

**School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**The Divine Marquis' Ethical Project: Sade and the "Turn to Religion" in  
Postmodernist Philosophy**

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To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

- Melissa M. Russell                      29/04/14

## Abstract

This thesis argues that Sade's work constitutes a transgressive ethical project which, in spite of its grounding in a materialist atheism, cannot escape from Christian ethical categories. In accordance with the nature of transgression Sade must invoke and reinstate those very limits and categories--such as good and evil, vice and virtue, the sacred and profane--that he attempts, with enormous relish, to destroy. This thesis does not argue that Sade explicitly employed a theory of transgression. However, following Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, who both base their concept of transgression on a reading of Sade's work, I use transgression to provide a philosophical lens through which to reread him and to determine the precise nature of his transgressiveness.

Sade's pornographic writings can still generate outrage in the popular imagination even if they are now largely unread. However, this thesis aims to show that it is not primarily the offensive sexual content of his writing which makes Sade's work deserving of the label 'transgressive.' Sex is the vehicle for transgression because sexual taboos have been the effect of and have helped to constitute the theological, philosophical and ethical systems which many Enlightenment thinkers sought to challenge. Sade's compulsive urge to produce his pornographic writings (even at the risk of his life) are evidence of his wish to affront Christian concepts of virtue and the intellectual structures that sustain their moral, political and religious authority.

Sade's materialist atheism is integral to his transgression since it empowers him to reject the tenets of classical theism, the infallibility of scripture and the narrative of Christian origins and thus repudiate an ethics based on what he felt were the repressive, universalising moral edicts of Christianity. However, the logic of Sade's version of libertine ethics does not lead to universal ethics founded on some alternative principle such as reason or nature. As Foucault explains, transgression never destroys the limits it aims to challenge or subvert because it is defined by those limits--the law which transgression requires to remain in place in order to guarantee transgression's efficacy. Sade rejected universalising ethical theories in favour of championing the autonomy of the individual, freed from oppression under any metaphysical law.

A defining feature of the ethical praxis exemplified by Sadean libertines, the freedom from the universal is therefore only obtained through transgression of laws, both religious and political, but at the same time remains open to dialogue with such laws (and the religious categories which inform them). Reading Sade's work as an ethical project demonstrates how these categories might productively be transgressed, and enables us to rethink ethics both with and beyond such categories. In order to establish and define Sade's ethical praxis, and his atheistic materialism, this thesis situates Sade in the Enlightenment intellectual contexts which underpin his work but also at times become the objects of his satire.

In exploring and describing Sade's ethical system, this thesis will also demonstrate how Sade can be used to re-examine contemporary ethical theories. The twin concerns of discovering a secular ethics which affirms individual agency yet ensures ethical treatment of the "other" is at the centre of postmodernist thought, as exemplified in the Levinasian ethics of the other. It is possible to read Sadean ethics using the concept of the relationship to the "other," a relationship which respects the autonomy of the other, while remaining open to that other. No matter what form the relationship takes; violent or irenic, the relationship can never be dissolved. Since such an ethics is structured by transgression, Sadean ethics demonstrate the limitations of an ethics conceptualised as a relationship to the other alone.

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Without my best friend Serena McClellan, the formatting of this thesis would be a mess. Thank you, Serena, for fixing it for me and for staying up late to help me organise my bibliography. You have been there for me through this whole process, and I hope to someday be there for you when you are at the nasty end of your thesis, facing down years of neglecting to add in bibliographic details at the appropriate time as I am. If nothing else, I have provided a helpful example of what you should not do! To my partner Nick, thank you for being there for me and helping to proof read and put together the bibliography. Thank you also for cleaning, bringing me cups of tea, and looking after my life while I was deep in editing mode with the thesis. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family for supporting me emotionally and, at times, materially, throughout my PhD, you have always been supportive of my academic endeavours and it is thanks to all of you that I have gotten this far in my studies.

## A Note on Translations

I have used English translations both of Sade's works and the works of other French writers to whom I refer. In the case of Sade, I have had limited options with regard to English translations. However, where possible I have chosen the edition that seemed the most authoritative, based on the fact that other sources reference that translation, and the fact that it is a translation by a reputable source. For instance, I have used the most widely referenced English translation of Sade's novels by celebrated translators Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, who have included important writings on Sade along with authoritative translations of his works. Austryn Wainhouse was the first person to produce an uncensored version of *Justine*. The translation of *Philosophy in the Boudoir* I have used is by Joachim Neugroschel, which is more recent than the Seaver and Wainhouse translations. Neugroschel is a well-known translator of philosophical texts and so I am confident that his translation is of first-rate quality. I have read, but not directly referred to, edited collections of Sade's dramatic works translated by John Franceschina, who is the only person to have produced collected and translated editions of Sade's dramatic works. I have consulted a wide range of secondary sources who have read Sade in his native tongue and so my interpretation of his works is supported by a range of perspectives from thinkers who understand the nuances of the French originals.

Furthermore, my supervisor Margaret Macintyre reads and speaks French and has been able to help me with translation and reading the original French where necessary. Another of my secondary supervisors, Professor David Buchbinder, has a degree in French, and has read my work, so I have not been totally disadvantaged by the fact that I do not read French.

As Patočka is far less well-known than Bataille, Foucault, Levinas and Derrida and therefore his work is not often made available in English translation. I wish to note that I have used Erazim Kohák's translation of Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the History of Philosophy* because Kohák is widely acknowledged to be a foremost scholar of Patočka and has produced an authoritative critical reading of Patočka's work and philosophy in English.

I have used the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* as a guide to referencing and formatting. I have listed all titles in the text in

English, and at the first mention of the text which is in a language other than English, I have provided the original title in parenthesis. All quotes are given verbatim. All Bible quotes are taken from an online version of the *New Jerusalem Bible*, which I feel to be a reputable translation of the Bible. I have given the chapter and verse numbers in all citations.

There is no firm rule about whether to refer to the Marquis de Sade as “de Sade” or simply “Sade,” and authors have used both when referring to him. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, “Sade” as opposed to “de Sade” will be used throughout this thesis. This puts the thesis in step with Gilbert Lély, Donald Thomas, Francine du Plessix Gray, Laurence L. Bongie, John Phillips, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. All references to his name in quotations are left as the author wrote them and so may differ at times. On the same note, the adjectival form “Sadean” is used instead of “Sadian.” Similarly, this thesis will exclude the nobiliary particle for other French names where the surnames alone are used – for instance Baron d’Holbach becomes “Holbach.”

## Introduction

### **The Life and Legacy of the Arch-Libertine the Marquis de Sade: How to Read Him Now**

#### **Sade in the News**

In early 2013, the *New York Times* published the news that the aptly named Bruno Racine, director of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, was in negotiations to purchase (at a hefty 5 million Euros) the original manuscript of *The 120 Days of Sodom* (*Les 120 journées de sodomie ou l'école du libertinage*) by the Marquis de Sade for the library's collection (Sciolino). *The 120 Days* is considered to be the most depraved and controversial work of a depraved and controversial man – a work which, the *New York Times* stresses, contains vivid descriptions of the most transgressive of sexual acts, including pedophilia, rape, incest, scatophilia and urophilia. The work, if Racine is successful in his bid, will be declared a national treasure, and displayed alongside some of Sade's other, scarcely less controversial, works, in the library's collection for the two-hundredth anniversary of the Marquis' death. To be fair to the *Times*, Racine himself is hardly singing the work's praises. He is reported to have remarked: "It is part of our cultural heritage. Whether we like it or not, it belongs in the Bibliothèque Nationale," and disapprovingly and, perhaps disingenuously, adds that the work is "atrocious, extreme, and radical" (Sciolino).

Racine's campaign is not the first recognition Sade has received for his contribution to the history of French literature, thought and cultural heritage. His importance to psychoanalysis and medicine, through the work of Freud and his theories of perversion, are immense, although Sade will not be discussed in a medical or psychoanalytic context at any length here because the interests of this thesis lie elsewhere. Thinkers including Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault have all acknowledged his influence and importance and written incisively on his work. However, there are two aspects of the articles about Racine's campaign which are striking to a careful reader. One is the outrage which Sade's name still has the ability to provoke, despite the intervening centuries since the initial publications of his works and the extensive and often controversial studies of his writing which have been undertaken during that time. The other is that the work in question is of great cultural and economic value.

The connection between these two facts is not coincidental: Sade's work is not valuable despite its distasteful elements; it is valuable because of them. It is the sheer transgressiveness, the atrociousness, of the work, especially in the context of his time, which has ensured not only its enduring ability to shock readers, but the continuing and deep interest it inspires in the fields of philosophy and ethics. It is one of the goals of this thesis to demonstrate how and why this seemingly paradoxical situation is the case.

### **Transgression and Paradox**

Sade's work is by no means the first example of writing to have incurred the wrath of the censors. However, because of his influence on the Surrealists, on psychoanalysis and medicine, and on literature and philosophy, the category of transgression, along with theories of the transgressive, have been formed in large part from interpretations of Sade's writing. Georges Bataille, the twentieth-century French thinker whose work and theories were, to some extent, inspired by his scholarship on Sade, says in his 1957 book *Erotism* that, "if today the average man has a profound insight into what transgression means for him, de Sade was the one who made ready the path" (196). Sade's work is not only transgressive because of its violent and sexual content, but also because, since Sade was virulently atheist in the anti-clerical tradition of some Enlightenment thinkers, it challenged Christian theology, religious authority, and dogmas. Particularly scandalous is the way in which Sade links sexual and religious transgression in his works – both by writing his libertines as vehement atheists and by having them enact elaborate blasphemous and sexual fantasies, for instance, staging orgies in the Vatican, with a libertine Pope as participant. However, Sade also challenged and reconceptualised the very Enlightenment ideas which informed his atheistic materialism. Sade pushed ideas, his own and those of others, to their limits. The Enlightenment theories which his libertines espouse in Sade's novels are taken to their most monstrous extremes as his libertines use those theories to justify their crimes and support their ethical codes. This is partly because the very ways in which Sade conceptualises nature, human nature, and God is a product of the Enlightenment, a world which was still infused with Christian theology, dogma and doctrinal views of the world, and so reading Sade's works purely as materialistic and atheistic simplifies the complex relationships in the libertine world between religious and Enlightenment thought.

Atheism does not necessarily imply materialism, which denies the existence of anything but matter, and so, itself, may imply atheism. As accusations levelled against Baruch Spinoza (also known as Benedict) demonstrate, substance monism was felt to equate to materialism (even if, as this thesis will make clear, Spinoza's ideas are far from materialist), which was judged to be an atheistic position. Atheists can retain a belief in the existence of entities and substance beyond matter, even while denying the existence of God. Nevertheless, during the Enlightenment, the two were regarded as going hand-in-hand. Moreover, in Sade's time, it was only just becoming possible to think of ethics as something divorced from religion, and proposing an ethics based on atheism was a radical proposition. Formulating a secular conception of ethics was a project of great importance to many radical Enlightenment philosophers, who wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to ground ethics without recourse to theological or dogmatic assumptions about ethics. Sade was profoundly influenced by this project, and even though he never explicitly proposes a secular conception of ethics in the way others, such as Spinoza, did, radical Enlightenment ideas about ethics and religion are everywhere in his writing. It is not only the influence of other thinkers which informs his work, but also his personal feelings about religion and ethics which determine the structure of his thought: Sade's atheism forms the basis for his ethical system, where atheism is an ethical choice within that system. Yet, important as Sade's atheist materialism is for comprehending his work, it is insufficient to describe the entirety of his thought or ethics. This thesis will establish that Sade's libertine writing constitutes an ethical system which, although it is based in his materialist atheist philosophy, is inextricable from and reliant on Christian metaphysical and moral categories of vice, evil, and blasphemy.

Since Sade's ethics cannot escape from Christian conceptions of God, ethics, and nature, it is interesting to read Sade's ethical system in the light of the theory of ethical responsibility to the "other," since the other can be thought of as God – or God can be said to "stand in" for the other. This complex idea will be explained at length, and much of the thesis will lay the groundwork for an examination of the ways in which Sade's ethical system can be read as an ethics of the other, against Sade's own ideal of the individualism which constitutes libertine sovereignty. The thesis will, in the final chapter, examine the theories of Levinas and Derrida to elucidate the notion of ethical responsibility to the other, and to explore how this

conception of ethics departs from common theories of ethics. It will also explicate some of the issues that Derrida identifies with this system of ethics when it is conceptualised in practice. It will be the intention of this argument to show, first, that Sade's ethics can be read as an ethics of the other. Second, it will show that the ethics of the other, particularly when that other is read as God, is transgressive in that it is compromised from within by transgression, and so cannot stand alone as the basis for ethical prescriptions in practice.

### **Sade's Life: the *Ancien Régime*, the Republic, and Napoleon**

Sade's life lends itself very well to sensational biography: it features illicit sex, revolution, persecution and war. Given that he was an aristocratic revolutionary, a libertine, and a philosopher, Sade's life story gives a good indication both of his Enlightenment interests and education, and his ethical disposition. He had a truly remarkable life, which is why it is not only an extensive and complex task to chronicle it, but also an unoriginal task: authors of the calibre of Francine du Plessix Grey (*At Home with the Marquis de Sade*) and Neil Schaeffer (*The Marquis de Sade, A Life*) have already completed the task admirably. In addition to these biographies, it seems every Sadean scholar must include a paragraph or two on his life before pursuing his thought and work, and this thesis will follow them. Like any controversial historical figure, his life has been the subject of conjecture, speculation, and gossip through the years. However, this thesis is not interested in the biography of Sade for its own sake; rather, it is interested in the historical, social and intellectual contexts within which Sade can be located, on the recognition that Sade's social context cannot be separated from the scandals which led to his imprisonment and institutionalisation for most of his later life. The context provided is essential for deducing how Sade's atheism and philosophy came to be shaped, and in addition, why it is interesting to look at them in the context of Enlightenment and contemporary thought. While this thesis will not attempt to psychoanalyse Sade, exploring the circumstances in which Sade wrote and published his infamous works is necessary to apprehend the structures of his thought and writing.

Biographer Philippe Roger rightly comments that "Sade's oeuvre has been de-historicised" because readings of Sade have aligned his thought with the violence



of political regimes in the early twentieth century<sup>1</sup> (“A Political Minimalist” 82). At the same time, the shifting political landscape of France during Sade’s life has been, reductively, given as the reason for the unique transgressiveness of the political and philosophical sentiments expressed in his work. Even Sartre, Roger points out, was tempted by this “sociologism and hasty psycho-biographism” when he describes Sade’s thought as the result of Sade’s status as an “aristocrat witnessing the decline of his own class” (qtd. in Roger 84). Characterising Sade’s work as a reaction to the violence of the Revolution or the decline of the aristocracy alone is too simplistic. It even denies the very history it attempts to describe. Although Sade’s political thought will be discussed later in the thesis, this section will describe the events which determined the course of his life, and the circumstances under which he produced his radical literature.

Sade was born on the second of June, 1740. France, at the time of Sade’s birth and childhood, was truly in the middle of the Age of Enlightenment, and the reign of King Louis XV. 1740 saw the beginning of the Austrian War of Succession, the first major conflict for France after the period of relative peace which followed the devastating War of the Spanish Succession. The reign of Louis XV has been seen as particularly debauched; however, it was common to depict the *Ancien Régime* in this way – in part as a result of revolutionary rhetoric. Despite Louis’ relationship with *mâîtresse-en-titre* Madame de Pompadour, and a string of other mistresses and lovers, his behaviour and that of his court did not mark some great departure from the behaviour of his predecessors, or the behaviour of other European courts of the time.

Accounts of the character of Sade’s parents certainly lend themselves to psychoanalysis: Marie-Eléonore de Maillé de Carman is often painted as a negligent and absentee mother and is also the genesis of Sade’s Freudian issues, if one is to believe some biographers: Plessix Gray calls her “glacially aloof” (226) and Pierre Klossowski believes that Sade’s work is partially driven by deep rage at his mother (*Sade My Neighbor* 128). His father, the Comte Jean-Baptiste François Joseph de Sade, is described as a libertine. The Comte was erudite, and possessed scholarly inclinations, although he never published any of his scholarship (*At Home* 31). The

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Pasolini’s film *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* is one attempt to draw parallels between what has been called “sadism” and Nazism.

Comte was arrested in his youth for propositioning a young man, who was in fact an undercover policeman, for sex in the Tuileries gardens. Throughout his marriage to Sade's mother, he took many mistresses, and some of his activities became public knowledge, which contributed to his social downfall. Like the behaviour of the Bourbons, that of Sade's father was not by any means unusual for an aristocratic man of the period. His downfall can be better attributed to fact that his indiscretions were publicised, rather than to the fact that he had indiscretions, many of which would have been overlooked by his close circle. He was also irresponsible with money: offered "only the most trivial diplomatic missions" after earning Louis XV's disfavour, he had to make do with the inadequate (for him) revenue from the family estates (Plessix Gray 34). Again, the Comte's irresponsibility with money was not unusual; an aristocratic family was expected to keep up with the extravagance of the court, and many found themselves bankrupt and in debt as a result. Plessix Gray drily observes that "it usually took a few generations for the offspring of noble families to go bankrupt, but Comte de Sade managed it in one" (34).

The Comte's brother, the Abbé Jacques-François de Sade was, despite being a clergyman, also a debauchee, known, according to Plessix Gray, by the damning epithet "the priest of Epicurus" (23).<sup>2</sup> The Abbé was also a friend of Voltaire and Voltaire's companion (and possibly lover) the Marquise du Châtelet, and a well-known member of Parisian society (Bongie 17). He was a man of literature, and authored, among other works, a biography of Petrarch. Laura de Noves, rumoured to be the subject of Petrarch's admiration and the addressee of some of his poetry, was an ancestress of the Sades, and therefore the family had a particular fondness for the Italian poet (Thomas 22). Sade was sent to live with this uncle in his youth; the Abbé hired Sade a tutor, the Abbé Amblet, who taught him to read, and who quite probably introduced him to Enlightenment literature and thought (Plessix Gray 26).

If it were not for his more extreme libertine predilections and, later, his outrageous writings, Sade would have lived a thoroughly conventional aristocratic life (provided that he was able to navigate the treacherous political landscape of the Revolution unscathed). It was usual for sons of the aristocracy to enjoy a broad humanist education, more often than not under the guidance of the Jesuits, and then

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<sup>2</sup> Epicureanism, for reasons which will become clear in later chapters, was a standard insult at the time, since it signified atheism.

enter the military, where they were customarily given military command. This is the narrative of Sade's early life. At ten, Sade was summoned to Paris by his father the Comte, and continued his education at the Jesuit college Louis-le-Grand,<sup>3</sup> whose alumni included fellow Enlightenment figures Voltaire and Diderot. The Jesuits were well-respected pedagogues whose order emphasised the importance of education. Their educational system, set out in the *Ratio Studiorum*, included as part of its humanist curriculum not only the study of theology but also the Classics, language, literature, rhetoric, the sciences and philosophy. A Jesuit education was routine for the aristocracy and the upper classes during the Enlightenment. Sade achieved modest grades at the college. At fourteen, his father, eager to see Sade recover the glory that the Comte himself had squandered, had Sade transferred to a military academy, and in 1755 he entered the army. Sade attained the rank of captain, and he saw action in German lands during the Seven Years War. He was demobilised in 1762, whereupon he entered Parisian society, at least initially without scandal. Although his first years in military service were without incident, he steadily became more promiscuous. His father, by all accounts terrified that Sade would follow in the Comte's own dissolute footsteps, was eager to marry him off as soon as possible to a respectable, and, more importantly, wealthy bride. However, Jean-Baptiste had compromised his son's social status such that he was forced to seek a lucrative marriage alliance for his son among the recently wealthy but common Montreuil (Lély 41-2).

Accounts of Sade's bride depict her, at times, as a long-suffering but loyal wife who won and kept Sade's affection throughout their marriage, and, at other times, as an unwelcome addition to his life, foisted upon him by a domineering father, a wife who Sade used as a front for appearances' sake. Richard Seaver notes:

Most Sade biographers and commentators see in Renée-Pélagie a passive, unimaginative creature completely in thrall of her forceful husband. ...[F]rom prison he sometimes issues orders to her as if he were still a cavalry captain charging the enemy; he insults her when when his errands and commissions have not been fulfilled in a timely manner ... but beneath and beyond all that

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<sup>3</sup> The name of Louis-le-Grand refers to Louis XIV, known as Louis the Great. The college still stands today.

is a tenderness, a caring about her health, her well-being, her state of mind.

(Introduction, *Letters from Prison* 20)

Phillips comments that Sade's wife "was clearly smitten" with him and would remain "utterly devoted" to Sade for the next twenty-seven years, through many hardships (*Sade: The Libertine Novels* 6). Apollinaire (whose admiration for Sade as a great philosopher and advocate of freedom perhaps clouds his judgement) claims that Sade "did not like" Renée-Pélagie, and "would have preferred to have married her younger sister" ("The Divine Marquis" 48). Plessix Gray documents Sade's affair with his sister-in-law, Anne-Prospère de Launay, which likely began while she was at La Coste visiting her sister, and continued when she visited Sade in Italy while he was evading authorities due to the scandal he had caused at Marseilles in 1772 (136-7). Plessix Gray notes that the combination of Mlle de Launay's flirtatiousness, high education, beauty, and apparent purity (113-5) would have appealed to Sade, along, with the incestuous nature of their affair. Finally, as "proof of his fascination" says Plessix Gray, "he gave her leading roles in every play he staged that season at La Coste" (115). Sade had a great passion for theatre, so that was high praise indeed.

Sade's indiscretions throughout his marriage are well documented, something which is likely to have contributed to his eventual divorce. Perhaps if such indiscretions had not, at the same time, involved crimes which could not easily be ignored by the crown, the marriage might have survived. Renée-Pélagie must have been aware of the affair with her sister, but seems to have decided that, according to Plessix Gray, "if Sade became a monster of immorality, she must all the more become a paragon of devotion" (135). The Marquis and Renée-Pélagie had three children together, the elder son, named Louis Marie, born in 1767 after Sade's first spell of imprisonment in Vincennes, a younger son, Donatien-Claude-Armand, born after the "Rose Keller incident" in 1769, and a daughter, Madeleine-Laure, born in 1771 (Plessix Gray 92, 107-108).

