179
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Bibliography</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	225

Introduction

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity', be.

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

The aim of this book is to explore the relationship of reason and sexuality within the western tradition of philosophy. It explores some of the manifold interactions and relations, some of the major 'constellations' of reason, sexuality and the self. The discussion is developed both historically and thematically, focusing on a number of decisive approaches and turning-points. Three major constellations are explored. Chapter 1 considers the transcendent 'reason' and 'ascetic idealism' of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and Kant. The contrasting 'hedonist realism' and conceptions of instrumental 'rationality' in the thought of ancient Epicureanism and the philosophies of Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, La Mettrie and Sade are examined in chapter 2. Chapter 3 looks at a number of Romantic and post-Romantic approaches which, in different ways, subordinate reason or rationality to some manifestation of passionate love or sexual desire, most notably the Christian mysticism of St Teresa of Ávila and the thought of Rousseau, Friedrich von Schlegel, Schopenhauer and Freud. The final part of *Reason and Sexuality in Western Thought* addresses a series of alternative philosophical perspectives, which go beyond the clearly defined but one-sided constellations previously considered. These perspectives contribute to a more holistic and multidimensional understanding – and perhaps a *more* complete

concept and objectivity – of reason and sexuality, situating them in the context of society, history, the subject and power.

This four-fold organization is intended primarily as a convenient way to identify a series of philosophical ‘ideal types’ of reason and sexuality. It is, of course, just as important to notice the tensions and inconsistencies *within* each constellation. The representative thinkers considered in each chapter are chosen in order to explore these variations on the common theme. It turns out that opposing constellations sometimes share common assumptions as well. So, for example, both ascetic idealists and hedonists tend to agree in according sexuality a fairly lowly status as the expression of an animal instinct, but evaluate it as either dangerously corrupting or harmlessly pleasurable. By contrast, some Romantics regard sexual passion as the key to a meaningful life. Although a chronological order is followed within (but not between) the main chapters, this does not imply any straightforward historical development or evolution of ideas. Any attempt to provide a continuous and reasonably inclusive history of this topic would clearly be beyond the scope of this project. The aim is rather to identify some of the most significant approaches and some of the more striking and interesting relations and contrasts between them.

It may be helpful, by way of introduction, to provide some preliminary explanation of what is meant by ‘reason’ and ‘sexuality’. The reference to either ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ signals the main emphasis here on philosophical approaches to sex and sexuality, although in some instances literary and theological variations are considered as well. The broadness of these terms reflects the fact that our concern is as much with alternative forms of reason as with the understanding of sex and sexuality. No single, well-defined conception of reason is presupposed, as the aim is precisely to consider the characteristics and implications of alternative conceptions. Since a philosophical understanding of any subject is presumably closely related to a rational or reasoned understanding of it, this project also involves an inescapable circularity. A philosophical understanding of the relations of reason and sexuality to the self will inevitably reflect the particular conception of reason implicit in the chosen philosophical approach. Reason is thus both an object of the inquiry and, at the same time, one of its essential conditions or presuppositions.

From this point of view, the topic of sexuality provides a helpfully concrete context and testing-ground for different conceptions of philosophy and reason. For one thing, sex is an area of human experience that delivers notably sharp and insistent intuitions – sometimes uncomfortably so – against which the abstractions of philosophy can

more readily be understood and assessed. More pointedly, it turns out that the western philosophical tradition has to a considerable degree *defined* reason in opposition to sensual, sexual impulses and behaviour. In the dominant tradition of ascetic idealism, sexuality is devalued at the same time as rationality is purified and idealized. The outcome is not only a deep gravitational pull towards asceticism but also a skewed conception of reason. As Robin May Schott puts it, 'the interpretation of emotion, desire, and sexuality as polluting has in fact been central to the construction of rationality on the basis of purity'.² So reason and sexuality cannot be regarded as completely independent terms. Any conception of sexuality says as much about reason or rationality, intellect or mind as it does about the body and sex.