### **From the Prison to the Madhouse**

For mostly psychoanalytic reasons, Sade's long imprisonment in a variety of institutions is by far the feature of Sade's life which has most fascinated biographers. However, his imprisonment is interesting to this thesis because the circumstances of Sade's incarceration demonstrate the tumultuous, volatile and treacherous political

times in which he lived. It is tempting to see his supposed revolutionary sympathies to be a response to his imprisonment, and, he felt, unjust persecution under the *Ancien Régime*, but it should be noted that Sade was imprisoned and persecuted under both the Republican and the Napoleonic governments. Although Sade spent most of his imprisonment in Charenton, a mental asylum, he never really left prison. As Michel Foucault notes, from the very first establishment of the Hôpital Général in France, the asylum should not be thought of as a medical establishment: “It is rather a sort of semijudicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes” (*Madness and Civilisation* 40). That madness came to be defined as mental illness is highly suspicious to Foucault, who demonstrates, in *Madness and Civilisation*, how political power would come to be exerted by the seemingly innocent and objective science of psychiatry. Sade’s life became, for Foucault, both the literal example of his theories about psychiatric power and the birth of the asylum, and the metaphor for unreason redefined and confined in the eighteenth century and beyond. Sade’s public indiscretions saw him incarcerated, but it was his writing which earned him a place at Charenton.

The first indiscretion to earn him jail time occurred a mere five months after his marriage, in October 1763 (Plessix Gray 62-3). Sade procured a prostitute called Jeanne Testard, and had her spend the night with him blaspheming God and the Church, and trampling upon crucifixes, a combination of his sexual proclivities and his atheism which is familiar to readers of his work (Plessix Gray 64). Testard recounted her ordeal to the police, in particular the inspector Louis Marais, who had been assigned to monitor Sade (and would do so for a long time after Sade’s initial incarceration). Having gathered evidence from Testard and a number of other prostitutes, Marais forwarded a dossier to Louis XV, who ordered Sade’s arrest. For a fortnight (from October 29-November 13), Sade was imprisoned at Vincennes for blasphemy, until his father begged an indulgence on his behalf from the King. This combination of sexual deviance and blasphemy was a potent heresy: sexual excess had long been linked to sin and so combining sexuality with any kind of religious symbol or ritual was enough to constitute blasphemy on the grounds that sex is always already profane. Two years after his marriage, Sade took a mistress, the actress La Beauvoison, to La Coste, where he attempted to pass her off as Madame de Sade. The real Madame de Sade, upon hearing of this latest scandal, sent a letter

to Sade's uncle saying that she had given up on trying to change Sade's ways. Of course, her actions would give the lie to these words as she continued to be a faithful and patient wife to Sade for many years and through many subsequent scandals.

The Rose Keller affair became the first of the Marquis' indiscretions to become public knowledge, and the fact that it was well known at the time meant that, unlike the Testard affair, there was no hope of redeeming Sade's reputation. The Marquis had obtained a small house in Arceuil, in the southern suburbs of Paris. Rumours about the violent and debauched behaviour conducted at the house spread rapidly, but nothing could be substantiated until the Marquis picked up a thirty-six-year-old woman, Rose Keller, as she left Easter Sunday mass in 1768. The Marquis offered Keller domestic work, and she, being poor, accepted and rode with him to his house. Once there, she was taken to a room, stripped and tied face down to a bed. His victim thus incapacitated, Sade played out a fantasy that must have served as the template for certain episodes described in his later writing. The victim was whipped. Sade, the vicious libertine, stopped only to utter threats of death. Later, he made incisions in her back and dripped wax into them. Despairing, Keller begged to be allowed to complete her Easter duties before death. The suggestion of religious piety could not have helped but arouse Sade's blasphemous imagination; he offered to be the woman's confessor, and, with renewed vigour, whipped her again until his frenzy reached a climax. Keller was cut free, and Sade locked her in the room and left her to clean her wounds with a towel. Keller recognised the opportunity, and made good her escape from the window, where she was rescued by a group of women from the village (Lély 76-7).

As the investigation got underway, Sade called upon members of his family and his childhood acquaintances and tutors to defend him. They painted the incident as another youthful indiscretion, with Keller as a willing partner, instead of a victim (Thomas 78; Bongie 115). Bongie observes that: "Crime, in a sense, could properly be defined only in terms of class. The misbehaving scions of good families were frequently guilty of "thoughtlessness" or "carelessness," but only very rarely of "crimes"" (117). During the investigation, Sade was imprisoned, an order which was soon reduced to exile at the family's castle La Coste, located in the commune Lacoste in the southeast of France. Sade's money problems worsened during the time of his exile, and his attempts to rejoin the court and the military were both rebuffed. The King was no fan of the Marquis' father, and the scandals caused by the Marquis

himself ensured that he would never find a friend at the court again, which would, in a twist of fate, be to Sade's advantage come the Revolution.

The incident at Marseilles would seal the Marquis' reputation as libertine and criminal and lead to his first serious run-in with the law. Certainly, earlier indiscretions would play a role in his finally being held to account for his crimes: his reputation was now too battered to repair, and his family had already exhausted the advantage of their political connections in mitigating his past actions. Besides which, it seems that this latest incident had tried their own patience to the limit. Sade sent his valet, Latour, to procure some prostitutes for a day of debauches not dissimilar to those he enjoyed with the unwilling Rose Keller. Sade beat the prostitutes with whips and with birch, and they beat him in turn. If the episode had been confined to whipping Sade could have avoided prison, but he could not restrain himself. He propositioned the young ladies for sodomy. According to their testimonies, they refused to allow it, because, in addition to the act being illegal and punishable by a death sentence, it was also blasphemous. Donald Thomas remarks that, even if the women had not rejected this suggestion, "it would have been advisable for [them] to say [they] had done so" (104). Sade, apparently heedless of this rejection, sodomised one of the women against her will. One of the women alleged that Sade had also been sodomised by Latour during the episode. As if charges of sodomy were not grave enough, Sade had given the women sweets laced with the (popular at the time in certain circles) aphrodisiac Spanish fly which contained arsenic. Two of the women suffered poisoning from consuming too much of the sweet. There is little evidence that Sade wished to kill or poison any of the women. Despite the violent fantasies which would later fill the pages of his notorious novels, he may have simply misjudged the dose of the aphrodisiac intended to heighten the day's debauches.

Sade and Latour, accompanied by Anne-Prospère, Sade's sister-in-law and lover, fled France for Italy to avoid punishment for the grave charges. He would successfully elude the French authorities for the next four years, travelling several times to Italy. Absconding did not entirely protect Sade from the law – while he was away, he and Latour were found guilty of all charges arising from the Marseilles incident, and were sentenced to death in absentia. They were beheaded and burned in effigy on September twelve, 1772. Later that year, Sade was imprisoned at a fortress

in Chambéry at the behest of the King of Sardinia, from whence he escaped, in a rather serio-comic manner, through a kitchen window in April 1773.

Sade's mother-in-law, the Président, Madame de Montreuil, finally turned against Sade after this latest scandal came to light. She had previously demonstrated affection for him, and had exercised political influence in helping him escape punishment for previous crimes, which she had dismissed as youthful passions and carelessness. Now, Madame de Montreuil was concerned only with recuperating the reputation of her family. The best way to do so, she seems to have decided, was by eliminating the one person who was so recklessly compromising their good name. She financed a raid on La Coste to catch Sade, and recruited Sade's own uncle the Abbé to her cause. Sade, however, eluded capture there, and so the Président was forced to seek other options. She petitioned King Louis XVI for a *lettre de cachet* for Sade's arrest (having already obtained one from his predecessor, it was necessary to reapply after Louis XV's death), the warrant which would eventually get Sade arrested and taken to Vincennes.

Being a fugitive did not prevent Sade from creating one last controversy, known as the scandal of the little girls. Sade had returned to La Coste in 1774, and late that year he recruited a young woman who then procured five young girls to come to La Coste. The harem thus formed, the Marquis passed some of the winter subjecting them to flagellation and sodomy. His wife was also a resident in the castle at this time, and seems to have been, at the very least, a tolerant if non-participating accomplice. The playing out of this libertine fantasy was cut short when some of the girls escaped the grounds. Charges of kidnapping were brought against him. Sade was a serial offender – punishment and imprisonment would not deter him, and prison only gave his fantasies time to intensify, a fact to which the novels that survive him attest.

Sade was imprisoned at Vincennes for one year before he escaped to La Coste for six weeks. Those six weeks would be his only taste of freedom for the next twelve years. In 1784, Sade was moved to the Bastille, and imprisoned there until 1789, when he was moved to the Charenton asylum where he would stay for the following nine months (Plessix Gray 272). Just over a week after he was moved, the Bastille was stormed, and his room sacked – his library was destroyed and the scroll containing *The 120 Days* was lost along with it – at least so far as Sade knew. Finally, in April 1790, the Revolution freed him by abolishing the device of the *lettre*



*de cachet*, one of which had held him for over a decade without trial and formal sentence. It was in prison that Sade's writing career began in earnest (he penned many plays, short stories, and novels including *Aline and Valcour*, *The 120 Days*, and *Justine* in prison, amongst other works) and it is possible that without such solitude and confinement, despite his personal libertinism, Sade would never have tried his hand at writing such extreme works. He records in a letter to his wife that, far from rehabilitating him as she might have hoped, his incarceration had only intensified his imagination and vices: "you have produced a ferment in my brain, owing to you phantoms have arisen in me which I shall have to render real" (*Letters from Prison* 315).

After Sade was freed, his wife formally separated from him, and resulting money issues would keep Sade bitter about this separation for years to come. Nevertheless, Sade was to experience relative peace for a couple of years. He set up a household in Paris with Marie-Constance Quesnet, who would be his companion up to his death, even throughout his later imprisonment. During these years, Sade worked to have his plays put on, with, as Gilbert L  ly reports in his biography of Sade, little success. Many readings of his plays to the *Com  die-Fran  aise* were rejected, and one play that was performed, *The Seducer (Le Suborneur)*, was interrupted by protests against the "ex-noble" identity of the play's author (L  ly 334). His one modest success was *Oxitem*, first performed in 1791. A disturbance during the second performance of that play postponed further performances (L  ly 331).

### **Persecuted by Revolution and Napoleon**

Sade became a member of the National Guard (Thomas 206), and began calling himself "Citizen Sade," a necessary precaution during the Revolutionary period where pride in one's aristocratic heritage could have one guillotined. It is, in many ways, unsurprising that Sade became a revolutionary. In the first place, members of the aristocracy who had survived to see the Republic had to be vigilant about proclaiming their support of it in order to avoid being prosecuted for anti-revolutionary activities in the coming Reign of Terror. In the second, the use of the infamous *lettre de cachet* which had condemned him to imprisonment at Vincennes and, later, the Bastille, was abolished in the wake of the Revolution, which allowed Sade to regain his freedom, something which could only have made him grateful.

Many times in his personal correspondence, Sade bemoaned the system which allowed citizens to be incarcerated without trial, and felt himself to be a victim of the unjust rule of the monarchy, despite his status as aristocrat. However, Sade also had his reservations about the Revolution, and recorded in a 1790 letter to a lawyer that he was “sore at having lost much, more sore still to see my sovereign in irons” and he laments:

it is impossible for good to be done and continue so long as the sanctions of the monarch are constrained by thirty thousand armed scoundrels and twenty pieces of cannon – though for that matter I have few regrets for the old order; it certainly made me too unhappy for me to weep over it. (qtd. in Lély 317)

Sade rapidly gained the respect and trust of the revolutionary government, in part by penning political letters. Sade served guard duty for the National Guard, and became, in 1792, secretary of his section. He was appointed commissioner of the Piques (formerly the Place Vendôme) ward, and later on, Chairman. Several pamphlets of his were printed and circulated in the other wards, amongst them a political pamphlet entitled *Consideration on How to Support Legislation by Sanctions* and another entitled *Speech to the Shades of Marat and Le Pelletier*, which Lély comments is disappointing in its overuse of revolutionary catchphrases and terms: “One might even imagine that Sade had intended the thing as a parody, some twisted sort of satire on that ghoul of the Revolution, Marat” (353). Given Sade’s proclivity for satire, which will be explored in Chapter One, it is very likely that what Lély imagines is true.

Despite his success, although perhaps predictably, Sade would soon run afoul of the revolutionaries. In 1793, Sade was imprisoned for a year, in part because he was thought of as a moderate. Donald Thomas explains: “His brother judges noticed that, where it could be done, Sade made great efforts to establish the innocence of those denounced and brought before him” (211). Furthermore, both of Sade’s sons were listed as émigrés by the French government (the younger having fled to Malta, and the elder having resigned military commission in order to travel around France). Thomas says that the “regime took a stern view of their conduct” and émigrés were considered enemies of the country for turning their backs on their republican duties (215). Sade’s name would remain on the list even after the fall of the revolutionary regime, something which was fatal to the health of his finances, since it blocked him from receiving revenue from his estates (Plessix Gray 372). Family members left

behind were often punished for the crimes of their absent kin. Sade's year in prison under the revolutionaries could easily have seen him guillotined. He was spared, having been erroneously marked as "absent" at a round up of condemned prisoners, possibly, speculates Plessix Gray, on account of having made some prudently placed bribes (346). This, a mere *day* before the execution of Robespierre and the end of the Terror.

Sade and his faithful companion, Constance-Marie, had a very difficult time with money in the following years. Sade's letters to his man Gaufridy become increasingly desperate, as he implores Gaufridy to sell land, possessions, anything, for money (Plessix Gray 350). The sale of La Coste in 1796, beloved of Sade though the lands and castle were, was a welcome relief. However, Sade's ex-wife "would see to it that Sade could not pocket much of the money" – Sade still owed her money from unpaid obligations during the revolutionary years after their split (352). The situation grew dire in 1798, when Constance-Marie had to sell her clothing to support herself and Sade. Even then, she and Sade eventually had to move out of their shared quarters and live apart, although she continued to bring Sade food, and he even cared for her son, Charles, for a time (369). Appeals to his family, and even to his ex-wife, proved fruitless (Plessix Gray 368-9).

Sade published *Aline and Valcour* and *Philosophy in the Boudoir* in 1795, neither of which made him much money, nor earned him much notoriety. Plessix Gray observes that the market at this time "may well have been swamped by the profusion of literature, both chaste and profane, that flooded the market when the Terror's stringent censorship rules were lifted" (361). Sade, perhaps hoping (at least, that would be his defence) that more scandalous novels might pique public interest and therefore result in greater sales, printed an updated and far more explicit version of *Justine (La Nouvelle Justine)* and, its sister novel, *Juliette (L'Historie de Juliette)* as a large, ten-volume series between 1797 and 1801 (Plessix Gray 361). At the beginning of the Napoleonic era, Napoleon was viewed, reports Plessix Gray, as "a reincarnation of republican virtues," and Napoleon himself was "as puritanical in many ways as Louis XVI" (372). He put in place strict censorship policies, and awarded powers to police to enforce them (372). Sade, who had escaped retribution for his works by virtue of political connections and political and social upheaval and disorganisation, became a high-profile target in Napoleon's campaign to clean up and police French morality and virtue.

In 1801 Napoleon ordered the arrest of the author of the novels *Juliette* and *Justine*. Although Sade had published those works anonymously (in keeping with the conventions for the circulation of clandestine literature at the time), it was known within certain circles that he was the author. For instance, the writer and dramatist Villetterque published a review of Sade's *The Crimes of Love* (*Les crimes de l'amour*) in 1801, in which he hinted that Sade was the author of *Justine*, something which Sade, in an essay written as a response to Villetterque's accusations, vehemently denied. Napoleon's orders led to Sade's arrest at his publisher's office in 1801. Sade would spend the remainder of his days in prison or in the asylum Charenton, and would not live to see the end of Napoleon's reign after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Marie-Constance would eventually gain permission to stay with Sade in Charenton, and only parted with him the week before his death. However unfortunate the timing, there is little to suggest that this parting was intended to be forever, or that the couple had quarrelled. She seemed to tolerate Sade's interest in and sexual games with a young girl, Madeleine Leclerc, an affair which was encouraged by the girl's mother, who was an employee of Charenton (406).

In prison, Sade finally had the chance to stage his plays with some regularity – the Abbé Coulmier, who ran Charenton, saw it as a therapeutic activity not only for Sade, but for the other inmates who were involved in the production and performance of the plays. Sade did not stop writing in the last part of his life – although his works were, of necessity, far less inflammatory than the ones for which he is most remembered, because of a raid in 1807 in which many of Sade's writings and journals were confiscated because they supposedly contained licentious material. Plessix Gray remarks that his final works were “terribly proper little historical novels” (400). Despite the relative mildness of Sade's behaviour in the years before his final incarceration, and his apparent reformation of character in prison, the crime which he committed in writing his libertine novels was the crime for which he was most heavily punished.

### **Sade's Library: An Enlightenment Education**

Biographical information paints Sade's early life and particularly his education in only the broadest of brushstrokes, and so it is difficult to say with authority what his early literary and philosophical influences may have been. Given his education at the Jesuit Louis-le-Grand, he would have studied the Greek and Roman classics, and

would have been exposed to dramatic literature. The Jesuits held that the Greek and Latin classics were essential to any curriculum because, as Stephen Beall explains, they were thought to provide “useful preparation for the forum and the court” and “because they lent refinement and beauty to the soul” (5). Sade would have read Cicero (who was essential for teaching pupils how to speak with eloquence), Plato and Aristotle. He most certainly would have studied, very closely, the works of Thomas Aquinas, since the *Ratio Studiorum* dedicates a large section to the provision of training in Aquinian theology. His early schooling with his uncle the Abbé de Sade, who mixed with Enlightenment literary figures, means that he was probably exposed early on to Enlightenment ideas, if not to the literature itself. Additionally, clues as to Sade’s knowledge and reading can be found in his works, and in his correspondence (what little of it has been preserved). His works are clearly the product of an exceptionally well-read mind. Much of his reading would have been of contemporary Enlightenment literature, some of it clandestine literature.

Although Sade’s early studies provided him with basic philosophical and theological knowledge, his thinking is chiefly shaped by the clandestine philosophical texts which one finds paraphrased and referenced throughout his work. Clandestine works were literature which contained controversial, blasphemous, licentious or treasonous material, and which offended religious and political authorities. As an aristocrat, Sade is not likely to have found it difficult to obtain illegal texts, and, indeed, his own father may have furnished him with the kinds of clandestine philosophical materials which so clearly provided the template for his thinking and writing. Given Sade’s, his father the Comte’s and his uncle the Abbé’s radical literary tastes and moral views, it is likely that clandestine philosophical literature played a formative role in the cultivation of such tastes.

It seems paradoxical to talk of a boom in clandestine literature, but Jonathon Israel explains that clandestine philosophical manuscripts “immeasurably furthered the spread of radical thought in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Europe” (*Radical Enlightenment* 684) despite the best efforts of the law enforcement officers of the time to tamp down its diffusion. Although, Israel notes, such manuscripts had been an important mode of communicating clandestine philosophy since “at least the era of Bodin and Giordano Bruno [the early sixteenth century], and possibly earlier, ... there was a decisive broadening and intensification of such activity from around 1680” (*Radical Enlightenment* 684). These manuscripts

eventually gave way to the proliferation of printed books in the mid-eighteenth century by radical philosophers including Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach and La Mettrie, all of whom Sade read and admired.

Robert Darnton, who is an expert on French clandestine literature, compiles a table of bestselling clandestine books and authors in his book *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, a list which contains many books that Sade read. Of the well-known authors Voltaire, Holbach, Rousseau, Helvétius, Argens, Mirabeau, and La Bretonne figure prominently. Texts seemed to be regarded as dangerous for primarily religious and political reasons, rather than strictly for reasons of sexual policing. Darnton comments on the low percentage of bestselling clandestine texts accounted for by pornographic works: “a poor score for the century of Réstif de la Bretonne and the marquis [sic] de Sade” (72). Sade does not even merit a mention in Darnton’s lists of bestsellers, although that may be because Darnton’s research is confined to the pre-Revolutionary period, and Sade barely published before that time. Israel also says that “those who bought, read and discussed this underground literature were nobles – especially courtiers, army officers, diplomats, or officials” (685). Sade’s father Jean-Baptiste enjoyed membership of every one of those categories at various stages of his life, while Sade himself was an army officer. Clandestine texts were very expensive, and, at times, dangerous to own, a factor which limited their readership to the upper classes who not only could afford them, but who had the necessary political connections to avoid persecution for owning such scandalous works. Robert Darnton describes harsh punishments for booksellers caught selling such volumes: hanging was possible in principle though rarely a risk in practice, but imprisonment was an immediate threat. Interestingly, Darnton says that booksellers called such works “livres philosophiques” or, in English, “philosophical books” (7-8).

Sade mentions a number of clandestine authors and philosophers by name in his novels, in correspondence, and in essays. In *Juliette*, as a part of her pedagogical introduction to libertinage, the heroine is told to refer herself “again and again to the great theses of Spinoza, of Vanini, of the author of *Le système de la nature*” (the author in question being the infamous Holbach, who remained anonymous for many years, and who, along with Spinoza and Vanini, was denounced as an atheist and a radical) (20). Later in that volume, Juliette encounters a libertine called Chigi, who borrows Helvétius’ argument that the passions are what most motivate moral actions,

an argument that Chigi, in what will be established in this thesis as the typical Sadean style, exaggerates nearly beyond recognition (730). In *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (*La philosophie dans le boudoir*), the libertine Dolomance references “The adroit Voltaire” and Voltaire’s scorn for religion (28). Even if Sade does not mention these thinkers by name, his libertines borrow in spirit the arguments of Holbach “more or less verbatim” (Phillips, *The Marquis de Sade* 35), along with those of Helvétius and La Mettrie.

Sade, mostly by petitioning his wife, was able to assemble a library at Vincennes and at the Bastille which, according to Plessix Gray, numbered “some six hundred books and was of striking variety” (262). He had the classics, including “Homer, Virgil, Lucretius, Montaigne,” books on science, including texts by Newton and Buffon, fiction, including Fielding, Voltaire, and Smollett, drama, including Shakespeare (unusual since the great playwright had not yet been staged in France), travel chronicles, history and even erotica, alongside many volumes by Enlightenment thinkers (Plessix Gray 262-3). Through records of his correspondence, it is clear that he had trouble obtaining certain texts, including Rousseau’s works, because they were banned by prison authorities (263). In a 1783 letter to his wife, Sade complains facetiously:

To refuse me Jean-Jacques’ *Confessions*, now there’s an excellent thing, above all after having sent me Lucretius and the dialogues of Voltaire; that demonstrates great judiciousness, profound discernment in your spiritual guides. Alas, they do me much honor in reckoning that the writings of a deist can be dangerous reading for me; would that I were still at that stage.

(*Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* 133)

He further remarks that “Rousseau’s ethics and religion are strict and severe to me. I read them when I feel the need to improve myself” (134). Rousseau was indeed felt to be a radical thinker, although his views seem tame enough in comparison to Sade’s. Despite his radical views and his life, Rousseau was felt to be a highly moral writer, as Sade’s rather acid words demonstrate. Plessix Gray records that Sade also had trouble obtaining a copy of Holbach’s *A System of Nature*, a tract which Sade proclaimed was “verily and indubitably the basis of [his] philosophy” (*Letters from Prison* 336).

Sade displays the breadth of his reading in the essay “Reflections on the Novel,” in which he sets out a brief history of the novel, and describes those traits

that he believes a good novel should contain. The double motivation Sade had in writing this essay, to deny authorship of *Justine* and justify the libertine elements of his recently published *Aline and Valcour* surely casts suspicion over the sincerity which this essay seems to exude. Sade's self-serving argument here is that the vivid and accurate portrayal of vice is essential to the author who truly wishes to warn readers off the path of vice. He says: "Unlike Crébillon and Dorat, I have not set myself the dangerous goal of enticing women to love characters who deceive them; on the contrary, I want them to loathe those characters" (115). Crébillon and Dorat were eighteenth-century writers of erotic novels, and Crébillon, like Sade, attended Louis-le-Grand. In the same essay, Sade mentions Voltaire, who, he intimates, sacrificed craft and sentiment in order to "insert philosophy into his novels" (105), the most well-known of which was *Candide*. This is ironic, given that Sade's novels can be classified as philosophical. Where Rousseau is concerned, Sade can only utter praise. He says, slyly, that nature "granted in refinement and sentiment" to Rousseau "what she had only granted in wit to Voltaire" (105) and that Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (in French: *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*) "will never be bettered" (105). Sade turns to the sentimentalists Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, proclaiming that their works demonstrate that "tis not always by making virtue triumph that a writer arouses interest" (106).

There are a number of literary influences which, though Sade does not mention them by name, are the thematic forerunners to his work. Such influences will be discussed in the first chapter, which provides context for Sade's literary accomplishments. Alongside obvious references to Enlightenment philosophical works (which many of the arguments of his libertines borrow from heavily), clandestine and "pornographic" literature of the early to mid- Enlightenment, particularly those with a pedagogical bent, provided the template for Sade's own pedagogically-oriented tales, including *Juliette*, and *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. In particular, works such as Nicolas Chorier's *The School of Women* (originally *L'academie des dames*) (1660), Michel Millot's *The School of Venus* (or *L'ecole des filles ou le philosophie des dames*) (1665), and the Marquis d'Argens' *Thérèse the Philosopher* (or *Thérèse philosophe*) (1748). In *Juliette*, the heroine inspects the living quarters of a debauched friar and turns up "a mine of obscene engravings and literature," pronouncing judgements upon a select few which are likely to mirror Sade's own opinions (462). Juliette encounters *The Porter of Chartreaux* (*Le portier*



*des chartreaux*) allegedly by Latouche, which she says is more “bawdy” than truly libertine (461). *The School of Women* she pronounces “well-conceived” but “poor in the execution” and *The Education of Laure* she finds lacking in lewd scenes and cruel actions. Juliette approvingly says that *Thérèse the Philosopher* is alone among those works “to have discerned the possibilities of the genre” and that it “finally gave us an idea of what an immoral book could be” (462).

### **History of Authorship and Dates of Publication of Sade’s Work**

A timeline of the authorship and publication of Sade’s work is necessary in order to provide a reference point from which this thesis can proceed in its analysis of Sade’s writing. This timeline will demonstrate not only the span, but also the scope, of Sade’s literary output, far beyond those best known novels to which this thesis largely confines its analysis. Combined with a reading of his biography and the reception of his writing, the timeline tabulates the historical context in which Sade authored and published his writing, and allows the reader to conceptualise some of the political problems which he faced in doing so. Most of his works had to be published anonymously, and the work for which he is now most infamous, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, was not published at all until the twentieth century (Sade assumed it was lost forever).

1782	Sade writes <i>Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man</i> ( <i>Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribund</i> ).
1785	Sade writes <i>The 120 Days of Sodom</i> while imprisoned in the Bastille and is forced to leave it behind when he is freed. Sade believed the work lost, something he mourned deeply. He begins writing <i>Aline and Valcour</i> ( <i>Aline et Valcour</i> ).
1787	Sade completes the earliest incarnation of <i>Justine: The Misfortunes of Virtue</i> .
1788	Sade completes <i>Aline and Valcour, Dorci, or The Peculiarity of Fate</i> ( <i>Dorci, ou la bizarrerie du sort</i> ), <i>Stories</i> ( <i>Historiettes</i> ) (some of which are now lost; others were not published until 1926).

1791	A more extensive version of <i>Justine</i> is published anonymously, the first of Sade's books to be published.
1795	<i>Aline and Valcour</i> is published, the first of Sade's novels to be published under his own name. <i>Philosophy in the Boudoir</i> is published.
1797	<i>The New Justine</i> is published anonymously, a revision of the original text <i>Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue</i> . Around the same time, the sequel, <i>Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded</i> is published.
1800	<i>The Crimes of Love</i> is published.
1807	Sade begins writing <i>The Marquise de Gange</i> .
1812	Sade completes <i>Adelaide of Brunswick, Princess of Saxony</i> . The work was never published in French, and not published at all in Sade's lifetime.
1813	<i>The Marquise de Gange</i> is published. Sade completes <i>The Secret History of Isabelle of Bavaria</i> (never published).
1904	<i>The 120 Days of Sodom</i> is published for the first time by Iwan Bloch.
1926	<i>Stories, Tales and Fables (Historiettes, Contes et Fabliaux)</i> , a collection of some of Sade's short stories, is published for the first time, together with <i>Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man</i> .
1954	<i>Adelaide of Brunswick</i> is published in English translation, never having been published in French (Lély 450).

### **Pornographer, Revolutionary, Monster, Martyr: The Reception of Sade and his Work**

Sade's reputation as a pornographer precedes any reading of him. If one looks at reception of Sade's work, however, it is easy to see the many possibilities for interpretation Sade's work offers, as well as the scope of Sade's influence on a variety of traditions. It is therefore useful to trace the reception of his work since its earliest publication to get some idea of the way in which Sade is discursively positioned in popular, literary and philosophical culture.

His major published work, *Justine*, became a best-seller, but, lewd as it was, Sade was in no position to take due credit for the scandalous work. Both *Justine* and

*The Crimes of Love*, caught the attention of several well-known figures, and instigated the hunt for the books' author, something which would eventually lead to Sade's arrest in 1801. A bookbinding establishment was raided in 1800, and copies of *Justine* confiscated. The author Rétif de la Bretonne, who was himself charged with being a pornographer, wrote the erotic novel *Anti-Justine* as a response to what he felt was Sade's "filthy" writing. Villeterque, as discussed, called *The Crimes of Love* "detestable," and also hinted that Sade had written *Justine* (117). According to Bongie, these rumours "turned into direct accusations in the press" (282) forcing Sade to deny vehemently that he had authored the novels, even during his various bouts of imprisonment. Anonymity, given the clandestine culture in which books such as Sade's and those he most loved to read circulated, was essential to maintain a virtuous reputation and to avoid prosecution.

But the damage was already done. Sade was seen as a monster for his authorship of *Justine* and *Juliette*, or, at the very least, a sterling example of the excesses of the then-maligned *Ancien Régime*. Even those who acknowledged his intellect, such as the astronomer Lalande, did not regard him as a worthy contemporary in a list of notable atheists for his lack of virtue. Bongie quotes Lalande: "he has all the requisite intelligence, reasoning powers and erudition but his infamous novels *Justine* and *Juliette* must exclude him from a sect where virtue alone holds sway" (283). Lalande's motivations are understandable; it was assumed that atheists, lacking any religious basis for ethics, could not be virtuous, and so atheists at the time had to defend themselves against charges of immorality. Immorality was hardly a charge which Sade, with his criminal debauches by then well-known, could refute.

### **Sadism and Medical Discourse**

In the late nineteenth century, Sade made his most recognisable, although unwitting, contribution to the popular lexicon when the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing included an entry on Sadism into his *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886. Krafft-Ebing notes that the term already existed in French literature, derived from the Marquis, who, he says, was a "monster" (69). He defines Sadism thus:

Sadism is the experience of sexual pleasurable sensations (including orgasm) produced by acts of cruelty, bodily punishment afflicted on one's own person or when witnessed in others, be they animals or human beings. It may also

consist of an innate desire to humiliate, hurt, wound or even destroy others in order thereby to create sexual pleasure in one's self. (53)

This represents the first record of sadism in respected medical literature. Iwan Bloch, a psychiatrist, published *The 120 Days of Sodom* for the first time as a kind of medical curiosity. Perhaps most well known of all medical studies of Sade's work was conducted by Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, where Freud follows Krafft-Ebing in designating sadism and masochism as active and passive versions of the same perversion. This is a theory which Gilles Deleuze sought to debunk in his 1967 work *Coldness and Cruelty*, a work analysing the writing of Sade and Sacher-Masoch, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

It is important to stress that the result of these studies was to classify sadism as a psychological disorder. Where in his own time Sade was classified as monstrous for his atheism (it was blasphemy, to recall the incidents with Jeanne Testard and Rose Keller, which would initially earn him jail-time and a bad reputation, far more than physical injuries inflicted), or his perceived ethical failings, he would be perceived in modernity's imagination as mentally ill. Sade did spend a great deal of his time in an asylum, but it was not his fondness for flagellation or his sexual excesses in themselves which had him immured in Charenton. When it manifests as cruelty or violence towards a non-consenting person, sadomasochism is still seen as a psychiatric issue, but it is now stricken from the diagnostic manual of psychiatric disorders. This is a relatively recent development, and it is by no means socially acceptable; most certainly not so in the forms it took in Sade's work. However, "sadomasochism" has entered popular culture in a variety of surprising ways in recent years. Sadomasochism now has marked stylistic signifiers, a result of the influence of BDSM subcultures on fashion (a sure sign that the subculture has been recuperated to the mainstream), and it is found in a very de-clawed form in the maligned but bestselling *50 Shades of Grey*, itself an inheritor of the themes and structures of the pedagogical, sentimental and seduction novels of the eighteenth century. This seems to have reduced none of the power of Sade's work itself to shock, and the term "sadism" seems to stand quite apart from Sade himself, or his writings, in the popular imagination.

### **The Sovereign Man: Sade and the Surrealists**

Sade's influence on, and appropriation by, the Surrealists helped to revive and restore him in the modern imagination. David Gascoyne says in *A Short Survey of Surrealism* that Sade "was in many ways the starting point of the great Romantic movement that rolled across the last century like a theatrical thunderstorm" (3). His importance to this movement means that to enumerate the Surrealist works which in some way reference Sade or use his work as a direct influence would be far too long and tiresome an undertaking for this introduction, but to get an impression of that importance, one need only hear the names of just a few of the thinkers who championed his thought and work in the Surrealist movement. Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Paul Éluard, Man Ray, Maurice Heine, André Masson and René Magritte all produced works inspired by or about Sade. Breton even mentioned Sade in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) as a "surrealist in Sadism" (9). Apollinaire wrote "The Divine Marquis" (*Le divin Marquis*) in 1909, an essay which provides a short biography, a study of some of Sade's major works, including his dramatic works, and includes some of Sade's letters. Éluard, Masson, Heine and Breton all produced essays on Sade and his importance to Surrealism. In 1969 Dalí produced a set of lithographs based on several of Sade's plays, although it is likely that Sade had been an influence on Dalí's work before this time. Even though Bataille was never formally a Surrealist, his works are testament both to his Surrealist tendencies and connections, and the influence of Sade in that artistically and socially transgressive movement.

Although it was Sade's transgressive depictions of sexuality which drew many of the Surrealists to his work, his anti-clericalism, revolutionary status, and promotion of freedom (whether it be from politics, religious mores, or conventional morality) were also significant contributing factors. Indeed, Simon Baker proposes, in his book *Surrealism, History, and Revolution*, that it was Sade's "association with the Bastille" (242) which made him so interesting to the Surrealists, something which can be observed in the most straightforward manner by examining Man Ray's *Imaginary Portrait of D.A.F. de Sade* (*Portrait imaginaire de D. A. F. de Sade*), which features the burning Bastille, and a profile of Sade constructed from prison bricks. Éluard praises Sade fulsomely when he says he is "the most feared of philosophers":

Because he never acknowledged any barrier to his desire for freedom; because his genius shamelessly revealed every human instinct; because he denounced man's hypocritical relationship with his fellows; and because he developed a system that could give humans of both sexes their natural freedom and allow them a real life together. (185)

Apollinaire called Sade "the freest spirit who ever lived," (65) and seems to regard Sade's reputation to be less a result of any real cruelties Sade inflicted upon women (Apollinaire is particularly sceptical of the whole Rose Keller affair), and more a result of his scandalous political and religious positions.

Bataille criticised the Surrealists for their taming of the image of Sade in the essay "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade" ("La valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade"). Bataille comments disdainfully: "the behaviour of Sade's admirers resembles that of primitive subjects in relation to their king, whom they adore and loathe, and whom they cover with honours and narrowly confine" (115). Bataille's main objection to the Surrealists' treatment of Sade is that, in reducing him to a symbol of freedom, or a literary figure or trope, they appropriate Sade only in truth to expel him: "he is an object of transports of exaltation to the extent that these transports facilitate his excretion" (115). The revolutionary character of Sade, imagined by Bataille to be found in Sade's challenge to conventional morality, his refusal to respect limits, his enshrinement in thought of anything that is ordinarily excreted in thought, is betrayed when he is celebrated as the early champion of this-or-that intellectual cause such, as the cause championed by the Surrealists. Those parts of his writing which are transgressive are left out and expelled from any conception of Sade as some kind of early freedom fighter.

### **Sade and Evil in Philosophy, Literature and Drama**

The philosophical influence of the Surrealists aroused interest in Sade in the philosophical community. In the mid-twentieth century, philosophers including Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot (Klossowski and Bataille both having ties to the Surrealists) helped to rehabilitate Sade's image, and carve a place for legitimate readings of Sade in philosophical work. In 1947, Pierre Klossowski wrote the book *Sade, My Neighbour* (*Sade, mon prochain*) and Beauvoir wrote the provocatively titled essay "Must We Burn Sade?" ("Faut-il brûler Sade?") in 1951-52, both works which remain so integral to Sadean

studies that it is tempting to forget that they were once among the only serious and respected philosophical works on Sade. These philosophical readings of and responses to Sade's work paved the way for renewed interest in Sade throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day. Major postmodernist thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida have been influenced by reading Sade, whose works enabled them to formulate the notion of transgression. There is little in Sade's work itself to suggest that he is a postmodernist thinker *avant le lettre*, yet his work has useful and interesting applications in postmodernist thought when read in a postmodernist context, and when considered in the light of postmodernist conceptions of transgression, and theories of ethics and religion. Sade's significance to postmodernist philosophy will be discussed at length in Chapter Eight.

Sade became, and remains, fascinating to many writers, though repulsive to others, and his work itself has been influential for the lessons it has been perceived to provide on evil and human nature. Franz Kafka is reported to have said of Sade that he is "the real patron of our era" because he can "obtain pleasure only through the suffering of others, just as the luxury of the rich is paid for by the misery of the poor" (qtd. in Janouch 131). Algernon Swinburne was in love with the idea of Sade, and composed a poem entitled "Charenton 1810" before ever reading Sade. However, Jeremy Mitchell explains in his article "Swinburne – The Disappointed Protagonist" that Swinburne's initial reading disappointed his expectations, since he found the libertine's writing overly concerned with "quantity," "quite regardless of expense" (qtd. in Mitchell 84). Swinburne condemns Sade's philosophy: "You take yourself for a great pagan physiologist and philosopher – you are a Christian ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through mortification of the flesh" (qtd. in Mitchell 84). Swinburne's judgement captures, as later chapters will investigate, the paradox at the heart of Sade's work – bodily pleasure is denied in the name of transgression, and in the name, precisely, of religion. Mitchell claims, however, that Swinburne nevertheless continued to be fascinated by Sade, and that it was through reading Sade that Swinburne deepened his obsession with flagellation (85). Sade also influenced Gustave Flaubert: "From the age of 17 until the year of his death, over a period of forty years, Flaubert repeatedly came back to de Sade" (Wall 104) and wrote in a letter that he would pay for Sade's novels "their weight in gold" and that Sade was a great man, even an immortal (Flaubert, qtd. in Steegmuller 11). Baudelaire is recorded as saying that "one must always return to Sade, that is, to Natural man, in

order to explain evil” (qtd. in Derrida, *Given Time* 166).<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire’s, Flaubert’s and Swinburne’s reactions to Sade not only romanticise him, they are typically Romantic reactions to his work, in that they are concerned with nature and human beings in their “natural” state, which, according to a Rousseauian view, is innocent (in the sense that humans are not yet either good or bad) and free. Dostoyevsky, in contrast to Swinburne, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, opposed Sade’s system of thought and morality. Dostoyevsky scholar Robert Louis Jackson writes that, while Dostoyevsky understood the complex and grave nature of the moral questions that Sade raised, “what is certain is that he rejected the Sadean world view as amoral, disfigured and destructive of the moral and social fabric of men and society” (160).

Bataille perhaps went further than any other writer in exploring and, to an extent, emulating, Sade’s writing in his own work. Not only was Bataille deeply engaged with Sade in formulating his concept of transgression, Bataille wrote often about Sade – two chapters of *Erotism (L’Erotisme)* are dedicated to Sade, and one of *Literature and Evil (La littérature et le mal)*. Bataille’s own fiction, most prominently *The Story of the Eye (Histoire de l’œil)*, is, to an extent, modelled on Sade’s erotic transgression and theatrical staging, and employs the same generic techniques of the libertine novel. Like Sade, Bataille also draws from and satirises the conventions of the sentimental novel. The characters of Simone and Marcelle in *The Story of the Eye* recall the Sadean sisters, the libertine Juliette and her innocent, but ill-starred younger sibling Justine. Simone is the carefree libertine, characterised by a fellow libertine as “the simplest and most angelic creature ever to walk the earth” and Marcelle is the pure and innocent object of Simone’s and the unnamed narrator’s affections, eventually driven mad by their debauchery until finally she hangs herself (75).

Peter Weiss’s play *Marat/Sade* (published in 1963 and first performed in 1964) is one of the twentieth century’s most telling and profound portrayals of the Marquis. Sade is characterised as a philosopher, albeit a nihilistic and detached one, who is more an observer than an active political figure amid the chaos of the Revolution being replayed by his fellow inmates in 1808. The deliberately

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<sup>4</sup> The book that this quote is supposedly taken from, the first volume of Gilbert Lély’s *Oeuvres Complètes* of Sade, is not available in English translation, and is very difficult to find even in French in Australia. Therefore quoting directly from the work itself has not been possible.



provocative and lengthy title of the play: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*<sup>5</sup> gives the audience a sense of what is in store. A play within a play, *Marat/Sade* imagines a stage production, directed by Sade while he was in Charenton, depicting the notorious story of the assassination of Marat at the hands of Charlotte Corday. The assassination scene, as staged in the most celebrated production of the play by Peter Brook, recalls the painting *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David. The actors are the inmates of the asylum (Corday is played by a somnambulist) and their performance in the play is regulated by nurses at the institution, as well as the hospital's director, Coulmier, who believes that the play will reflect his bourgeois and patriotic views about the Napoleonic government and the regrettable events of the Revolution and will be a therapeutic exercise for the inmates. These details are drawn from history: Sade was allowed to stage a number of conventional plays during his time at Charenton. The inmates have other ideas; they want to reinvent the Revolution and restage *The Terror*. Their revolutionary outbursts are often expressed in place of Coulmier-approved lines, and have to be censored at his outraged request. The character Charlotte Corday is not dissimilar to a heroine of a sentimental novel: she believes in the purity of the Revolution, and wants to assassinate Marat because in her view, he has perverted the ideals of the Revolution ("my way was true," she sings, "while for you the highway led over the mountains of dead" (23)). Played by an inmate of the asylum, she becomes corrupted and surrounded by violence and sex; it would be unsurprising to learn that Weiss drew from Sade's own libertine heroines in writing the character.

Sade is a dispassionate and sardonic director, occasionally interjecting with speeches of his own which (true to the real Sade) cast doubt upon the position both of the revolutionaries and the supporters of Napoleon. In the Brook production of the play, Sade becomes the most compelling character, a puppetmaster in full control of the events, even when they seem to have dissolved into chaos. In one compelling scene, Sade directs Charlotte Corday to whip him with her own hair (in Weiss's script, it is with a many-pronged leather whip, Brook's alteration renders the scene both more intimate and more shocking), while he delivers a monologue on the

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<sup>5</sup> In German: *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade*.

Revolution, his lines interrupted by periodic sounds of whiplash and gasps of pain and ecstasy. One of the only depictions of Sade to do so, the play acknowledges the ethical, philosophical and political complexities in Sade's thought. Keeping in mind the play-within-a-play structure, Sade's dialogues, especially with Marat, are really dialogues with himself.