The range of approaches to reason within the western philosophical tradition also brings a variety of different and less abstractly philosophical issues into play. In its most modest, most 'realistic' manifestation, what I shall refer to as mere, or instrumental, '*rationality*' is defined simply in terms of certain human capacities of analysis, reasoning and calculation, memory and foresight. In this version, rationality itself is morally neutral, serving only as an instrument for the maximization of individual or collective pleasures. More ambitiously, an idealist conception of what I shall call '*reason*' refers not just to certain reasoning abilities associated with human intelligence, but also to something less tangible, something higher. Reason is identified as what is most valuably human about human beings, what is most genuine or true about the self. Far more than a mere instrument in the service of animal inclinations, reason is something that raises human beings above their merely animal natures. The 'life of reason' is then regarded as the proper object of human aspirations. More than a simple faculty or set of capacities that we happen to have at our disposal, reason is something to which we must *aspire*.³

Reason in the latter, idealist sense is clearly more metaphysically contentious than the calculating faculty of instrumental rationality. Not surprisingly, associated philosophical approaches strain the boundaries of philosophy in its contemporary sense as a clearly demarcated and, above all, secular intellectual discipline. Philosophies of idealist reason invoke ideas of a 'real' or 'essential' and morally valuable self, and, as such, are not easily separated from religious forms of thought. Philosophers like Plato and Kant seem to be motivated by religious or, at any rate, extra-philosophical metaphysical and moral considerations which, for a different philosophical tradition, are clearly *beyond* reason. The relationship between religion and philosophy is further complicated by the fact that Christianity,

as the dominant religion of the western tradition, has evolved through frequent interaction and mutual inspiration with philosophy. This relationship is apparent both in the deep influence of Platonic and Aristotelian ideas on Christian theology and in the importance of theology itself within the Christian religion. Accordingly, religious and theological conceptions of self and sin will be considered alongside philosophical conceptions of reason, morality and pleasure.

The case of Romanticism further stretches the sense in which this book is concerned with different conceptions of reason. Romantic currents of thought both react against and are inspired by the traditions of philosophical and religious idealism. But in the process, they develop accounts of love, passion, sex and sexuality that are significantly independent of, and sometimes even explicitly opposed to, reason. They are concerned with reason primarily in the mode of criticism, opposition or denial. Some strands of Romanticism identify the essential self, or what we truly are, with our loving, passionate or sexual selves rather than with reason or even what is compatible with rationality. They do so despite centuries of ascetic condemnation and hedonist cynicism about our erotic nature. Romantic commitments may require us to endure unhappiness or even to die for their sake. Marriage, family and social order are potentially sacrificed for the sake of the individual's amatory or erotic attachments. Significantly, these Romantic motifs are expressed not only through the medium of art and literature but also within the seemingly less congenial confines of philosophy. In the latter case, reason not only is present as an object of criticism but also paradoxically provides the medium for its own correction.

Nor can a philosophical discussion of reason exclude consideration of *political* issues of order and power. Philosophical constellations of reason and sexuality can as little be separated from politics and society as they can be abstracted from religion. In the intellectual tradition of the West, the requirements of reason are closely connected with notions of order, whether within the individual or society. For Plato, both forms of order are related, since the proper order of the individual's inner life, which requires the supremacy of reason over will and appetite, is directly analogous to the proper organization of a well-ordered society. The notion of social order is important in a different way for the realist tradition of instrumental rationality, whose radically hedonist implications are, with Hobbes and Hume, almost immediately cancelled for the sake of family stability, inheritance and the King's peace. Conversely, Bentham's consistently radical hedonism leads him to an alternative conception of social order. Romantic views are politically more ambivalent, some-

times challenging the restrictions of the bourgeois family and merely conventional marriage, sometimes approving both as the apotheoses of eternal love.

If various notions of reason are in these ways hostages to a variety of long-standing philosophical, religious and political disputes, *sexuality* has in recent decades become a no less complex and contested term. It is now difficult to talk about sexuality other than in the wake of Foucault's and Foucauldian discussions of recent decades. Foucault attempts to show how a specifically modern construction of 'sexuality' has come into being as the privileged expression of the 'subjected subjectivity' of the modern individual. Certainly, sexuality in this special sense represents an important configuration of reason and sexuality in the West.⁴ In the present context, the widespread influence of the Foucauldian argument calls for the immediate proviso that the term 'sexuality' will be used, at least initially, in the more straightforward sense as whatever pertains to sex, the sexes and things sexual. Understood in this theoretically innocent (or naïve) way, it is then considered as the variable and evolving partner of reason and the self. Thus conceived, sexuality has a past as well as a genealogy.