### **Sade in Popular Culture**

The transgressiveness of Sade's work, and the mystery and scandal which surrounds understandings of his life, have captivated popular culture. The 2000 movie *Quills* represents Sade as something of an oppressed literary soul who, in his erotic writing, bravely stands against censorship and sexual repression alike. Sade biographer Neil Schaeffer wrote a damning review of the movie, accusing it of being not only historically inaccurate and romanticised, but misguided in its didactic message. He notes that the message seems to be that "seemingly good people are all bad underneath, are all hypocrites, while the seemingly bad person, De Sade, probably has some redeeming qualities" ("Perverting De Sade"). In the movie, Sade is flirtatious towards, but ultimately not willing to take advantage of, his young, impressionable chambermaid (played by Kate Winslet). Schaeffer notes with some irony that the real Sade had chronicled his affair with an eighteen-year-old chambermaid "from her early teens until the week before he died." Most relevant to this thesis, Schaeffer says:

The movie-makers and reviewers alike seem to think that the main point of De Sade's life and writing is to oppose censorship. In fact, his main obsession was to push the limits – sexual, spiritual, and political – as a means of feeling out the limits of his times and of his own mind. If there were no limits, there would be no meaning. When De Sade performed a sexual act with a prostitute and a communion wafer, he cried, "If you are God, avenge yourself!" The perversions were rhetorical acts at least as much as sexual ones. They were a way of opening a dialogue with the powers that be and with nature itself. ("Perverting De Sade")

Schaeffer says, "*Quills* simplifies De Sade into a modern "victim" and over-emphasises his potential as a focus for liberal-political meanings," a move which strikes a chord with contemporary cinemagoers, but which misses the mark entirely in its representation of Sade the man and his philosophy ("Perverting De Sade").

By contrast, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pier Pasolini's 1975 translation of Sade's *The 120 Days* into film, makes no attempt to romanticise Sade's writing or give it a moral purpose; indeed, Pasolini seems to want to politicise Sade's work in troubling ways. The four libertines in *Salò* are fascists who occupy high positions of power in Mussolini's Italy: in this film, fascism and libertinism go hand in hand. The film was only recently (2010) awarded an R 18+ rating in Australia where it had previously been banned (Wikipedia).<sup>6</sup>

As a result of his notorious reputation, Sade has been appropriated as a monstrous stock character available for use in Gothic horror. He is portrayed as a supernatural monster in Robert Bloch's short story "The Skull of the Marquis de Sade," which was adapted into a movie in 1965 entitled *The Skull*. In the story, Sade's skull is removed from his grave and sold to collectors. The sinister item brings madness and death to all who find it in their possession. The 1988 film *Waxwork* imagines Sade as taking ghostly possession of a wax effigy of himself, and luring teenagers to their deaths in a haunted wax museum. In pulp horror novelist Mary-Ann Mitchell's novels, he is portrayed as a powerful and evil vampire who has survived, along with his mother-in-law and niece, to the modern day and lives in debauchery in San Francisco. While none of these depictions provide a very accurate or profound examination of the Marquis, they demonstrate the extent to which the idea of Sade as monster has characterised reception and remembrance of him. Sade is still a figure of disgust and moral horror to most who recognise his name, despite the increasing openness to his work in philosophy, literature and art. It is one of the tasks of this thesis to explain why and how Sade's ideas produce this disgust and moral horror, in short, why they are transgressive, as a means of coming to a new conception of Sade as an ethical thinker. Key to answering the question of why Sade's writing is transgressive is his social context.

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<sup>6</sup> There have been many other films based on Sade's life and works, including several by Spanish director Jesus Franco, who seems to have been particularly inspired by Sade's work, and *De Sade*, a 1969 biopic written by Richard Matheson (who is famed for his science-fiction writing). However, these films are too numerous to dedicate space here to each of them.

### **God, Nature, and Human Nature During the Enlightenment**

Sade was an atheist materialist in a time when this was extremely uncommon, not to mention socially and politically fraught. There are broad themes in Sade's writing which, though utterly of his time, are pushed to extremes, such that they serve to challenge the moral limits of human knowledge of the world. Despite rarely being placed into his rightful intellectual context as an Enlightenment thinker, Sade's work is only explicable in this context. The Age of Enlightenment can be broadly characterised by new perspectives and ways of thinking about the nature of God, of nature itself, and therefore of human nature. Sade's positions on these issues, though rarely original, are taken to such radical extremes that they are transgressive not only in the light of entrenched religious authority, but even to Enlightenment views of reason and ethics. Sade reinterprets and co-opts these categories, which is one reason why Sade is a transgressive writer. Religious and Enlightenment ideas about God, nature and human nature need to be elucidated in order properly to contextualise Sade's work, and in order to examine precisely how it is transgressive and for what purpose. This is a major undertaking which will occupy a large portion of this thesis. However, a few brief introductory paragraphs are necessary to define the Enlightenment.

Although some Enlightenment thinkers had begun to challenge the authority of the Church and its dogma and theology, Christian ideas were still dominant. Europe had fragmented into different confessional sects, a development which necessitated the creation of toleration doctrines, but these only went so far as to advocate toleration for differing versions of Christianity. Historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes: "In one form, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment did indeed set itself against Christianity. . . . Much of this started as being anti-Catholic rather than anti-Christian" (*Reformation* 698). Sade's atheism is defined by his relationship to Catholic Christianity and the apologetics of classical theism; for Sade, to be anti-religious is to rebel against Catholicism. Therefore, whenever this thesis refers to the term "religion" or the phrase "religious categories" it is specifically identifying the Christian religion. That is not to suggest that the term "religion" *should* be used so narrowly; indeed, what counts as religion, and how the word should be defined, has remained contentious. This thesis argues that Sade's atheism and ethics operate on the basis of and cannot escape Christian theology, dogma and practice. Christian thought has been far from homogenous, even in times in which religious attitudes

were closely policed, such as the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, there are categories of understanding which are Christian by virtue of Christianity being a major structural component of Western ways of thinking about the world. Categories such as sin, virtue, the sacred, the profane, good and evil, and more besides, are informed by a specifically Christian worldview. It would be a momentous project to explicate the entirety of this “worldview” not least because it is not in fact one view but a wide range of often contradictory views. Yet looking at Christian understandings of nature, human nature and God covers those parts of Christian ways of thinking about the world relevant to understanding Enlightenment thought, which engendered a radical rethinking of Christian understandings of God, nature and human nature. Furthermore, beliefs about God in Western thinking have been shaped predominantly by notions of the Christian God, even though Christians themselves do not agree on the true nature of the Godhead. In philosophy, God is abstracted in that the word “God” can be made to stand in for concepts like “prime mover” or “most perfect being” or even “the other” (all concepts to be expounded in later chapters). However, God in the Sadean world is not just a philosophical abstraction as it is in classical theism, but a personal Christian God at which Sade shakes his fist.<sup>7</sup>

As Peter Hamilton describes it: “the Enlightenment was the creation of a new framework of ideas about man, society, and nature, which challenged existing conceptions rooted in a traditional world-view, dominated by Christianity” (23). This challenge to a traditional world-view was posed, according to Hamilton, by new forms of knowledge, which depended on the human capacity for reason, and undermined the basis of older forms of knowledge: those based on religious and scriptural authority. Jonathan Israel, a passionate advocate of the radical Enlightenment, observes that:

Mid seventeenth-century Europe was still, not just predominantly but overwhelmingly, a culture in which all debates about man, God and the World which penetrated into the public sphere revolved around ‘confessional’ – that is, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), or Anglican issues. ... By contrast, after 1650, a general process of rationalisation and secularisation set

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<sup>7</sup> Later chapters, particularly, Six and Eight, will discuss how the Christian God became a personal God, and why this is significant in fundamentally changing the way that Western subjects think through ethics and their relationship to the other.

in which rapidly overthrew theology's age-old hegemony in the world of study [including] commonly received assumptions about mankind, society, politics, and the cosmos. (*Radical Enlightenment* 4)

Despite early theologian Tertullian's scepticism of the place of philosophy in theology (summed up in his question: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens ... ?" ["Revelation Before Human Reason" 62]), Christianity has always been influenced, constructed and structured by philosophical thinking, such that, for much of Christian history, theology and philosophy cannot properly be distinguished. The idea that faith was compatible with reason seemed beyond question, particularly when it was affirmed by theologians of the calibre of Thomas Aquinas. By the time of the early Enlightenment, Europe was still religious, but riven by religious wars, which, along with the kinds of doctrinal disputes that caused the Protestant Reformation, began to erode religious authority. However, the idea that religion and reason were compatible was radically undermined during the Enlightenment. At the same time, the aims of philosophy came to be considered, at the very least, difficult to reconcile with those of theology, and, at worst, an outright menace to theology.

However, it is important not to reduce the entirety of Enlightenment thought to one narrative about the progress of human rationality for the intellectual emancipation of humankind. In the first place, few Enlightenment thinkers were so radical as to discuss freedom and equality for all in the way in which those terms are discussed today. Their goals were usually limited to the interests of the dominant group. Second, as Israel points out, "there were always two Enlightenments" (*Enlightenment Contested* 11). It is necessary to differentiate the radical Enlightenment from the conservative or "moderate mainstream" (11). The moderate mainstream was dominant in the time of the Enlightenment, although Israel contends that, in the long run, it "proved to be much the less important" (11). The moderates, including thinkers like Voltaire, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Christian Thomasius (*Radical Enlightenment* 11) adopted revolutionary pedagogical, political, ethical and philosophical stances, but "in such a way as to preserve and safeguard what were judged essential elements of the older structures, effecting a viable synthesis of old and new, and of reason and faith" (11). The radical Enlightenment, including thinkers like Pierre Bayle, Denis Diderot, the Marquis de Condorcet and Baruch Spinoza, would by contrast attempt to sweep aside all pretensions to reconciling faith and reason. It "characteristically combined immense reverence for science, and for

mathematical logic, with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakably republican and democratic tendencies” (*Radical Enlightenment* 12). Sade’s (admittedly partial and partisan) use of the theories and arguments of many radical thinkers demonstrates his intellectual lineage, and the extent to which his materialism, his anti-clericalism and his anti-Catholicism are products of his time.

Even if some Enlightenment thinkers did not go so far as Sade in denying the existence of God, they problematised entrenched views about how humanity might come to know God. Prior to the Enlightenment, miracles and revelation were seen as the “‘first pillar’ of faith, authority and tradition by theologians” (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* 219). They were one of the primary means by which humans could come to know God, and certainly they were the most authoritative means by which humans could know God (so long as the Church verified the miracle or revelation in question). During the Enlightenment, thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza and David Hume cast doubt on, or, in the case of Hume, denied the possibility of miracles. Those less radical thinkers, like the deists (including Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau) attempted to reconcile theology and this new philosophical scepticism by positing that proof of God could be discerned, not by revelation, but by logic and empirical observation of nature alone. Therefore, many of these thinkers looked to nature – its complexity, its beauty and its mysteries – to provide proof of a benevolent, intelligent creator: the Christian God. Attempts to unite materialist conceptions of nature with theology came to be called “natural theology.” Deists often felt that God had created the world, but did not intervene in it. The deistic interpretation seemed to make the authority of scripture, revelation and the authority of the Church redundant, which caused them to be labelled atheists by many traditional theists. Emerging scientific knowledge combined with a rationalistic outlook engendered a shift in theories of nature that underpinned the shifts in thinking about God and human nature, and which contributed to the relative decline of the authority of scripture, revelation, and the influence of the Catholic Church in Europe.

Christianity had always seen so-called natural laws (their definition of this term being distinct from emerging conceptions of scientific natural laws) as, at least in part, religious and ethical injunctions, and so knowledge of nature was important in guiding ethical behaviour. Likewise, Enlightenment thinkers, both religious and

secular, looked to nature to provide a blueprint for human behaviour. There was a crucial difference in their respective understandings: while religious thinkers had long argued that nature, as the creation of God, demonstrated God's will and benevolence and could therefore provide something of a template for human behaviour,<sup>8</sup> radical secular thinkers wanted to dispense with the notion of creation and assumed that nature, as rational, could serve as a template for rational behaviour in humans. For many Enlightenment thinkers, systems of nature were crucial to systems of ethics independent of a religious basis for ethics.

Sade is certainly one such thinker. Sade draws on radical Enlightenment thought, particularly the arguments of Spinoza and Holbach. Sadean libertines use these systems in order to set out the basis for both ethical theory and praxis, which they then demonstrate in elaborate and precisely executed *tableaux* or scenes. However, Sade cannot be described as a radical thinker in the same way that Bayle, Diderot, or Spinoza can. He uses these theories not only to advance an atheistic or materialistic conception of Nature, not only to dispel "superstitious" religious ideas about God, and certainly not only to provide, from a "blueprint" of nature, a guide to virtuous behaviour, but to transgress notions of virtue, religious beliefs about nature and God, and Enlightenment rationalism. Transgression characterises the Sadean system, and also compromises any reading of Sade's works as purely materialistic.

Given the tension in Sade's work between Christian categories, Enlightenment reason, and transgression, Sade's ethics cannot be read in any straightforward way, but it is not, therefore, reasonable to assume that Sade's ethics can be so easily discounted. It is commonplace to assume that radical and atrocious works like Sade's are destructive to morals. They may be destructive to normative ideas of ethics because libertines deliberately problematise and transgress normative ethical laws. They may also be destructive to ethics from a meta-ethical perspective. When libertines theorise and act out some of the monstrous consequences of taking seriously proposed bases for ethics, such as Christian theology, or nature, or reason, they destroy both those frameworks of thinking which have been used to ground ethics, and the very possibility that ethics can be grounded in any universalising conception of morality. Libertine arguments against universalism highlight the

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<sup>8</sup> A belief still very much in vogue today when arguments about, for instance, sexuality, become mired in debates about what is and is not natural.



oppressiveness of universal reason, more than a century before postmodernists questioned universal reason. However, the way that libertines problematise ethical theories, both religious and secular, demonstrates that Sadean ethics can be a valuable critical tool. The critical and illustrative nature of Sadean ethics and transgression can provide new perspectives on the major ethical ideas and dilemmas which have dominated postmodernist thinking on meta-ethics.

### **Postmodernism and Sade**

Even though he cannot, strictly speaking, be labelled a proto-postmodernist writer, it is useful to look at Sade in the light of postmodernist theory in order to analyse and clarify aspects of works which do not fit easily into any one literary or philosophical tradition. The aspirations of this thesis are to examine Sade's ethics and atheism, and so it is the ways in which Sade's work can be read through postmodernist theories of ethics which is of greatest interest here. Sade's significance to postmodernist ideas and ethics is not arbitrary, but a result of his influence on Western thought. For instance, he was influential to Nietzsche, whose challenging concept of the transvaluation of values in many ways still determines postmodernist notions of truth, values, and ethics. John Phillips writes: "It is in large measure due to the influence of Sade on Nietzsche, for, notwithstanding Sade's aristocratic leanings and hierarchical ways of thinking, the Sadean text contains many thoughts and ideas that we would now consider both Nietzschean and postmodern in character" (*Sade: The Libertine Novels* 166). Furthermore, Sade's challenge to both religious and secular understandings of ethics implies that his ethical system cannot be explained with recourse to Enlightenment systems of ethics alone. Binary oppositions and moral absolutes are infamously undermined by many postmodernist thinkers. This suggests that there is some commonality between Sadean ethics and postmodernist theories of ethics.

Although there is no one system of "postmodernist ethics," the notion of ethical responsibility to the other is something which has generated much discussion and debate in postmodernism. After the Holocaust, appeals to some kind of ultimate good which is supposed (by Rousseau, among others) naturally to reside in human nature seem hopelessly optimistic. After Nietzsche and the death of God, it is difficult to conceive of any basis at all for meaning and value beyond mere pragmatism. The "ethics of the other," a product of the work of Emmanuel Levinas

who conceived of it specifically in the context of the Holocaust, is one way in which philosophers have attempted to formulate a system of ethics in this situation. Levinas considers a central problem of ethical conduct: how to behave towards the other in physically and metaphysically non-violent ways, metaphysical comprehension or mastery being a form of violence in that it subjugates the other to the will of the self. The notion of responsibility to the other tries to displace the primacy of the self in ethics. It puts the other first, imagining an ethical encounter, a responsibility, which precedes and therefore transcends all other responsibilities. Perhaps because of this transcendence, the other can be interpreted as a substitute for God, and God is also seen to “stand in” for the other. This is and also is not the God of the Christian bible. It is, because Western concepts of God are Christian concepts by virtue of cultural inheritance, granting that in Levinas’ writing they are also Jewish concepts of God. It is not, because, after all, this God is dead in the minds of most contemporary Western subjects (as Nietzsche proclaimed), but also because it is God conceived of as pure alterity and infinity. The ethics of the other undermines any simple opposition between the secular and the religious in ethics, and can also be used as a critical tool in evaluating ethical practices. There is a paradox which arises in Sade’s work between the fierce individualism of Sadean libertines, their aspiration to sovereignty, and their total commitment to transgression. Transgression assumes an audience, an other, who acts as witness to and target of the transgression, thereby making it possible. Transgression binds libertines, who, despite their assumed sovereignty, are responsible to an other in the moment of transgression. This is the paradox which provides an opportunity to read Sade’s ethical system in relation to the notion of ethical responsibility.

A reading of ethics such as that proposed here has the potential to open up an understanding of Sade’s most notorious works which, against conventional views of his work, seems counter-intuitive, because the Sadean libertine seems to be so radically sovereign that it defines the very concept of a sadistic master: impenetrable, unbending and unknowable as a god. They have been defined as enclosed totalities, and the concept of a Sadean system has been conceptualised as a system which subsumes and encloses. A reading of Sadean ethics as an ethics of the other will illuminate the ways in which that system does not enclose at all, but remains open to alterity, and is constituted by that openness, by and in transgression. The violent nature of this ethics is destructive upon contact with the apparently non-violent ethics

of the other. It is therefore useful to explore the fallout from this contact, and what it might mean for ethical practice based on responsibility to the other, particularly when that other is conceptualised as God.

### **Thesis Structure and Chapter Summary**

Chapter One will deal with Sade's work in the context of the literary structures and genres of the philosophical, the libertine and the sentimental novels. Sade's work cannot be discussed without explaining his literary strategies and, if these strategies are not considered before the thesis moves on to discussing Sade's atheism and ethics, such discussions become mired in tangential explication of the significance of the generic and structural features of Sade's writing. This chapter acts as a kind of overture to the rest of the thesis. The chapter will first discuss the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, and the formation of the philosophical novel and its popularity in Enlightenment literary culture. This will begin to make explicable the philosophical elements of Sade's work. The chapter will then trace the development of the libertine as a literary stock character and the emergence of the libertine novel as a way to position the formation of Sade's libertine heroes and heroines within a literary history. This will make plain why Sade's work is not mere pornography, but belongs in a distinguished group of works which can be defined not only by their exploration of sexuality but also, conjoinedly, philosophy, ethics and politics. Finally the chapter will analyse the pedagogical, parodic and satirical dimensions of Sade's works, both features which are explicable within the context of eighteenth-century literature (and indeed, philosophy), and which set Sade's work apart from that context.

In order to provide an essential background for making sense of Sade's materialist atheism, Chapter Two will scrutinise the changing ways in which atheism has been conceptualised, defined, and received. It will demonstrate why it is difficult to define the term "atheism," given that it is a historical and discursive construction which has named disparate concepts in different social and historical contexts. Chapter Two will look at the ways in which atheism has been envisaged in different times, including Sade's, and in the work of particular atheistic thinkers and so demonstrate the ways in which these definitions of atheism have been dependent upon particular cultural contexts and social relations. Specifically, it will look at some of the main bases of atheism and how these have shifted over time: from

disputes over the nature of God and the divine, to doctrinal debates and the question of whether faith can be reconciled with reason, a question which preoccupied many Enlightenment thinkers. Since postmodernist views of atheism provide the basis for exploring the ways in which ethics are rethought, the chapter will canvass the possibilities offered by postmodernism, and particularly the work of postmodernist thinker Jacques Derrida, in thinking through the relationship between atheism and religion. Derrida's work is regarded by some prominent scholars (including Caputo, Vries, and Critchley) as exemplifying a "turn to religion" in postmodernism, despite the fact that Derrida is a self-proclaimed atheist. Derrida's work challenges binaristic thinking and complicates terms which are thought to be simple and easily explainable, like the term "atheism." It is intended to show that the title "atheist" is not simple to define; nor is it an easy title to take for oneself. It has political, ethical, and philosophical implications and political consequences, implications of which Sade is aware and exploits in applying the label to himself.

Chapter Three will explore Enlightenment philosophies of and Christian dogmatic and theological positions on nature, and, in particular, theories of nature employed in Sade's writing, which are the major basis for Sade's materialist atheism. By describing the dominant views on nature during the Enlightenment the chapter will demonstrate how Sade's co-option and transgression of these views constitutes a satire of religious and of Enlightenment positions on nature. Materialism is one of the major bases for atheism in the Enlightenment, and materialism is a set of views about the natural world. Atheism and theories of nature are connected, and so this chapter will examine how nature has been conceived of as the basis for human nature and conceptions of God. In particular, the chapter will describe how Enlightenment thought challenged dominant religious beliefs about nature, and therefore, also, of human nature, since nature was imagined as a blueprint for human nature. In the process, the chapter will explicate the means by which religious conceptions of a divine natural order came to be critiqued, to show how these newer theories of nature came to be characterised as materialistic and atheistic perceptions of the world. The second half of the chapter articulates the way that Sade's novels employ theories of nature to challenge, question, and destabilise not only religious knowledge of God, nature and human nature, but also Enlightenment views of these categories. The chapter will show that appeals to nature in Sade's works do not in themselves

establish a coherent atheistic position; instead they serve the purpose of transgression, which for Sade possesses an ethical significance.

Chapter Four will examine the notion of transgression in Sade and the means by which sex is used to transgress against religious ways of knowing the world and conceptions of the body as in some ways sacred, and in others profane. Interestingly, although Sade's sex scenes transgress Christian doctrines, theology and dogma, they can only be articulated through a meaningfully and specifically Christian view of sex and its place in human nature. Sade maintains the very categories that he wishes to undermine. The chapter will begin by defining Christianity's views of sex and the body. It will explain, with reference to Foucauldian theory, how sex has come to be constructed through a confessional discourse as a way of contextualising how Sade's writing about sex can be called confessional. The chapter will continue discussions about nature which began in Chapter Three in order to demonstrate the way that Sadean sex scenes involve a transgression of Christian ideas of nature, the divine, and sexuality. It will look at specific "crimes against nature" which Sadean libertines frequently commit to demonstrate the nature of this transgression, but also how the transgression replicates the logic of Christian ideas about sex, the divine, and nature, which were, in Sade's time, being challenged not only in France, but across Europe. Sade's work comes out of a period of sexual revolution,<sup>9</sup> during which sex was in many ways reconceptualised, and so Sade's work can be located between older ideas about sex, the body, and sexual sin, and emerging Enlightenment ideas about sexual freedom and the private nature of sex.

Chapter Five will contemplate Sade's particular species of atheism, his relationship to Christianity, and how this relationship forms the basis for his ethical system despite his atheist materialist views. It will illuminate the reasons why, first, Sade can be said to have an ethical system, and second, why Sade's atheism can be thought of as an ethical rejection of religion in favour of his own ethical system. In view of his revolutionary leanings, the chapter will explore the political motivations for Sade's atheism, which will explicate the basis for Sadean political satire, and also the extent to which his satirical impulses are a product of Enlightenment literary trends. This political dimension to Sade's writing demonstrates his rethinking and

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<sup>9</sup> For more on sexual revolution during the Enlightenment, see Faramerz Dabhoiwala's *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*.

co-opting of Enlightenment views of religion, as well as the rejection of revelation, of the authority of scripture, and of the institution of the Church. The implications of Sade's relationship to religion will become clear, however, only when considering how Sade's co-option of radical enlightenment theories is made problematic by the transgressive use to which he puts those theories. Therefore, Chapter Five will argue that the transgressive atheism in Sade's novels co-opts Christian categories including sin, vice, and virtue, resulting in a paradox which undermines simple binaries like atheism/religion. This paradox is explicable in the light of postmodernist attitudes to the religious, and the postmodernist rejection of binaristic thinking.

Chapter Six will contextualise discussion of Sade's ethical system by analysing some of the ways in which ethics has been fundamental to debates about religion, atheism and secularism. It will discuss how ethics, which in Christian history have been thought to be inseparable from religion, have been secularised, particularly in the Enlightenment and modernity. The chapter will review attempts to separate religion and ethics, to formulate an ethics based not on religion but on reason, and attempts to reconcile faith and reason in ethics or even justify religious faith on an ethical basis. As a major part of this exploration, the chapter will consider in some detail the postmodernist "ethics of the other" through the theories of Levinas and Derrida. A conception of ethics which attempts radically to redefine the relationship of the self to the other, the chapter will demonstrate that this formulation of ethics continues to be caught up in both religious and atheistic perceptions of the world, particularly in formulations of the ethics of the other in which the other is conceptualised as God, or as an abstract substitute for God. By using the works of Derrida, Bataille and Patočka the chapter will elucidate the implications of the ethics of the other for contemporary theories of ethical behaviour.

By applying the ideas which have been examined in previous chapters, Chapter Seven demonstrates that Sade's writing contains an ethical system and defines the nature of this system. This chapter shows that, by basing a system of ethics on transgression, the atheistic materialism which seems to be the basis of Sadean ethics is undermined by a transgressive co-option of religious ideas like evil, sin, vice and virtue. The chapter begins by considering how Sade's work is ethical. It demonstrates that Sadean libertines are moral agents whose ethics are deeply considered and examined, and who are concerned with social ethics. The pedagogical narratives in Sade's novels point to an interest in ethical instruction. Sade's

pedagogical narratives satirise the sentimental and pedagogical novels, tracts and theories which flourished during the Enlightenment. The chapter discusses the way that Sade co-opts Enlightenment and religious theories of ethics alike, and challenges them through his own system of ethics. Since this is a transgressive move, the chapter concludes by demonstrating that Sade's ethics are based on a kind of will to evil which is also a will to transgress. Because libertines need evil in order to transgress, and because they need categories like vice, virtue, sin, and the sacred, they never go so far as to abolish Christian modes of thought since they rely on them so heavily.

Chapter Eight will advance the argument that reading Sade's ethics as an example of an ethics of the other exemplifies some of the limits of ethical responsibility conceptualised as a relationship to the other alone. Necessarily, this entails a deconstruction of Sade's ethics in order to demonstrate that his ethics can be read as an ethics of the other. The chapter will show how, because of the transgressive relationship to the other characterising libertine relationships and actions, and because of the always already limited nature of transgression, any transgression against another requires a negation of the self. The self is negated in total commitment to transgress against the other, and, therefore, the libertine's sovereignty, something desired by all libertines, is always betrayed even as the will to evil singularises them. The chapter will explain why the ethics of the other necessitates a view of ethical responsibility which can only be thought of as responsibility to God, which cannot be the basis of ethical relationships between humans because it is always compromised by the violence of transgression.

The very structures of Sade's work, as the next chapter will reveal, are deeply indebted to the literary milieu of his time. Still, Sade's work itself is owed a debt by many writers, even those to whom such a debt would seem intolerable, for Sade did not only influence transgressive writers and artists, but also philosophy, eventually even mainstream philosophy. His legacy, as this thesis will show, continues to be troubling to understandings of literature, philosophy, and ethics, but it is precisely in its troubling and transgressive qualities that it can prove most interesting (and even, perversely, productive) to thinking through ethics in the context of postmodern thought, which itself has deeply troubled Enlightenment theories.

# Chapter 1

## Overture:

### The Uses of Literature

“Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.”

- Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*

Sade is often regarded as at best, a literary hack, and at worst, a pornographer. His works are characterised by their repetition, long philosophical digressions, and gratuitously shocking sex scenes. However, as this chapter aims to make plain, Sade’s central works are libertine novels and as such, they cannot be reduced to either pornography or philosophy. This chapter will examine the nuances of Sade’s engagement with the various genres of the novel. It will situate Sade in literary history as essential context for delineating the nature of his works, and the kinds of traditions they developed out of and to which they reacted, and will explore why Sade chose to communicate his ideas in the form of the libertine novel. This inquiry will also examine the possibilities might this form have offered him, and the way that he exploited the possibilities of the genre in order to satirise and critique not only Christian beliefs about nature and society, but also Enlightenment beliefs. By situating Sade in his literary contexts, this chapter will clear up confusions which may arise in later discussions of Sade’s work. If one does not understand the generic structures of Sade’s novels and the way that he manipulates them, one may be tempted to misread the philosophical and ethical insights they offer, and ignore the satirical overtones of his writing.

Out of the many methods and genres that philosophers have used to express their ideas and concepts, the Marquis de Sade’s work contributed to the formation of the philosophical and libertine novels. The philosophical novel was a genre in which Sade felt free to develop his philosophy without restrictions, since the philosophical novel provides a rare opportunity for its author to explore concepts in an almost sensory, experiential way, something not possible with the usual modes and genres of traditional philosophy. The erotic, transgressive content of Sade’s work would have been lost in any other genre, and yet it is the philosophy behind the debauchery which has redeemed the form to modern scholarship. The philosophical novel was



relatively new in Sade's time. During his life, several influential philosophers used the novel to articulate their ideas: Voltaire wrote what would later be considered his greatest work, the parodic and satirical *Candide* (1759), which critiques providentialism;<sup>10</sup> Rousseau wrote *Emile* (1762), which scrutinises pedagogical theories; and Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist (Jacques le fataliste)* (1796), which explores the tension between determinism and free will.

It is worth noting that the novel was only just emerging as a dominant genre in literature in the eighteenth century. Still a new form to many, it prompted reactions that were mixed and sometimes extreme. The philosophical novel complicated matters further, blurring the lines between the novel, which was often felt to be trivial and frivolous, and serious philosophical work. The libertine novel, of which Sade's work is an example, was even more contentious than the philosophical novel: it could not be treated as regular erotica (erotica at the time enjoyed an unacknowledged but widespread popularity), since it drew from previous traditions in drama and literature, for example, Restoration comedy and the romance, and was more respectable than erotica, as it was usually written by and for the educated. However, Sade's work occupies a liminal space between novel and philosophy, even without the eroticism which makes it both infamous and fascinating. It is necessary to trace the development and influence of the libertine novel in order to understand why Sade chose to express his ideas in such a controversial genre. Sade's libertine novels parody the sentimental and pedagogical novels as a means of subverting the ethical systems reinforced by those works.

### **The Novel in the Eighteenth Century**

The novel was not always such a well respected genre, nor was it such an easily recognisable form; rather, the development of the novel was a long and uncertain

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<sup>10</sup> Providentialism rests on the view that, since God is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, He has complete knowledge of, and control over, everything that happens in the universe. It attempts to reconcile God's perfection with the existence of suffering, evil and sin through a number of different theological approaches, too numerous to elucidate here. However, a common approach is to reason that, since God "pitches his efforts, which none can resist, toward accomplishing the greatest good imaginable," then "the world in which we find ourselves is, as Leibniz put it, the best of all possible worlds" (McCann). Even the worst suffering is a part of God's plan, which will result in the "greatest good imaginable" for His creation.

process. It drew from many different literary traditions, the marks of which are still present in the novel today. In *A Short History of English Literature*, Robert Barnard details some of the literary traditions which contributed to the formation of the novel: “the novel form has its roots in the short tales the Elizabethans enjoyed, in French romance, in the exotic prose fictions of Aphra Behn and others” (70). It was always influenced by the ancient literature of the Greeks and Romans, such as the works of Homer, the enigmatic Greek writer Chariton’s *Callirhoe* (commonly known as *Chaereas and Callirhoe*)<sup>11</sup> and Roman writer Petronius’ *Satyricon* (probably written sometime in the first century CE), which is remarkable for its similarity to the modern novel. The *Satyricon* is a narrative in prose and poetry, written with an unusual degree of realism, painting a vivid and satirical picture of Roman life during the despised Nero’s reign. These literary traditions greatly influenced the romance, and the novel which came after it.

Though the romance was based in a principally French tradition (Echard 16), it was a popular genre across all Europe prior to the novel, and has very little in common with the modern romance, other than themes of faithful or chivalric love. It often took verse form, and told heroic adventure stories. Siân Echard says that it is “quintessentially a medieval genre” defined by its “fantasy, escapism and inwardness,” and its references to court life, knights, ladies, adventures, and monsters (161). The subject matter of the romance was drawn mostly from Greek, Roman, and later British history. Despite the often supernatural and superhuman elements in these works, there was little distinction between truth and fiction in the romance (Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance* 6). However, with the development of the novel came a rejection of those fantastic and unrealistic elements of the romance epics. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, John Richetti observes that:

In place of the gloriously and deliberately unreal world of romance from the middle ages and early Renaissance, novelistic narrative from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries comes to substitute the quotidian world of everyday and commonplace experience and put in place of larger-than-life characters,

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<sup>11</sup> Chariton’s era is unknown and debated, but his only work, thought to have been written sometime before 200 CE, is often considered to be the earliest example of a prose romance.

both good and evil, people who are no different from the implied reader in an ordinary world where everyday commonsense prevails. (4)

The novel would not have developed without the printing press; yet even after the use of the printing press became widespread, a number of factors, including printing costs, access to technology, and literacy levels, inhibited the development and influence of the novel in Europe until well into the eighteenth century. The latter century is associated with what literary historian Ian Watt termed, in his well-known book of the same name, the “rise of the novel” in the Western world, culminating in the establishment of the novel as a central genre by the nineteenth century. As John Richetti explains:

What we now think of as the novel – a long prose narrative about largely fictional if usually realistic characters and plausible events – did not actually solidify in the minds of readers and writers as a literary type or a set of expectations for narrative in the English-speaking world until the beginning of the nineteenth century ... when the novel in our current sense of it was widely accepted in Britain and elsewhere in Europe as a major literary form, as the inevitable and inescapable mode of telling a long fictional story. (1)

The still fluid form of the eighteenth-century novel, then, was the final part of the formative phase of the novel, and determined expectations of the novel which persist to the present day. The rise of the novel is sometimes correlated with the rise of the middle class, but the relationship is not so simple as that. Barnard states that the popularity of the novel *was* shaped more by changes in middle-class life: “more and more middle-class people in the eighteenth century were acquiring an education, and the education they were acquiring was less exclusively classical in content than the education of the upper class” (70). Women, while by no means liberated, were better educated than in earlier times, and middle- and upper-class women also had a greater amount of leisure time, a result of shifting roles of women in domestic life. Domestic duties were coming to be seen as poorer women’s work. The novel was an easily available form of private entertainment, where previously the most popular form of entertainment was the very public theatre. Thus, the novel filled this spare time, and the greater female readership in turn influenced the novel as the form became a part of women’s emotional lives, leading to new genres such as the wildly popular moralising novels, to be examined later in this chapter. The growth and increasing literacy of the middle class (and even, to an extent, the lower classes), and

the increasing affordability of the novel thanks to the development and ever wider distribution of printing technology, led to a massive growth in demand for popular, accessible and secular reading material (Richetti 8; Hunter 20).

While religious and didactic texts had dominated the market for centuries, this new form of narrative storytelling was responsive enough to social changes to reflect them and adapt with them, yet versatile enough to challenge them. Richetti says that the unique, contemporary structure of the novel appealed to the masses because, “set in a world where nothing is impossible to virtue and ambition, the novel (taken as a whole) invokes what might be called a middle-class myth of personal possibility, of the individual’s potential for growth and achievement” (8). The novel developed as a response to cultural changes in the eighteenth century, and this is evident in its development throughout the century. It was

“frequently a critique of the breakdown of the traditional moral order in the face of this new and ruthlessly dispassionate and impersonal economic world, and the so-called ‘sentimental novel’ that develops in the middle of the century is a celebration of private and domestic virtue and solitary philanthropy in the face of a rapacious and uncompromising possessive individualism.” (Richetti 8)

The sentimental genre was strongly gripping, even addictive, to its readers at the time. It encouraged the reader to sympathise and *feel for* characters on a far deeper level than what had come before, and readers responded to its injunction to feel with great enthusiasm and dedication. Although it was not restricted to a female readership, it tended to place the female, who was represented as more emotional and sensitive than the male, at the centre of its moral and didactic message. It was regarded as a feminised form, and in turn the novel itself came to be regarded as feminised: Jane Spencer explains in “Women Writers and the Eighteenth-Century Novel” that “[d]espite the dominance and widespread influence of the male novelists ... contemporary commentators on the novel persistently gendered the form as a feminine one” (215). Novel reading was sometimes felt to be a waste of time for women, and even potentially addictive. Although the long, epistolary form of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* seems dry and forbidding to readers today, at the time, the tension in the work between Clarissa’s determination to preserve her virtue and Lovelace’s equal determination to possess it made for a compelling page-turning read. Sade parodies the conventions of the sentimental novel in writing an address to

women at the start of some of his works and in demonstrating the education of young women in the ways of libertinage in his four most infamous novels. For instance, at the beginning of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Sade writes: “Lubricious women: may the voluptuous Madame de Saint-Ange serve as your ideal” (1).

The importance of the sentimental novel was established with the runaway success of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (*Julie, ou le nouvelle Héloïse*) (1761), and Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* (1768). The novel was a balance between fiction and realistic, contemporary and identifiable characters, settings, and situations. It played with the “still blurry division” between fact and fiction, a relic of the romances ancestral to the novel (Richetti 2). The mutable nature of this new form of writing enabled the proliferation of genres and, in particular, the development of a genre which could exist both in the narrative world of the novel, and the discursive realm of philosophy. Sade’s work took advantage of this, and in turn helped to shape the development of the philosophical novel.

### **Dissent and Dissidents: The Satirical Novel in the Eighteenth Century**

As the sentimental novel shows, the novel was able to provide a platform for social criticism, and writers (Sade among them) quickly recognised the potential for satire in this new form. The parody was in league with satire. Parody used ironic imitation of literary conventions to challenge, critique, or ridicule an original work or genre and to satirise the ideals it contains. *Shamela*, Henry Fielding’s 1741 parody of *Pamela*, is an example of this ironic imitation, and displays the uniquely self-reflexive and socially aware nature of satire. Although the satirical novel typically made use of humour to critique society, it had a serious agenda. *Shamela* is not a simple, unselfconscious poke at Richardson’s novel, but a sophisticated critique of the moral hypocrisy that Fielding saw in this work. Another of Fielding’s novels, *Tom Jones*, satirised what he perceived as the moral hypocrisy of the Methodists. Similarly, Laurence Sterne became famous for his novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (published in nine volumes from 1759 to 1767), which draws from the conventions and generic structures and tropes of the sentimental novel in order to satirise them to devastating effect (as Sade does, most obviously, in *Justine*). Despite the efforts of moral sentimentalists throughout Europe to deny the nature of *Tristram Shandy*, often by publishing sanitised copies and excerpts of the

novel, it is a satire, and one permeated with bawdy humour. Indeed, the novel is considered to have been well ahead of its time, and a work of proto-postmodernist literature.

Development of the satirical novel in this century, especially in France, reflects a certain level of social discontent which was, at least in part, a result of changes in thinking brought about by the Enlightenment. For example, the inclination in the romance to use orientalism and exoticism extended to the novel, and was employed this time for satirical purposes. This trend is exemplified by Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (*Lettres persanes*) (1721), a satirical novel about the experiences of Persian noblemen in France; Diderot's *The Indiscreet Jewels* (*Les bijoux indiscrets*) (1748), which casts Louis XV as a sultan of the Congo; and parts of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), in which the characters travel to the Ottoman coast. Although these depictions of the cultural "other" in Western literature do not provide accurate information about that other, they are useful in reflecting upon European culture, and the society in which that literature is produced. In her article "Eastern Others on Western Pages," Adrienne Ward says that

fruitful information derives from analyzing the subject's production of and engagement with its discrete notion of its Eastern object, whose function is to mediate cultural issues at home. Alterity as a conceit to permit self-reflexive discourse is a commonplace. Scholars who take up orientalism in eighteenth-century literature thus focus on the motives, mechanisms, and consequences of the representation for the representer. (2)

Interestingly, although Sade does not use orientalism explicitly, the style of the cover art of the 2006 Penguin edition of Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, illustrated by Tomer Hanuka, recalls the influence of *japonisme* on Victorian art nouveau. Evidently, the impression of orientalism in the Victorian era endures, and that it is linked to one of Sade's most openly satirical works is telling in that the illustration makes the connection between eighteenth-century orientalism in literature and satire. Sadean libertines frequently reference the laws and customs of people from other countries and cultures as a way of giving weight and authority to their transgressive ethical claims; an instance of using "Eastern others" to "mediate cultural issues" (Ward 2), and critique the French customs contemporary to Sade. There are many examples, but a notable one is the giant Minski's tirade against the virtue of hospitality in *Juliette*. Minski references other cultures which do not practice

hospitality,<sup>12</sup> saying that “Egypt was long barred to foreigners; the government’s orders were to enslave or kill anyone found along the border or within sight of land,” and that the people of Loango (now the Republic of the Congo) “will not even suffer a stranger to be buried in their country” (595).

### **The Sadean Novel and Anti-Novel**

Sade’s discussion on the development of the novel in his essay “Reflections on the Novel” is useful to any examination of his work because it makes his position in the literature of the time easier to ascertain. The essay also makes clear that defining and discussing the novel as a genre was important to Sade as a writer, and also important to other Enlightenment-era philosophers and literary figures. However, it tells us more about Sade’s works and thought than it does about any other novels. For example, Sade states that man “is prey to two weaknesses,” “the need to pray, and to love” and he claims that “herein lies the basis for all novels” (99). This odd claim rests upon Sade’s belief that “we find works of fiction as soon as fiction seized hold of the minds of men” (98). This fiction, being, of course, religion: Sade refutes the established idea that it was with the Greeks that the novel originated, stating that “it was in the countries which first recognised gods that the novel originated; and, to be more specific, in Egypt, the cradle of Divine worship” (98). Such a premise is not historically verifiable, although it is revealing in that the link which Sade makes between religion and novels is borne out in his own works. Sade is here making a snide remark about religion; he is not necessarily deriding the form of the novel.

Sade begins by giving a kind of definition of the novel, which is unfit as a general definition but is rather apt in the light of Sade’s own writings. He says: “we give the name ‘novel’ to any work of imagination fashioned from the most uncommon adventures which men experience in the course of their lives” (97). Dalia Judovitz points out in “‘Sex’ or the Misfortunes of Literature” that Sadean novels “deal with adventures so uncommon that their implausibility will threaten the very definition of the novel” and that, as such, “rather than copy reality” as many novels purport to do, they “parody the very conventions that structure novelistic ‘reality’” (173). Therefore, she posits, they can be called “anti-Novels.” For example, at the

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<sup>12</sup> One cannot take his assertions as truth; they are libertine inventions and exaggerations.

centre of the novel is the connection and identification that the reader feels with the protagonist(s), and indeed, this identification is what made Richardson's *Pamela* and Rousseau's *Julie* so popular. Yet Sade attempts to undermine this identification, to prevent the sort of "dangerous" communion one might feel with the seductive libertines of other writers. Sade's challenge to other writers constitutes a challenge to novelistic convention. Ihab Hassan argues in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* that

the very form of Sade's work qualifies for the term anti-literature. The conventions of Gothic fiction, the picaresque novel, the novel of manners, the philosophic dialogue, and utopian pornography all make their perfunctory appearance in that work. But the function of form as control or realisation of a human impulse is denied, for Sade's impulses deny all satisfaction. (45)

Sade goes beyond even these subversions when he undermines narrative itself. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Roland Barthes asks, "what is a libertine's promise *worth*, other than the pleasure of cheating on it?" (162). Indeed, the same principle applies to Sade's narratives. Barthes says that Sadean narratives are rhapsodic; they unfold "without order: voyages, thefts, murders, philosophical dissertations, libidinous scenes, escapes, secondary narratives, schedules of orgies, descriptions of machines, etc. This construction frustrates the paradigmatic structure of narrative [and]... it constitutes an outrage of meaning" (140). A narrative is supposed to stand for something: it takes part in a process of exchange between the text and the reader. Sade's work subverts this notion of exchange for the sake of the pleasure of transgressions. In Sade's work, the reader is offered philosophy as the price of debauchery. Yet this is subverted when philosophy is put to work for the sake of vice.