Further terminological cautions follow from the same basic point. If sexuality has a distinctive genealogy and assumes a distinctive form in the modern West, then so do its variants and sub-categories. David Halperin has argued, for example, that there have only been (now somewhat more than) one hundred years of homosexuality.⁵ But for the sake of an uncluttered discussion, 'homosexuality', 'heterosexuality' and their cognates and cousins are used here to refer simply to sexual behaviour involving partners of the same or opposite sex, respectively. There is no assumption that the partners in such transactions identify as, or even are aware of, being homosexual or heterosexual. In these theoretically innocent terms, homosexuality has existed for considerably more than one hundred years. But neither is this usage intended to rule out arguments for the social construction of sexuality. It does not imply, for example, that it has always been possible to be gay or lesbian, categories that will be reserved for self-identifying or, at least, self-conscious homosexuals. The intention is only to avoid an endless and potentially confusing proliferation of sexual categories and terms at the outset. These loose and approximate definitions of the concepts of reason and sexuality will, it is hoped, provide some idea of the field within which the following discussion will take place.

However, for a topic of such breadth and historical range, it is surely also prudent to indicate some significant omissions and exclusions. Certainly, the areas omitted or treated only cursorily here are

the subject of a wealth of analysis, commentary and argument elsewhere. Any serious encounter with the wide-ranging theories of gender, sex, desire and the body produced by recent and contemporary feminist theorists is beyond the scope and, indeed, outside of the central focus of the present work. These feminist theories evidently deserve separate and direct treatment in their own right.⁶ This work is intended to *complement* rather than to encompass or engage directly with feminist discussions of patriarchy and gender. Although sexuality is clearly at issue in both areas, it will be considered here mainly in the sense that cuts across divisions of gender between the male and female 'sex'. Even the legacy of gay and lesbian liberation and the ever-expanding fields of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, which are more directly relevant, will not be directly addressed. They also deserve separate treatment. This book is therefore best considered as a preparation or propaedeutic for a more adequate study of contemporary theories of sexuality.⁷

The place of reason and sexuality in the western tradition of philosophy is such a large topic that it is also inevitable that even directly relevant thinkers and theories have to be treated selectively or not at all. The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, his followers and successors has obviously exerted a major influence, albeit sometimes by way of reaction or outright opposition, on the contemporary understanding and even practice of sexuality. This legacy will be considered only in two respects: first, in so far as Freudian concepts can be understood as an indirect expression or outcome of Romanticism and post-Romanticism; secondly, as applied, developed and criticized by philosophers like Sartre, Beauvoir, Marcuse and Foucault.⁸ Nor will there be any detailed examination in what follows of the historical and conceptual intricacies of sexology and other biological and medical studies of the phenomena of sex. Instead, their philosophical and moral implications, whether legitimate or specious, will be briefly considered.⁹

A more surprising omission, perhaps, is the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, who is the first philosopher (to my knowledge) who commonly refers to 'ascetic idealism' as a prominent and highly problematic feature of the western cultural and intellectual tradition. Nietzsche has, I now believe, exerted a considerable subterranean influence on the perspective that emerges from the present study.¹⁰ But his thought is so complex and many-faceted that it would inevitably be distorted by being forced into the clear confines of an 'ideal type' or constellation of reason and sexuality. Nietzsche's complex relationship to asceticism deserves, once again, independent discussion. This omission is, perhaps, somewhat mitigated by the fact

that Nietzsche has had a profound effect on the thought of Foucault, who is discussed in this volume.¹¹ Foucault's history of sexuality might even be described as Nietzsche by other means.