Sade states that it is wrong for a writer to "replace the true ... with the impossible," because this asks too much of the reader, who may feel that the writer is "seeking to dupe him" (16). Nevertheless, Sade's tales are themselves filled with impossibilities: libertines who never tire, whose expenses are never greater than their means despite the extravagance of their spending, and whose crimes never earn them condemnation from the rest of society, perhaps because those in high positions are also portrayed as debauched. Sade warns against moralising, saying that if the characters must argue something out: "let them always do so without affectation, without the pretension of doing so" (112). This prescription seems to preclude most of his libertines' long dissertations, which are essential to the philosophy of his



novels. Either Sade believed himself above these rules because he was a writer of the libertine novel and of satire, or he assumed that he was licensed to escape them by virtue of the genius of his writing. Then the ultimate hypocrisy: Sade's conclusion to this literary polemic is to deny authorship of *Justine*, calling those who do not believe him "imbeciles or evildoers," which surely undermines the sincerity of the essay (116).

This essay is also useful in providing substantive evidence of Sade's literary preferences and influences. Sade is occupied in the essay with establishing his work in a certain context. Early in the essay he remarks on the role of the troubadours and of the romance in the development of the novel. He praises writers closer to his time who he feels have continued the tradition of the romance: Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, Scarron, a seventeenth-century writer whom Sade calls "delightful," and author of the *Roman Comique* (1651), and Madame (or Comtesse) de la Fayette, author of *The Princess of Clèves* (*La princesse de Clèves*), whom Sade calls a "gracious and charming lady" (104). Sade comments on the shift of focus in the novel, saying that writers fixated on the physical side of love, and that their books "indulged vice and strayed from virtue" (105). This is where Sade seems to discover his own niche, but it is interesting to note a tone of distaste in this part of the essay. He goes on to describe an emerging group of writers in a century which "had recovered from the follies of chivalry, the absurdities of religion, and the adoration of women," and tried to "amuse or corrupt those women" rather than adore them (105). Apparently, these writers "clothed cynicism and immorality in a pleasant, bantering, and sometimes even philosophical style" (105). Sade names among them Crébillon and the playwright Pierre de Marivaux but he might as well be describing the reception of his own novels.

Sade denies a connection to these writers. He says that, by creating characters "so frightful that they will most assuredly not inspire either pity or love," he is "more moral than those who believe they have licence to embellish them" (116), an interesting argument, and one that apparently gains credibility in the light of Sade's denial of authorship of *Justine*. Perhaps Sade felt this book had such an overt moral lesson that its virtue could not be defended under his own logic. However, Sade reveals in the same essay a possible motivation for this book; in his analysis of Richardson's *Clarissa*, he defends the tragic ending on the grounds that it is a more "faithful mirror of the human heart," reflecting "all its crests and troughs" (12). He

says that the novelists of sensibility, Richardson and Fielding, teach readers that “’tis not always by making virtue triumph that a writer arouses interest” since, when virtue triumphs, “our tears are stopped” even “before they begin to flow” (106), whereas the works of authors such as Crébillon and Dorat entice “women to love characters who deceive them” (115). Sade believes that a story in which virtue does not triumph over vice is truer to nature, and inspires more sorrow and emotion in the reader: “our hearts are inevitably rent asunder,” “the work having moved us deeply” (107). Taking Sade’s own word for it, together with the ways that he subverts the very form of the novel, and coupled with his fascination with and explication of philosophical and ethical theories in his works, it is clear that they are much more than simply novels. The idea of the novel is becomes complicated when it makes contact with such subversive and dangerous philosophy.

### **Uncovering the Origins of the Philosophical Novel**

Since the philosophical novel drew from many sources and genres in its formation, and in part because of the many historical variations of philosophical writing, coupled with the still unformed nature of the novel in the eighteenth-century, the philosophical novel is not an easy thing to define. Though its use was controversial, the employment of narrative, even fiction, to deliver philosophical concepts is to be found in the work of some philosophers from the very beginning of Western philosophy. For example, philosophical concepts unfold in the form of a conversation embedded in a narrative in some works by Plato, from whence the term “Socratic dialogue” is derived as a description of this form. In Plato’s work, the Socratic dialogue tends to be dramatised, whereas the Socratic dialogues of Xenophon included not only what the “characters” say but also a narrativised account of the circumstances of the dialogue, and present a more coherent story. Some of Plato’s other works, including *The Republic* (circa 380 BCE), used a more familiar narrative format in which the story is told from the first-person point of view of Socrates in the course of the journey from Athens to Piraeus. Augustine’s *Confessions* (397-8 CE), considered the first example of an autobiography, is also written in the form of a narrative, during which Augustine tells his own conversion narrative, a journey from Manichaeism to Christianity. It is a foundational theological work, since it examines, through narrative, issues of theology and philosophy. Sade also draws on the conversion story in many of his libertine

narratives, the most obvious of which is *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, in which the ingénue Eugénie is converted to a life of libertinage. The philosophical novel as it developed in the eighteenth century was founded on this tradition in philosophy, and the pedagogical nature of the Socratic dialogue is an obvious relic of its heritage. Even so, the philosophical novel was (and remains) an ambiguous form, and attracted criticism as much for its perceived transgression of audiences' expectations of literature as for the belief that it was not a suitable platform for the discussion of serious and weighty philosophical ideas.

Even though the philosophical novel occupies an ambiguous space in literary history, it is necessary to have at least a rudimentary definition to be able to separate the philosophical novel from those novels which contain philosophical concepts, but do not revolve around them or advance them in any meaningful way. Stephen Ross asserts in his book *Philosophy and Literature* that there are different ways through which philosophical views enter novels or are expressed in them. The most common expression of philosophy in literature is evident where a novel merely displays philosophical positions; almost every piece of literature has some sort of theoretical or conceptual background, either as a by-product of context, or as a conscious choice on the part of the author to support some philosophical position or positions. However, the way that philosophy is expressed in what can be termed the "philosophical novel" is the extent to which a novel not merely displays philosophical positions, but "adopts ... and makes claims about them" (Ross 3). Even so, given that authors can and do make use of already established philosophical arguments in the novel, this might be insufficient to describe the nature of the philosophical novel. After all, it would hardly be a contribution to philosophical knowledge if an author merely parroted well-known views. Therefore, these claims should not be a restatement of an established position, but rather a critique or development of such a position, or an exploration of original philosophical ideas.

The philosophical novel has not always been enthusiastically received. There are many criticisms of the philosophical novel, both by the mainstream novelists on one side and by the philosophers on the other. Some critics of the philosophical novel judge that the addition of a philosophical argument to a novel makes the novel tedious, sterile and boring, and undermines its aesthetic and emotional value to the reader. Ross explores the main criticisms of the philosophical novel, which stem from the question of whether or not narrative, fictional literature or indeed any form

of art is capable of presenting and supporting a philosophical position. The philosophical arguments in such a work are thought by some critics to be delegitimized by the form in which they are presented. The author's authority is likewise called into question by a seeming inability to present his or her case in the more serious discursive manner traditionally befitting philosophy. As Ross points out, art is seen to "distort whatever truths it may possess through the use of emotionally loaded words, the reliance on metaphor, and the use of legendary and fantastic tales," so that some believe "the bizarre, emotional and fantastic means used by authors arouse our feelings, but [these means] have no right to touch our reason or enlist our intellectual capacities" (9). It is true that the "unliteral and imprecise qualities" (9) of the means of expression in literature makes articulating philosophical concepts difficult. In Sade's work, the pages long philosophical disquisitions indulged in by libertines has been accused of being boring, and this is as much an effect of the literary form he takes as a model as it is of the satirical impulses which motivate much of his writing. It is likely that Sade is making a satirical statement regarding the form of the philosophical novel as much as he is making a statement about the contents of the arguments of popular philosophical novels of his time, particularly because he makes a snide comment about the appropriateness of including such disquisitions in novels in "Reflections on the Novel."

However, literature can also provide some sense of experience and emotion which rational analysis cannot, and can therefore give meaning and value to a concept: "art can provide so controlled an experience for us as to make us tolerate what we couldn't bear in any other form" (Ross 26). Philosophical novels were lauded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and many Enlightenment writers experimented with the genre including, as mentioned earlier, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* [1774]) is a hugely successful example. It combines the forms of the *bildungsroman*,<sup>13</sup> the romance, and the philosophical novel. The argument that

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<sup>13</sup> The *Bildungsroman* is a "coming-of-age" novel, in which the young hero of the novel journeys "toward self-understanding as well as a sense of social responsibility" (Summerfield and Downward 1). The hero's journey acts as a symbolic representation of youth and the passage to maturity.

emotive or imprecise language is unfamiliar to philosophy also discounts the extensive use of metaphor that philosophy has employed since the time of the Greeks. Philosophical novels may be able to reach a wider audience than philosophy, which in recent centuries has been confined to the academy; moreover, such novels have succeeded in popularising philosophical ideas where other philosophical texts have not. Accordingly, the philosophical novel has continued to be popular even after the eighteenth century. In his book *Masterpieces of Philosophical Literature*, Thomas Cooksey includes an analysis of Jorge-Luis Borges' *Labyrinths* (1962) alongside other well-known examples of the genre (including *Candide*). To demonstrate the ongoing popularity of the philosophical novel from the twentieth century to the present day, Cooksey also names writers Umberto Eco, Milan Kundera, and Italo Calvino as inheritors of Borges' influence and of the tradition of the philosophical novel (Cooksey 229-231). While, mishandled, the addition of philosophical concepts to literature may well degrade the novel; the popularity of philosophical novels belies this argument. Not only can philosophical novels move readers and inspire devotion in them, but, perhaps by virtue of their philosophical content, they enjoy longevity.

### **Libertinage as Philosophy**

Despite his extensive borrowings of the tropes and conventions of a wide variety of genres, Sade's work lies predominantly in the genre of the libertine novel, since philosophy and the erotic are inseparable in Sade. Sade's ideas certainly fit the genre of the philosophical novel: he posits and advances his philosophical ideas in the context of the narrative, and though the arguments he uses are not always original, his system of thought is unique. He has done more to advance a libertine philosophy than any other writer. Sade's libertines constantly rationalise their debauchery, explaining to the uninitiated a philosophy supported by reason and logic. This would seem to be Sade's attempt to make of sex a philosophy, but one function of the libertines' philosophical disquisitions is to add another dimension of transgressiveness to the debauchery, which thus increases the pleasure gained from the act. Barthes argues that in Sade's work the "dissertation is an erotic object. It is not only speech that is erogenous, not only what it represents, ... it is the subtlest, most cultivated forms of discourse: reasoning" (146). His philosophy is "inseparable from passion" (Blanchot 9) which, as Chapter Six will make apparent, is a

problematic thing to say of Sade's works, and in any case is not itself a radically original feature of Sade's works, since Hume (among others) also advocates for the role of the passions in philosophy and in ethics. This is what makes Sade's work decisively libertine, rather than simply an erotic philosophical novel. The distinction is not idle, because the erotic plays a large part in the subtler aspects of Sade's philosophy and ethics: the erotic activities are as essential as actual dissertations in establishing and exploring philosophical views and ideas.

### **The Shady Figure of the Libertine**

The development of the character of the libertine predates the libertine novel, and is essential to comprehending how the latter came about. It is also useful to take stock of the different forms the libertine and the libertine's precursors have taken in order correctly to situate Sade's libertine characters within their literary and philosophical context. Sade's libertines inherit their ethical and philosophical significance from previous incarnations of the character. The word "libertine" had connotations both of free-thinking and moral debauchery, Jin Lu explains:

The Latin adjective, *libertinus*, of a freed man, combines both the idea of liberation and that of a degraded social situation. In French, the word *libertin*, from its earliest appearances in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, implies both free-thinking as well as moral dissolution and sexual debauchery. During the following centuries, its definitions shift according to which aspect of the two meanings is accentuated, but it is generally believed that impiety would necessarily cause moral depravity, and vice versa.

("Beyond Laclos and Sade" 319)

The libertine had long been a prominent figure in drama, and was often seen in the guise of the rake in the Restoration comedies popular from the mid-1600s to the early 1700s. These comedies were well known for their bawdiness, encouraged by the tastes of the rakish aristocracy of that time, notably Charles II's court (see Bonamy Dobrée's *Restoration Comedy* 18).

The rake, a stock character in Restoration comedy, can be difficult to distinguish from the character of the libertine; often they are one and the same. The rake was, perhaps, the earliest form of the libertine: a sexually promiscuous man, a prodigal spendthrift, excessive in behaviour and dress, either aristocratic or pretending to be, and quite often a drunkard. In Restoration comedy, the convention

was for the rake to repent in the final act, or be married off and thereby domesticated. Some plays, particularly around the time of the Restoration, such as Sir Charles Sedley's *Bellamira* (1687), diverged from this convention, thereby creating outrage because the unreformed rake was felt to promote immorality. The fate of the rake in these comedies presents an interesting moral quandary because, although the rake is often penitent, he is in effect rewarded with the exact object of his rakish affections. John Traugott points out in his article "The Rake's Progress from Court to Comedy" that "Restoration comedy is in fact unique in the history of comedy, being the only example that proposes a hero who is handed all the rewards because he breaks all the moral codes" (381). The Restoration comedy began to lose public favour towards the end of the seventeenth century, having become offensive to the changing tastes of audiences, and became so neglected that it had to be revived in the twentieth century (see Styan's *Restoration Comedy in Performance*). The Restoration comedy eventually gave way to a reformed, moralising period in drama. Nevertheless, the rake remained an important stock character, even if the character was toned down, with later plays placing far greater emphasis on the reformation and redemption of the rake. The character was soon carried over to the novel in the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth, where he can be found prominently in the works of Oscar Wilde. Many of the traits of the rake are essential to the character of the libertine, although the rake is decidedly more domesticated than the libertine.

The rake came in different forms, the one most resembling the libertine being the "erudite" rake. The libertine is always an erudite figure; moreover, historically it was nearly impossible to be a libertine without some financial or social standing, given the lavish tastes and excesses that a libertine life entails (Gregory 325; Traugott 384). For this reason, the fop, another character who by tradition is also a type of rake, stands in opposition to the libertine. Fops are lovers of pleasure and victims of fashion, and this is where comparison ends, for the fop lacks the intellectual capacity and the aristocratic bearing of the libertine (Mackie 28-9, 36). These are not idle distinctions: intellect and philosophy are traits inherent to the libertine, even if often only obliquely. As a character, then, the libertine requires a blending of philosophy and literature. Although historical figures including the Earl of Rochester (John Wilmot), Lord Byron, Arthur Rimbaud and Sade himself have been given the title, the figure of the libertine is best known from literary works. The libertine acts not only as protagonist in the libertine novel, but also as philosophical

teacher in the tradition of Socrates. This parallel is especially clear in the dialogue of Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, in which only the libertine may speak, and only the libertine is in the privileged pedagogical position. In Sade's novels, the position of teacher is raised above all others; it supersedes even familial relationships.

A defining trait of the libertine character is his or her paradoxical nature: although necessity dictates that the libertine's debauchery remain hidden, that debauchery also requires public recognition, or it is worth nothing. Libertine conquests are not for pleasure alone, because, although pleasure is a goal of the libertine, it is certainly not an original one. Rather, the conquests of the libertine must be recognisable in order to prove the validity of the libertine's philosophy as well as his or her mastery. Elena Russo posits in "Sociability, Cartesianism, and Nostalgia in Libertine Discourse" that libertines are nostalgic for the Cartesian ideal of man as a whole, autonomous self, and therefore implement a strict discipline over themselves, as self-mastery is necessary before mastering others. Libertines deny the effect of the social on the individual. This is taken literally in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), whose protagonist epitomises the dream of the libertine to remain unmarked by the world, and thus able to maintain a perfect social façade without compromising any of the physical pleasures that libertinism guarantees. The libertine's dream of self-autonomy and self-sufficiency is bound to fail, however, because the libertine relies on public opinion of some sort, whether it be acknowledgement of his or her dominion and mastery over others, or the moral outrage that he or she evokes. This has an interesting effect on Sadean ethics, which compromises a conventional reading of Sade, a point to be explored extensively throughout the thesis. Russo says, "the libertine is certainly not a radical reformer: the only action he knows is reaction, he needs the law in order to transgress it, and he never questions traditional boundaries and hierarchies" (396). Sade does question boundaries and hierarchies, but ultimately he preserves them.

There is an additional paradox in the difference between the apparent purpose of libertinism and the reality: libertinism expounds the virtues of free-thinking and free-living, and attempts to cast off society's oppression of the body and bodily desires; yet libertines themselves impose such restrictions. In "The Libertine's Bluff: Cards and Culture in Eighteenth-Century France," Thomas Kavanagh says that the libertine lives his life by the bluff, and that there is no distinction between what is true and false in the games of seduction they play where appearances matter above



all else. Libertines are only whatever they need to be for the purposes of seduction and domination of others:

The libertine's resolve to remain impervious to feeling through the cold remove of the bluff consigns him to a practice of endless irony and paradox. His compulsive insistence on equating being with deceiving yields to an oscillation between the bluffer and the bluffed that subverts any real distinction between the two. (515)

Thus, the libertine always sacrifices intensity for power and love for the rational mind, because to surrender to the heart means risking domination by the object of affection, a lesson exemplified by the undoing of the libertine Valmont by his love for the virtuous Madame de Tourvel in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (*Les liaisons dangereuses* [1782]). The libertine seems motivated by passion, pleasure and hedonism, but is actually cold – libertines must deny themselves the very pleasure they seem to seek. The real significance of this paradoxical exchange between libertine and victim in Sade will be elucidated in Chapter Eight. For now suffice it to say that such a paradox defines the character of the libertine in literary history.

### **Atheists and Sodomites: Sade's Libertines**

Sadean libertines inherit many of the same traits of the libertine character, but they exaggerate them, excess being the principle which motivates their desires both inside and outside of the boudoir. These traits will be examined in a cursory way in this chapter, but will be elucidated in more depth throughout the thesis. Unlike libertines of history and in literature, Sade's libertines rarely play subtle games of seduction like the character Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons*. They are either teachers who initiate innocents into a life of libertinage, or criminals who take victims. Fashion is rarely mentioned, although libertines often surround themselves with finery, since they are all rich – a precondition of libertinage in the Sadean world and also its reward. They are often described vividly in terms of their looks, their philosophical dispositions, and their sexual predilections. Their looks may vary, but they are often not the classically handsome rakish types usually seen in libertine literature and drama. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the Duc is described, almost Byronically, as relatively attractive, with “a proud and masculine visage, great dark eyes, handsome black eyelashes, an aquiline nose” and a “well-proportioned figure” (201). By

contrast, the President de Curval is described primarily in terms of his disgusting countenance. He was “not much more than a skeleton” and “hairy as a satyr” with “flat drooping buttocks” which he kept at all times in such uncleanness that they resembled “a well-freighted privy” (205). In *Justine*, the Comte de Gernaud is described as “a man of fifty, almost six feet tall and monstrously fat” (630). At times the male libertines may be feminised, which in Sade is meant as a transgressive inversion of expected gender roles and performances: in *The 120 Days*, Durcet has both hips and a chest “like a woman’s,” and Monsieur de Bressac from *Justine* has “a rather too pronounced tendency toward that nonchalance, that softness which belongs only to women” (510). Despite the variation in male attractiveness and gender expression, female libertines are always written as beautiful in Sade’s work. Juliette herself is described as having a “pretty face,” “fine figure, eyes of singular expression;” other libertines often compliment Juliette on her looks, her figure and her sexual organs (458). Clairwil, Juliette’s companion, is described as resembling a Roman goddess; she is “majestic” like “the figure of Minerva adorned with Venus’ amenities” (273). Durand is also called “majestic,” a “handsome woman, richly and gracefully made” (527). Although libertinage in Sade is largely established by disposition and learning rather than appearance, style or charisma, female libertines must be sexually attractive to all, and sexually attracted *to* all.

Even if they differ in countenance, the descriptions of libertine’s minds are unerringly similar. In most cases, libertines display a fondness for vice, and they possess a will to do evil, not just for the potential rewards of libertinage (of which there are many), but for its own sake. They are almost all atheists, and their intelligence and learning are well-established. In *The 120 Days*, the Duc de Blangis’ morals consist not merely in “always doing evil” but also in “never doing good” (198). He is also an atheist. The Bishop of X\*\*\*, his brother, shares “the same black soul, the same penchant for crime, the same contempt for religion, the same atheism, the same deception and cunning” but “a yet more supple and adroit mind” (203). His mind is, perhaps, the most villainous, since he “was to such a point mired down in the morass of vice and libertinage that it had become virtually impossible for him to think or speak of anything else” (206). In *Justine*, the heroine describes Bressac thus: “never had wickedness, vindictiveness, cruelty, atheism, debauchery, contempt for all duties and principally those out of which Nature is said to fashion our delights, never had all these qualities been carried to such an extreme” (510). Later, Justine

encounters several libertine monks, the libertine monk being a popular figure, along with the debauched nun or priest, in the anti-clerical imagination. She describes one of them, Clement, as having “ferocity, a disposition to sarcasm, the most dangerous roguishness, intemperance in every point, a mordant, satirical mind ... no delicacy, no religion” (565). She later on depicts Gernaud as “a solitary man, a philosopher” (628). In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, principle libertine Dolomance is described as “totally a philosopher” and “the most renowned atheist, the most immoral man” (4). Madame de Saint-Ange demonstrates her own atheism through diatribes aimed at Eugénie, her pupil, and is portrayed as an exceptionally well-educated upper-class woman. Justine describes her sister, who is in the guise of Madame de Lorsange, as “a trifle wicked, unfurnished with any principle” (458). She is “haughty, libertine,” but “had received the best education” (458). Juliette herself proclaims that she is “profoundly an atheist” (401). A lack of sentiment characterises Clairwil, in contrast to the heroines of novels of sentiment. Clairwil “prided herself on never having shed a tear” (274) and is the “sworn enemy of all religions” (274). Durand proves to be even more ruthless than Clairwil, since she engineers the other woman’s death, but she is described as having a look which “contained everything that announces breeding, education, and intelligence” (527). Saint-Fond is something of a departure from other libertines in Sade’s novels. He is described as “having a keen wit, with much intelligence and much duplicity” (213), with a crucial difference: later in the novel he admits that he believes in God, albeit an evil God.

Libertine men and women alike all eschew reproductive sex for more transgressive activities, and they all have a pronounced penchant for sodomy. Sade describes all four principal libertines of *The 120 Days of Sodom* as “generally susceptible of an enthusiasm for sodomy” (210-1). Bressac has “a disgust for our [the female] sex” (506) although, according to Justine, “Nature had introduced its tastes to him as well” (510). Dolomance from *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is “a sodomite by principle, he not only idolizes his own sex, he also yields to our sex purely on the condition that it will supply him with the treasured charms that he is accustomed to using among men” (3-4). Even female characters demonstrate a fondness for sodomy: early on in *Juliette*, Juliette is sodomised by a girl named Volmar, who has a clitoris three inches long (23). In Sade’s works, a penchant for sodomy demonstrates refined sexual tastes, good breeding, and advanced education. Owing to religious taboos, it is not only sexually transgressive, but it is also blasphemous,

which is what makes it so attractive to libertines, who hate the Church and reproduction with equal vehemence.

### **The Libertine Novel**

It is difficult to isolate the libertine novel as a generic form from other literary forms because, by its very nature, it blurs the lines between the philosophical and the pornographic. Although it was an overwhelmingly French genre, many significant libertine works were not French. For example, the legend of the fictional Spanish libertine Don Juan influenced a great many libertine works, one such being *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery* (1684), the most famous play by the Earl of Rochester. The libertine novel enjoyed a clandestine popularity in the early eighteenth century and in pre-Revolutionary France. Though most libertine literature was produced in the eighteenth century, it owes a debt to certain precursors. Jean Marie Goulemot describes *The School of Venus (L'école des filles)* as “undoubtedly the first libertine *bildungs-roman*” (11). The libertine novel thus grew out of a libertine tradition in Europe, and its writers were sometimes themselves libertines. It is, however, difficult to separate the libertine novel from the mainstream pornography and erotica of the eighteenth century. Lu reflects on this difficulty: “the distinctions between libertine, licentious, erotic, or even pornographic or obscene can be quite blurred. While certainly not interchangeable, they can be overlapping and efforts to clearly distinguish them, according to author’s intention, reader’s reaction, and difference of styles or narrative techniques, have been unsatisfactory” (320).

The libertine novel is nevertheless notable for a philosophy characterised by certain attributes and by which it can be clearly distinguished from erotica or pornography in other forms. It is not that the libertine novel is *inherently* a philosophical novel, but such novels do possess common philosophical, ethical, broadly intellectual and satirical elements. Jin Lu says that recent definitions of libertinage, rather than focussing on its sexual and obscene aspects, instead “emphasize the unity between erudite and moral libertinage, free-thinking, and free-living” (320). In her chapter on eighteenth-century literature in the *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vol. 2*, Natania Meeker clarifies the fact that the recognition of differences between the libertine and the erotic novel is nothing new: “discussions of Enlightenment literary eroticism have traditionally distinguished between the libertine novel of worldliness and seduction (the *roman mondain*) on the one hand,

and the obscene or pornographic novel on the other” (481). Libertine novels are subversive, taking up a position that, while it may be in opposition to the dominant morality and values of society, is nevertheless seductive and effective, as it can in this way provide a critique of that society.

Libertine novels are also remarkable for their often political motivations, something which can be observed in Sade’s novels. In “Pornography and the French Revolution,” Lynn Hunt explores the connections between the pornographic novel and the Revolution, suggesting that in the eighteenth century pornography and the libertine novel often had explicit ideological and political motivations which set them apart from the pornographic trade. The impact of this literature was so great that “politically motivated pornography helped to bring about the Revolution by undermining the legitimacy of the *Ancien Régime* as a social and political system” (Hunt 301). The queen, Marie Antoinette, was a popular target for this form of criticism, and satire seized upon existing rumours that she had conducted an incestuous relationship with her son (a rumour that haunted her during her trial), and had hosted orgies in her court. Iain McCalman explains in “The Making of a Libertine Queen,” that “representations of the Queen as a scheming sexual pervert were used by Jacobin revolutionaries to eroticize and feminize the aristocratic public sphere,” which did irreparable damage to the Queen’s reputation (112). It is the unique libertine philosophy and ideology which set the libertine novel apart from the mainstream erotica of the day, and not the debauchery or immorality it contains, although one must acknowledge that these do influence that ideology.

Libertine novels do not all share identical philosophical positions, but there are some core ideas present in most libertine literature. These ideas are a product of what may vaguely be termed a “libertine philosophy,” but can in turn form and shape that philosophy. The philosophical position basic to libertinage is the hedonistic idea that the pursuit of physical pleasure as the highest good to which any person should aspire. Often this takes the form of Epicureanism, based on the teachings of Greek philosopher Epicurus (341 BCE-270 BCE), which generally hold that the greatest good consists in the pursuit of a pleasurable, though relatively simple, life characterised by an absence of worry and fear (which he calls *ataraxia*) and absence of pain (*aponia*). However, other libertine novels place more emphasis on philosophical materialism, which is unsurprising given the emphasis on materialism in the Enlightenment era, particularly in the work of Diderot and La Mettrie.

Materialism is the belief that all existence, including consciousness, can be reduced to matter, and that the spiritual does not exist. Libertine novels often portray human bodies as machines, possibly drawing from de La Mettrie's metaphor of the machine man, in his book *Man, a Machine (L'homme machine)* (1748), and place sole emphasis on physical pleasure and contentment. Materialist philosophy precludes the existence of a spiritual realm which transcends matter, because, according to this belief, nothing can transcend matter. Accordingly, many libertine novels also espouse atheist philosophies. Although early libertine works were more reserved in promoting controversial atheist views, Goulemot asserts in her article "Toward a Definition of Libertine Fiction" that "the works that followed in the eighteenth century circulated clandestinely, and all veils had been removed, ... antireligious discourse had become straightforward and unequivocal, and that the assaults that were being launched against religious dogma were now frontal" (135).

A defining feature of the libertine novel is the ethical positions it takes up. These are the product of its philosophical positions, but also potentially more controversial than those philosophies. In *The Libertine Reader*, Michael Feher asserts that "neither moralistic nor strictly amoral, libertine fiction is nevertheless primarily about morals" (15). It is often concerned, therefore, not just with morality, but also with the ways in which morality is subverted, in the moral hypocrisy of society and the debauchery masked by the appearance virtue, as well as in the ethics of its protagonists, the monstrous libertines (the upcoming section of this chapter, "Exposing Hypocrisy," testifies to this with examples from libertine literature). Libertinism entails free-thinking, which, since it questions the foundations of socially entrenched concepts and ideas, can be, and usually is, at odds with dominant ideologies, and thus with dominant systems of ethics. Although in the eighteenth century the basis of ethics in theology and scripture was being challenged by the ideas of thinkers such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Bayle, traditional ethical positions were still mostly accepted and thought necessary for the preservation of social order, which is why philosophers like Diderot and Bayle proposed an alternative secular ethics based on humanist concepts. Libertine novels challenged even this, often taking up an ethical position based on the pursuit of physical pleasure and other hedonistic principles. Libertine novels challenge the validity not only of the basis of ethics, ideologies and values, but the very concepts themselves and they typically view values as relative and shifting. These novels tend to be anti-clerical and they

adopt radically atheist positions, and therefore religious values are vehemently rejected in many libertine novels. While the latter may offer an internal set of values to replace those rejected, these values are not always upheld, and for this reason some libertine novels, including, at times, Sade's, can appear nihilistic.

It is not only the philosophy in the libertine novel that sets it apart from the erotic novel, but also certain elements which contribute to the "worldliness" that Meeker identifies, and in turn to the unity of the genre. Libertine novels were written nearly exclusively by aristocratic or upper-middle class men for reading by their peers, and as a result convey upper-class and masculine values. Women are marginalised. Kathleen Wilson explains in "The Female Rake," "if male libertinism marked a bourgeois appropriation of aristocratic sexual privilege, then female libertinism marked a double transgression of gender as well as class" (96). Even though *any* expression of feminine sexuality challenged societal values, not even the libertine authors could truly liberate women or raise them to the status of men. Though females in libertine novels are a departure from the woman of virtue in the sentimental novel, they are still usually either victims or serve only as the target of desire for the male libertine, even if they are willing targets. If they are themselves libertines, they are either punished for it, as exemplified in the fate of the Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons*, or, if they are not, they must forever play student to the male libertines, never to be true equals, as with Sade's famous libertine Juliette. The libertine novel parodies the pedagogical conventions of the sentimental novel, and is engaged with the many popular philosophical texts which explicated the pedagogical concerns of the Enlightenment, a subject which will be discussed in depth later on.

Although Sade's work is firmly within the libertine tradition, it is nevertheless original in that it took advantage of novelistic conventions. The "glory days" of the libertine novel ended with the French Revolution, and, although most of Sade's novels were published after the Revolution, they have come to characterise that genre to contemporary readers. Therefore, many of the conclusions that can be drawn about the libertine novel are conclusions based on taking Sade's work as an example. That the novel provided a new form of private, internalised entertainment has been discussed, but Norbert Sclippa argues in his article "The Must of Monstruosity" [sic] that the potential of the novel to explore this inner space, the "interplays of imagination and desire," was not treated fully by writers up until Sade

(3). He says, “Sade is the only Western writer to have taken stock of this epoch-making revolution, and to have fully exploited it. Everyone else continued to write as if nothing at all had happened, their characters going in and out of their novels like passengers from a stagecoach” (4).

### **Satire and Pedagogy in the Libertine Novel**

As a clandestine genre, the libertine novel made an effective vehicle for satire. As with the orientalism popular in philosophical novels of the eighteenth century, the libertine novel used the very alterity of libertine philosophy to critique society. So close to the erotic novel, it was sufficiently clandestine, even “other,” to produce the sort of effective critique of society that only an outsider’s perspective could accomplish. It was also intimate with society in a way that mainstream literature is not: it articulated a familiarity with the shady, debauched side of society that is generally hidden. However, it possesses the erudite authority that no erotic novel can claim. The monarchy was a target for critique and satire prior to the Revolution, a popular tactic being to cast royalty as sexual debauchees, as Diderot does by representing Louis XV as a libertine emperor in *The Indiscreet Jewels*. The Enlightenment, a movement which was both complicit in the development of the libertine novel and which denounced the form as immoral, was another target for satire, especially in Sade’s work. Goulemot came to the conclusion that, “while the pornographic novel brings the reader’s body into play; the libertine novel appeals only to his mind” (144). As an example, three major, interconnected concerns of the Enlightenment, pedagogy, ethics, and religion, will be examined in the libertine novel.

The pedagogical elements in the libertine novel in many instances define the relationship between libertine and lover or victim, but these pedagogical elements also refer to the concern of some Enlightenment philosophers over pedagogical theory. Anxiety about education pervaded the Enlightenment, and progressive and (for the time) radical ideas about education and pedagogy proliferated. Roland Mortier points out in his article “The ‘Philosophes’ and Public Education” that this should not be surprising, given the commitment of Enlightenment thinkers to the acquisition and spread of knowledge: “It would seem absurd if a movement, as ‘engagé,’ as eager for action as was that of the Enlightenment, were not preoccupied with spreading its ideas through education and, with this goal in mind, had not



thought about reforming education itself" (62). To this end, a great many works were produced during the Enlightenment: Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Rousseau's *Emile* or, as it was also known, *On Education* (1762), La Chalotais' *Essay on National Education* (1763), Diderot's *Refutation of Helvétius* (*Réfutation d'Helvétius*) (1773), not to mention his contributions to the *Encyclopédie*, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787).

Rousseau's *Emile* propounded a system by which a person might be educated without compromising the goodness that Rousseau believed was inherent to humans and, in the young, who are yet to be corrupted by society. Antithetical to Rousseau's ideas, pedagogy in the libertine novel is, in effect, a priapic pedagogy, aiming to corrupt and sexualise rather than instil virtue.

### **Exposing Hypocrisy: Satirising Ethics**

Erotic novels were popular, yet often condemned by the public as immoral, and since libertine novels dealt with the erotic in a more erudite and aristocratic genre, they used this to draw attention to and satirise the apparently hypocritical ethics of upper class society. While the sentimental novels attempted, by offering moralising tales, to combat what authors viewed as a moral degradation of society, libertine novels either did the same by satirising moral hypocrisy, or by celebrating this degradation as a return to nature or as the triumph of materialism. Crébillon's *The Sofa* (*Le Sopha*) is told from the point of view of Amanzei, condemned to reincarnation as a series of sofas until he can witness a true union in love. He will be allowed to regain a human body when two virgins consummate their love in front of him. During his tenure as a sofa, Amanzei witnesses many couplings, and this is the device through which Crébillon critiques moral hypocrisy. Amanzei recounts the hypocrisy of the aristocrats who cheat on their spouses, destroy their virtue, and succumb to the advances of the libertines. Jean Sgard remarks, in an introduction to the text, that the story reveals "the ruses of false virtue, worldly hypocrisy, and religious scruples" and demonstrates how "instinct, vanity and fantasy will prevail at the expense of avowed morality" (170). Likewise, the magic ring of the Sultan in Diderot's *The Indiscreet Jewels* enables women's sexual organs to speak, entirely without the consent of the women themselves. The talking "jewels" reveal the truth behind the façade of virtue and morality those women attempt to maintain. These novels use the obscene, the repressed, the erotic to satirise the ethics of a society which tries to

suppress the erotic, but is in private obsessed with it. They are also influenced by orientalisising ideas, both using the “other” to critique the sexual mores of Western subjects.

### **Sex in the Convent: Satirising Religion**

Libertine novels usually articulate anti-clerical and atheist sentiments through satire. For this kind of novel, the inclusion of religious elements added another layer of transgression which perhaps was all the deeper because it challenged not just society, but the very concept of religious authority and religious dogma. This increased the pleasure of the transgression because the power and authority of institutionalised religion was entrenched not only in society but also in the moral and spiritual life of the individual. Christopher Rivers argues in his article “Safe Sex” that the convent was “the most eroticised space available in *Ancien Régime* France” (386). Argens’ *Thérèse the Philosopher* contains an extensive satire of religious practices. Thérèse becomes a student of the Jesuit priest Father Dirrag, who seduces her, and initially she mistakes the sexual pleasure for spiritual ecstasy, as Theresa of Ávila is so often imagined to have done, given the infamously and suspiciously sexual depiction of her spiritual ecstasy immortalised in Bernini’s sculpture the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. However, Thérèse’s sexual education continues after she is placed in a convent, where the repression of her body’s desire for sex awakens her to her own sexual nature. Rivers explains that the convent was a popular setting for the transgression of religion in the eighteenth-century novel, because it not only served the purpose of profaning a religious space and religious symbols, but also introduced another element of the forbidden: female homosexuality. Rivers argues that the libertine convent novel is so prolific that it could constitute a sub-genre by itself. The setting of the convent also allowed authors to satirise pedagogical themes, often including a scenario in which “an older nun – a seasoned veteran of sexual combat – undertakes a twofold initiation of her protégée,” teaching her both about the sexual aspect of libertinism and the philosophy that underscores it (389). Rivers stresses that this intellectual initiation is in line with the typical content of the libertine novel (388). This scenario, although not the sole focus of Sade’s work, is present in the same form at the beginning of the novel *Juliette*.

Juliette is raised in a convent, where she is initiated into libertinage at a young age by a nun called Madame Delbène. In the opening pages of the novel,

Juliette explains that those in the convent are most assuredly “attached one to the other, not by virtue, but by fucking” (4). In her time in the convent, Juliette recounts, “the seed destined to flower into vices without number was sown in the depths of my soul” (3). Delbène, “anxious to take her [Juliette’s] education in hand,” makes it her mission to cleanse Juliette “of all those religious follies which spoil the whole of life’s felicity” and “guide her back to Nature’s fold” (8). Delbène advances a long dissertation on materialism, nature, the pleasure to be found in doing crime, and the falsity of religion. The nun convinces Juliette that emotions such as remorse and guilt are useless and irrational, and that Juliette should never repress her vices for fear of doing others harm, because vices constitute “the sole happiness granted us in life” (17). Juliette is utterly convinced by this lecture, and it is from this episode that her career as a libertine begins. Later in the novel, Juliette is invited to an audience with Pope Pius VI, which ends in an orgy. The concept of an orgy in the Vatican was another literary trope which can be indirectly attributed to the seeds of distrust in the Papacy sowed by the works of Martin Luther, particularly *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in which he accused the Pope of being the Antichrist. Juliette questions the Pope’s hypocrisy in inviting her: “what the devil is this prattle of virtue when your sole purpose in bringing me here is to sully yourself with vice?” He replies, “I am not of those who can be soiled ... successor of the disciples of God” (748). She laughs at him and proceeds to enumerate the sins and failings of his predecessors, questioning the morals and religious commitment of the Vatican, which has become rich through the “knavery” of these corrupt Popes, and constantly denies and mocks its humble roots. She finishes by asking him to disavow his faith, so that they may proceed with the debauchery, which Pius VI, dropping all pretence, immediately does.

The libertine novel is a perfect vessel for satire. Sade’s work parodies the conventions of many different novelistic genres as a satirical strategy. The persecuted heroine, Justine, the abundant villainous libertines, the dark Gothic castles and dungeons, the ritualistic debaucheries, and the ever-present threat of death and violence recalls the gothic novel which emerged during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Sade subverts the conventions of gothic literature: the villains triumph, the heroine dies, and the ritual progresses uninterrupted. The picaresque novel usually depicts a lower-class hero who navigates the pitfalls and dangers of a corrupt society through his or her own roguish talents. Fielding’s *Tom*

*Jones* is a well-known example of this genre, Fielding being a writer for whom Sade expressed admiration in “Reflections on the Novel” (106). The conventions of the picaresque novel are also subverted in *Juliette*, where the heroine, an orphan, navigates corrupt libertine society by becoming a libertine herself, surviving on her wits, and wholeheartedly embracing this corruption. Being pornographic, his work subverts the novel of manners, and yet it cannot be truly called simple pornography because of its strong theoretical framework and the philosophy it contains.

### **Anguish and Ecstasy in Sade’s Sentimental Novels**

Sade structures two of his major works, *Justine* and *Juliette*, around the conventions of the sentimental novel in order to parody those novels and therefore satirise the moralising sentiments they promote. Sade’s *Justine*, originally published in 1787 relatively obscenity-free and under the title *Les infortunes de la vertu* (*The Misfortunes of Virtue*), was eventually published in its full, extended form in 1797 under the title *La nouvelle Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (*The New Justine, or, The Misfortunes of Virtue*). English Showalter explains in “Eighteenth-Century French Fiction” that “the term nouvelle ... came to signify a brief tale, often melodramatic and sentimental, with a clear moral lesson implied. (469)” The full title of *Juliette* is *L’Histoire de Juliette ou les prosperities du vice*, in English *The Story of Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded*. Sade’s titles directly references two popular works of the time: Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, or The New Héloïse* (1761).

As a parody of the sentimental novel convention of the young lady’s entrance into society, *Justine*’s entrance into society is fraught with threats to her virtue. Like Richardson’s heroine in the novel *Clarissa*, she is violated, but retains her virtuous disposition. Her story serves as a cautionary tale, similar to *Clarissa*, rather than one the reader is encouraged to emulate. Like *Clarissa*, whose distress after Lovelace rapes her is such that she cultivates her own death hoping that better things await her in the afterlife, *Justine* consoles herself that, whatever she must face in this life, her virtue will ensure that paradise will be her reward. *Juliette* must also enter society, but instead of protecting her virtue, she happily participates in vice. Upon the sisters being cast out of the convent, *Juliette* is “delighted to be her own mistress” and:

Spent a minute, perhaps two, wiping away *Justine*’s tears, then, observing it was in vain, she fell to scolding instead of comforting her; she rebuked

Justine for her sensitiveness, she told her, with a philosophic acuity far beyond her years, that in this world one must not be afflicted save by what affects one personally; that it was possible to find in oneself physical sensations of sufficiently voluptuous piquancy to extinguish all the moral affections whose shock could be painful; that it is all the more essential so to proceed, since true wisdom consists infinitely more in doubling the sum of one's pleasures than in increasing the sum of one's pains; that, in a word, there is nothing one ought not do in order to deaden in oneself that perfidious sensibility from which none but others profit while to us it brings naught but troubles. (460)

Juliette also tells Justine that she should “avoid believing it is marriage that renders a girl happy,” advising her that “were she to surrender herself to libertinage, she might always be able to protect herself against her lovers' moods, or be comforted by their number” (460). But Justine is “horrified” by this advice, being of “gentle good heart” (460), and the sisters therefore “bid an eternal adieu” (461), even if their farewell turns out to be temporary, as they are reunited by the end of the novel. Through the character Juliette Sade exposes the weaknesses of the ethics which inform the novel of sensibility and slyly parodies the grandiloquent and embellished prose they contain. There are a number of dichotomies personified by the sisters. Justine is given over to matters of the heart, to sensibility, while Juliette champions reason and sense over sensibility. Justine remains innocent, and her downfall is never learning from experience, while her sister always profits by letting experience guide her.

Sade's parody of the sentimental novel continues later on in *Justine*, when she, moved by no doubt the same virtuous tenderness experienced by Clarissa, Pamela, and other heroines of their sentimental ilk, falls in love with the libertine Count, the Monsieur de Bressac, who Justine says “possessed a mind containing a great fund of wickedness and libertinage” (506). Despite this observation, Justine feels herself “drawn to him by an insuperable and instinctive tenderness;” indeed, she says: “had the Count called upon me to lay down my life, I would have sacrificed it for him a thousand times over” (511). She even fancies that he returns her affections to some degree: “I was so blinded by the little his heart offered me, that I sometimes had the weakness to believe he was not indifferent to me” (511). He truly is indifferent to her, not only emotionally, but physically, since he has an adamant “disgust for our [the female] sex” (506). Justine, being cast in the mould of other

heroines of the novels of sensibility, seeks to reform him using religion. Far from being reformed, Bressac seeks instead to corrupt her.

### **Sade the Teacher**

In accordance with his parody of the sentimental novel, Sade frequently and overtly satirised popular pedagogical theories of his time. Both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* are novels about heroines who overcome adversity through adherence to virtue. The heroines came to be considered role models for young women and men of the age and the novels have a pedagogical motivate in that they advocate sexual virtue for women and sensibility for men. Sade's Justine likewise faces adversity with her own sense of virtue, her morals springing from a "natural" sensibility and sensitivity, a parody of Enlightenment theories which claimed that ethics can be derived from the natural compassion for human beings. Despite all that happens to her, her principles never waver. It soon becomes apparent that Justine's virtuous actions lead in every instance to punishment and violation. No sooner has she offered a beggar money than he robs her, no sooner helped a prisoner to freedom than he rapes her, and no sooner pleaded sanctuary from a church than she is imprisoned there by the debauched priest (another stock character in literature of that era) and his group of libertine accomplices. In the final pages, she is struck and killed by lightning, an apparently fitting end for one so plagued by fate.