One final question needs to be addressed at this stage. Why, it might be asked, should we look back at all to earlier philosophical conceptions of reason and sexuality, if not to provide a systematic and chronological history of this topic? One overriding and critical aim is to avoid some of the distorted understandings of sexuality and the self which have been perpetrated by western philosophical and theological traditions to profound and largely detrimental effect. These distorted understandings reflect a recurring and pernicious tendency within western thought to elevate and absolutize some particular, limited dimension of human experience at the expense of its overall richness and coherence. The specific critical intention of the present argument is, in these terms, to disable rationalizing, theologizing but also biologizing, individualizing, naturalizing and similarly reductive treatments of sensual and sexual experience. Within idealist philosophy, sexual desire is subordinated to the requirements of transcendent reason. Within Christian theology, sexual pleasure is sacrificed for the sake of a rationalized conception of divinely ordained nature and the narrow goal of procreation. To very different effect, naturalism and hedonism tend to rely on an unhelpfully one-dimensional and detached standard of satisfaction. Some Romantics have even been prepared to abandon life itself for the sake of passionate love rendered absolute.

The more positive and ambitious goal that ultimately inspires the ensuing historical and philosophical exploration is to point towards alternative and richer conceptions of reason and sexuality. Central to the approach advocated here is a holistic conception of reason. Reason is understood not as a separate faculty – whether of idealist inspiration or mere rational calculation – but as a capacity or set of capacities that only exists in the articulation and complexity of human experience as a whole. The rational articulation of experience is, further, something that is ultimately inseparable from the social situation and historical unfolding of intellectual and cultural life. It is, in that sense, not just conceptions of reason but reason itself that has a history and a past. To that extent, the approach adopted here evidently has some affinities with Hegelian philosophy.¹² But Hegel's social and historical perspective must also be supplemented and, in part, corrected by the insights of existentialism and phenomenology. From the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Sartre to the sexual politics of Beauvoir, Marcuse and Foucault, the sexual subject is situated within the matrix of history, society and power.

A further important implication of a holistic approach to reason, philosophy and the self is that sexuality is not only limited or contained, but also potentially *enriched* by demands and interests stemming from complementary spheres of human experience. Rather than being forced to sacrifice sex for the sake of reason or reason for the sake of passion, these and other areas of our experience are mutually illuminating and enriching. We approach something like an 'objective' knowledge or 'concept' (in Nietzsche's sense) of reason and sexuality not by isolating them from this wider experiential context, but by remaining open to the manifold perspectives, the sometimes indefinable 'affects' of these different orders of meaning. In other words, the interpretation of sexual experience is one part of a broader and ultimately infinite task of understanding or interpretation.

At this stage, the most telling feature of this 'hermeneutic' task is the familiar problem of circularity – a feature of any systematic attempt to understand a meaningful text or human artefact. A certain circularity is unavoidable in any process of interpretation, where the understanding of some *part* of the work – for example, a sentence in a work of literature – depends on understanding the *whole*, but where understanding of the whole itself depends on a prior understanding of its component parts, and so on.¹³ Put more positively, interpretation advances in an 'upward' spiral of understanding which, at best, is always improving but, in the meantime, is never perfect or complete. As Hegel famously said, 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk'.¹⁴ It would be more accurate, if less inspiring, to say merely that a *more* adequate knowledge and a *more* complete concept can be expected at the conclusion. After all, the conclusion is not the end, just another beginning.

1

The Ascetic Idealism of Reason

... if a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of immortality, he can in no way fail to achieve this: constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy.

Plato¹

1 Eros and the Idealism of Platonic Reason

Contemporary western thought still bears the clear marks of a distinctive conception of reason and philosophy that received its first and most systematic expression in the philosophical schools of ancient Greece. The rationalist, idealist and at least tendentially ascetic treatment of sexuality in the thought of Plato and Aristotle represents a decisive formative moment in the genealogy of a constellation of reason, sexuality and the self that is then consolidated, if not petrified, and propagated by Christianity in the West. Western attitudes to sex and sexuality have been profoundly and, let us be clear, detrimentally affected as a result. At the same time, a long-standing relationship within western culture and thought associates the classical world and, in particular, ancient Greece with dissidence against the western sexual syndrome. For those frustrated by the unnecessarily repressive morality of the western tradition or, at least, for those whose social, academic or artistic status gave them access