Perhaps the best example of the use of pedagogy in Sade's works is to be found in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. At the beginning of the book Sade writes with typical irony: "may every mother get her daughter to read this book" (xvii). Sade did not expect his writing to change society, or even to be read by women at all. The statement is intended to outrage the reader's morals, and it shines a light on the pedagogical philosophies of his time. The two libertine teachers, Dolomance and Madame de Saint-Ange, are charged with reschooling the initially virtuous Eugénie in sex and libertine philosophy. By the end of the novel their relationship becomes so strong that Eugénie derives pleasure from torturing her own mother at her teachers' request.

Since the sentimental novel and pedagogical instruction are united, to satirise them is also to provide a satire of the conventional ethics the novel promotes. Sade's novels do not so much critique moral hypocrisy as attempt to break morality down completely, challenging its validity on the basis that it is untrue to nature, which

contains as much evil as it does good, and is, in any case, indifferent to the suffering of humans. The novels *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and *Justine* together provide an interesting picture of how Sade satirises morality. In the first, the student Eugénie is introduced as a paragon of virtue who has been sent to be thoroughly corrupted by the libertines Dolomance, and Madame de Saint-Ange, and freed of the influence of her mother, who has instilled sexual virtue in her. They accomplish this corruption easily, managing in only a day to initiate her into the libertine way of life, which, they argue, is closer to nature. Justine is also introduced as a paragon of virtue, but through all her trials and the various attempts to corrupt her, she remains unwavering in this virtue. Here Sade portrays, not the triumph of virtue over vice, but rather the misfortunes with which virtue is constantly faced, and which can never be overcome, a stark contrast to the messages of the sentimental novel.

### **Rereading Sade, Rereading the Enlightenment**

As this chapter has argued, Sade's novels can only be understood in the context of the generic codes and conventions which structure his work, and which are a product of literary developments and trends in the eighteenth century. Sade consciously co-opts generic conventions in order to satirise and critique those conventions and the ethical theories which underpin them. The explanation of Sade's literary influences and textual strategies this chapter has provided forms an essential context for how his philosophical and ethical system must be understood since the libertine novel, as a satirical and philosophical genre, proves central to Sade's critical strategy. The way libertine novels are now defined is, in large part, due to Sade's writing, which demonstrates Sade's longevity and importance to literature. In the introduction to their book *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, Allison, Roberts, and Weiss put it succinctly when they say that examining Sade now leads to the problem of determining "how that century [the eighteenth] must be reread after the rediscovery of Sade, given his contribution of such distinctively radical textual strategies – strategies which extend and subvert traditional theories of both narrative and discourse" (12). Though they speak only of literary history, the philosophical and ethical positions typically advanced by novels should also be re-examined in the light of Sade's work. It is not only the normative and religious frameworks of thought which come under fire, but also Enlightenment rationalism, which he subverts through eroticism, putting it to a use which could only have outraged the rationalists.

## Chapter 2

### The Many forms of Atheism: From Deism to Materialism

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.  
 - Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach"

The Marquis de Sade is one of Western history's most notorious atheists, and yet Sade's atheism, being of a unique kind, is the basis of a transgressive relationship with God. The fact of Sade's avowed atheism is not in question: Sade proudly claims the title for himself many times, and considers it an honour to have it bestowed upon him. However, atheism in Sade should be viewed as a transgressive category, not merely a theoretical position, and so it is Sade's particular kind of atheism which constitutes a relationship with the religious, a feature of Sade's work which, as this chapter will establish, is not as contradictory as it first appears. Sade's work does not escape religious categories which are constitutive of, and integral to, his philosophy. In Sade, the connection to religious categories is not an idle connection determined by his social context; as with many of his time, he actively takes up religious questions, categories and ideas in order to rethink and even co-opt them. He is the bearer of a double legacy, a citizen of a Catholic civilisation with a long and complex history and an uncertain future given the threat of the coming Revolution, and the radical questioning of that same Catholic inheritance during the Enlightenment. For this reason, Sade's position as atheist can only be properly gauged in the context of the development and implications of atheism in Europe, especially during the Enlightenment.



The title of “atheist” is at best ambiguous; how to recognise atheism, who “rightly passes” for an atheist is dependent upon context, even after Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “death of God.” It has always been difficult to define atheism, because its definition is contingent on particular social and historical circumstances. Postmodernist philosophy complicates simple binaries such as atheist/theist which offer a seemingly secure foundation for defining atheism. Derrida demonstrates how it is necessary to challenge dominant readings and understandings of atheism in order to think through how religion and faith still function in a society which has largely dispensed with them, and how they structure ethical problems. Therefore, it is also productive to explore postmodernist perceptions of atheism in order critically to read Sade’s atheism and its relation to ethics. This chapter traces the meaning and development of atheism through Classical times, the Enlightenment, modernity, and up to postmodernity, to provide contexts for understanding Sade’s atheism, and to build a framework through which his atheism can be productively examined. This chapter will demonstrate that the term “atheist” has political, ethical and philosophical implications that Sade exploits when he adopts the title for himself.

### **Atheism in Heresy and Blasphemy**

Atheism has, until recently, carried negative connotations; for example, early use of the term “atheism” in English did not describe an absence of belief so much as a heresy. George T. Buckley relates that its first use in England can be found in the work of Sir John Cheke, in an essay about his translation of Plutarch’s *On Superstition* (9). In it, Cheke criticises atheists for disbelieving in the “interventions of providence” rather than the notion of God (64). Michael J. Buckley points out that atheism was, in the sixteenth century, thought of as blasphemy or heresy. Buckley cites a number of anti-atheist polemics of the time, all of which testify to the growth of atheism and the contested nature of that category, calling it blasphemy, paradox, or infidelity (10). Certeau, too, comments on the literature of the time in his work *The Possession of Loudun* on the famous Loudon possessions: “the ‘atheists’ who first occupy the polemic are the ‘heretics’ of every church” (101). Certeau describes how these possessions allegedly caused one of the nuns to be tempted into atheistic thoughts as a kind of blasphemy. Aside from being thought of as a heresy, blasphemy or sin, it was thought of as something of an intellectual plague, a powerful metaphor in a time when devastating plagues would have been fresh in

popular memory. Roger D. Lund recounts in his article “Infectious Wit”: “To express their alarm at the threat posed by atheism and infidelity, later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers ... call upon the familiar iconography of infection inspired by recollections of the London Plague of 1665” (46). Since atheism has historically been considered, at worst, a grave crime worthy of the death penalty, and, at best, the mark of an immoral and sinful person, few would have willingly taken up the title of atheist, and even fewer would have been willing to do so publically.

During the Enlightenment atheism began to emerge from the underground and gain some respectability; nevertheless, it still bore the marks of a long history of suspicion towards and persecution of atheists. Although atheism has roots in Antiquity, it did not emerge as a coherent category, informed by and complicit in certain belief systems (such as materialism, humanism and secularism), until the late Enlightenment. Indeed, it was not until the anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment had truly taken hold in the late eighteenth century that it became possible to publicly proclaim oneself an atheist. Even during the Enlightenment, claiming the title of atheist for oneself was fraught – one could expect to be shunned by one’s community, as Baruch Spinoza was in the seventeenth century, or, like Julien Offray de la Mettrie, be compelled to flee one’s country (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* 705). As Jonathan Israel explains, the mainstream Enlightenment, while on the whole more secular than thinkers in previous centuries, were still likely to view atheism as dangerous to society: “some leading proponents of moderate Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Hume accorded little to no validity to religious authority as such but nevertheless remained anxious to restrict the scope of reason and retain tradition and ecclesiastical authority” (*Democratic Enlightenment* 11). It was those who Israel refers to as radicals: thinkers like Spinoza, Diderot, Bayle, La Mettrie, and Holbach who did the most to promote materialism, atheism, and secular thought in their work, and it is to the radical tradition that Sade, however problematically, belongs. Like Sade, these radical thinkers had to propagate their ideas “mainly in the form of clandestine manuscripts and a few illicit, anonymous publications that were vigorously suppressed by all authorities” (*Democratic Enlightenment* 13). Sade takes the term for himself not only as an ethical statement, but as a transgressive statement: the word loses its power in the libertine system if it is fully rehabilitated. Sade’s complex deployment of the title and position of atheist is dependent upon the term’s many complex discursive meanings and uses. The term cannot be taken as a mere

signifier which points to a precise kind of thing or person, but must be appreciated as part of a way of thinking and speaking – a discourse. As Foucault states in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, discourses are not simply sets of signs but “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49).

### **Dialectics: Classical Theism and Atheism**

It is critical to map the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the word “atheism” as a discursive formation over time. It often happens that the atheists of the past are mistaken for, or reclaimed as, atheists of the contemporary type, and that atheism of the past is seen as equivalent to the atheism of the present. Yet to see atheism as a consistent, timeless, and unchanging category is to disregard the historical complexities of the term and what it was supposed to name. What constituted atheism in ancient times might today be named deism or theism. Buckley says that the word could “carry vastly divergent and even contradictory meanings and could consequently be applied to figures whose ideas were radically opposed” (6). Michael J. Buckley insists in his *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* that the term “atheist” can be “profoundly misleading” unless “the instance to which it is applied and the meaning in which it is used are determined” (6), in other words, unless it is placed in its discursive context.

Atheism is a category which is often regarded as inherently negative since it appears to define itself by that which it is not; for instance, Buckley asks, “Does theism not only set the meaning, but also generate the existence of the atheism which emerges in the middle eighteenth century?” (16). Gavin Hyman states in “Atheism in Modern History” that consequently “if our definition and understandings of God change and vary, so too our definitions and understandings of atheism will change and vary” (28-9) and that “atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a *particular* form of theism” (29). Enlightenment thinkers, for instance, rejected particular understandings of God: the monotheistic, benevolent, omnipotent and omnipresent interventionist God of Christianity and Judaism. Hyman and Buckley make good points about how one might define and think through atheism at certain times: its genesis and development, and also the content of the arguments made in its name. However, these claims may easily be confused with the kind of apologetics which labels vocal atheists “fundamentalists” or “evangelicals,” as though there is a form of faith in atheism which implies that atheism is untenable in practice. A. C.

Grayling argues against this practice on the grounds that atheism is a positive move against what he sees as the atrocities and evils committed for religious motives, and that, furthermore, it might be more accurate to call atheists naturalists since they believe only in the proven workings of nature. Grayling concludes by stating that the idea that atheists can be fundamentalists is theists' "attempt to describe naturalism (atheism) as itself a religion" (476). Grayling defines religion as the belief in supernatural entities or forces, and since "naturalism (atheism) by definition does not premise such belief" (476) it cannot possibly involve faith. It is not the intention of this thesis to follow such arguments, even though the thesis argues that Sade, in his atheism, is intimately and uniquely concerned with Christianity.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the history of atheism takes place against the history of religion. It is in the context of deeply religious societies that it developed and it is this context which must be traced. In the Western tradition, atheism has developed out of classical theism. Classical theism is concerned with the nature of God and His attributes, and therefore, by its own logic, the fact of His existence. Atheism is almost solely predicated upon the question of existence, if one reasons, as Anselm of Canterbury does in his ontological argument for the existence of God, that existence is necessarily a good.<sup>14</sup> Even so, it is a rare thing that an atheist in pre-Christian times, and even up to the Renaissance, would deny the existence of a God or gods altogether. However, Buckley points out that the word "God" is as ambiguous as the word "atheism," and says, "The internal contradictions within the nature of god generate its denial" (16).

### **The Basis of Atheism: The Nature of God**

One major point of theological concern and contention is the problem of the nature of the divine (God or gods), a problem which is integral to the history of atheism. Debates over the nature of the divine have often led to accusations of atheism, especially where theories diverged from the orthodoxy of the time, as shifting and changeable as orthodoxy is. The nature of the divine was a major concern from the

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<sup>14</sup> Anselm's argument, and many iterations of the ontological argument, hold that the greatest being which one can possibly imagine must exist. A being that did not exist, however great, would by definition not be the greatest – a being which existed would, if existence is taken to be a good (and it is in these arguments), be better. This being, is, of course, God (see Anselm's *Monologion*).

very beginnings of Western philosophy, as evidenced by numerous sources from Greek and Roman antiquity. The dialogue in the great Roman orator Cicero's treatise *Of the Nature of the Gods* (*De natura deorum*) (45 BCE) is a clear example, in which Cicero enumerates popular philosophical positions on the matter, and other scholars set forth their own theories, such as the Roman poet Lucretius' atomist view, which he advances in *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*) (first century BCE), and Aristotle's idea of "prime-movers," or "unmoved movers" (which are not equivalent to creators or designers, and which are not all gods) that he sets forth in his seminal work *Metaphysics* (third century BCE).

Religion was so much a part of everyday life and ritual in these times that it would not have occurred to most people to question the existence of gods who played a part in human affairs. Therefore an accused atheist in Greek and Roman antiquity was more likely to be a deist, or a theist who had failed to acknowledge or show piety towards the state endorsed gods, than somebody who had denied the existence of gods altogether. For instance, later in his life, Aristotle's work attracted charges of impiety, which Shields calls "spurious" (7), that forced Aristotle to flee Athens for fear of meeting the same fate as Socrates. It has commonly been imagined that Aristotle believed only in the existence of a "prime mover" which is apparently equivalent to God. In *Physics*, Aristotle posits that, "[s]ince there must always be motion without intermission, there must necessarily be something, one thing or it may be a plurality, that first imparts motion, and this first movement must be unmoved" (129, bk. 8, part 6). Nevertheless, as Stephen Menn explains his article "Aristotle's Theology," Aristotle never explicitly equates the unmoved mover with God or gods, and he never refers to just one "God" – Aristotle uses the term as a plural to describe divine beings. Closer to Aristotle's concept of God (in the plural) is an idea of pure being which is utterly self-sufficient, and which does not require worship, but which cannot interfere with nature or humanity (Menn). Aristotle likely never intended that his conception of the "prime mover" be applied to God, but the concept was appropriated by Christian theologians, notably Thomas Aquinas, who derived his notion of a "first cause" from Aristotle's "prime mover:" "it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other. And this everyone understands to be God" (*The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas* 13; part 1, q. 2, art. 3). Later on, referencing Aristotle, Aquinas argues that the universe is not eternal but created:

The first mover was always in the same state: but the first movable thing was not always so, because it began to be whereas hitherto it was not. This, however, was not through change, but by creation, which is not change. ... Hence it is evident that this reason, which Aristotle gives ... is valid against those who admitted the existence of eternal movable things, but not eternal movement ... (*The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas* 252; part 1, q. 46, art. 2)

Atheism, in this case, a failure to acknowledge the state endorsed gods, was one charge laid against Socrates. It does not appear to be a crime of which he was guilty (he asked for a cock to be sacrificed to Asclepius, the god of medicine, as a final request). Cicero labelled the Greek poet Diagoras of Melos (fifth century BCE) “the first atheist,” and Diagoras was also accused of impiety, which forced him to flee Athens. Little of Diagoras’ works remain, which makes determining his position difficult, but given the fluid definition of atheism in Classical Greece, all that is certain are that his views on the gods were unconventional.

Suspensions of atheism in Classical times also rested less upon personally held views and more upon what could be inferred from philosophical schools of thought. Although Epicurus’ teachings frequently concern the gods, in whose existence he most firmly believed, the implications of his philosophy and the unusual nature of his definition of the gods attracted charges of atheism in the seventeenth century. Epicurus, following from the atomism of his philosophical predecessors, taught that the gods, like matter and the soul, are made of atoms. Unlike humans, the gods are immortal, and their souls are inseparable from their bodies – which is where Epicurus diverges from a materialistic conception of the world. He did not believe that the gods interfered with human lives but that humans had free will. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Epicureans inhabit the sixth circle of Hell, reserved for heretics. Virgil says that their chief heresy is to “with the body mortal make the soul” since Epicurus taught that the human soul is not immortal, but perished with the body (*The Divine Comedy* 77; *The Inferno*, canto 10). Without an immortal soul, people could not be punished (or rewarded) in the afterlife. This heresy was felt to promote immorality. Constantine’s propagandist Lactantius regarded Epicurus as an atheist, accusing him, in his tract *On the Anger of God*, of having “overthrown” religion, because the philosopher claimed that the gods do not intervene in human affairs (ch.

8). Lactantius, a Christian convert and apologist, defended Christianity against the pagans, and since then, the word “Epicurean,” has become a pejorative term.

The Sophists were well-known for undertaking intellectual exercises during which “both sides” of an argument could be explored, a rhetorical strategy which was regarded as potentially relativistic. Indeed, the Sophists are credited with introducing and spreading the concept of relativism. Relativism was, for obvious reasons, felt to undermine orthodox ideas about the gods, and so Sophists often fell under suspicion of atheism. Several well known Sophists are cited as early examples of atheism. Euhemerus, for instance, looked to anthropology to account for the origins of religion, conjecturing that the gods were merely great figures of the past raised to the level of deity by humans (Thrower 42). This idea carried dangerous connotations for it denies the state-endorsed gods, though Euhemerus is more accurately described as a theist, for he believed in the existence of immortal, primordial gods. Protagoras controversially admitted that “with regard to the gods I am unable to say either that they exist or do not exist” (qtd. in Taylor and Lee).<sup>15</sup> In his time, such doubt about the gods was considered atheist, but, as Taylor and Lee point out in their article on the Sophists in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*:

It is probable, then, that Protagoras was supportive of traditional religious practice, while the wording of his proclamation of agnosticism does not even offer a direct challenge to conventional belief. He cannot know whether or not the gods exist or what they are like; this presumably ... implies that no-one can know these things, but lack of knowledge is no bar to belief, particularly if that belief is socially useful, as Protagoras probably thought it was. Overall, it is likely that Protagoras’ position on religious belief and practice was as conservative as his general social and moral views.

Michael J. Buckley says that, although it is popular to label these philosophers atheists, their atheism was almost always “an alien, unsympathetic reading of their theism or their natural philosophy” (5). He asserts that “too little is known about most of them, naturalists, sophists, and sceptics, to assert much with certitude” (5).

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<sup>15</sup> Protagoras’ works have long been lost, and his thought survives only in quotations and fragments in the work of other writers, including Plato and Aristotle. Therefore, one cannot quote him directly.

### **“Polytheistic Atheists” and Heresies: The Spread of Christianity**

With the advent of Christianity, it was common for Christians to be charged with atheism because they did not believe in the pagan gods. Eventually, although it took some centuries to disseminate and gain followers even after its endorsement by the Roman state, the spread of Christianity across Europe was such that the situation was reversed. Disbelief in the Christian God would later become heretical. Even early on in Christian history, some Christian scholars propagated the view that any non-Christian belief system was tantamount to atheism. The second-century Christian scholar Origen called pagan religions “atheistical polytheism” because, although they had their own pantheon, they did not believe in the one true God of Christianity (*Contra Celsus* bk. 1, ch. 1). Clement of Alexandria went so far as to attempt to “rehabilitate the ‘canonical’ atheists, such as Diagoras, Euhemerus, and Theodorus, by claiming that they had at least recognised the foolishness of pagan ideas” (Bremmer 22).

With the triumph of Christianity in the Latin and Greek world, speculation on the nature of God intensified, but ran the risk of becoming heretical or atheistic. Classical philosophy was incorporated into Christian theology, and was taught alongside theology from as early as the eighth century, but Classical philosophy did not, despite its popularity at the time, go unquestioned and could be viewed as threatening. Augustine of Hippo, was, in early life, a Plotinian neo-Platonist, and, although he later rejected neo-Platonism along with his Manichaeism when he converted, he remained influenced by many classical philosophers. The influence of Plato was such that, as James Thrower remarks in *A Short History of Western Atheism*, “the period of Christian thought which began in the second century with the Greek and Latin fathers of the Church is one which is dominated by Plato and neo-Platonic ways of thinking” (58). However, many classical sources, including Aristotle, did not become available in translation until after the twelfth century, a development which contributed to the dominance of high scholasticism in the late Middle Ages.

The works of Aristotle became of chief interest to theologians, who viewed it as exciting because it opened up fresh possibilities for new theological approaches. Thrower says that, “it is in fact the introduction of Aristotle, particularly by way of the Arabian commentators, that brings us to the nearest approach to unbelief in the



early medieval period” (58). In addition, this new body of thought was in nature not “medieval and Christian, but ancient Greek and non-religious, not to say rationalistic in character” (59). Fearful, and not without cause, of the influence of this new development in theology, the Church initially suppressed new studies of Classical thought where it intersected with theology. Twelfth-century thinker Peter Abelard was one of the first to attempt to marry Aristotelian thought and Christian theology, the consequences of which were that in 1121 his doctrine of the Trinity was declared heretical and he was condemned for rationalising faith by the fierce preacher of the Crusades, Bernard of Clairvaux (Rubenstein 116-18). Some years after Abelard’s death, the works of Aristotle became extremely popular among theologians of the likes of William of Ockham, Albertus Magnus, and, famously, Thomas Aquinas. Faith was becoming increasingly rationalised. This is often thought of as the beginning of an opposition between faith and reason in Western thought, a clash of ways of knowing which would become all the more intense in subsequent centuries, and especially in the Enlightenment.

### **The Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation**

In time, Christianity became integrated into society and the everyday lives of citizens that Lucien Febvre proclaims that talking about unbelief and atheism during the middle ages is anachronistic. He says that “rationalism and free thought” (which Febvre equates with atheism) could never find support against “a religion whose dominance is universal” (353). There does indeed seem to be a conspicuous absence of atheism in this period. It is not that theology was an absolute barrier to the development of ideas in science and philosophy. One such philosophical development is the theory, which now seems Orwellian, of “double truth” or “two truths.” “Double truth” is a theory that thinkers used to reconcile the cognitive dissonance created by simultaneously believing two contradictory propositions, usually one a matter of empirical fact or logical inference, and the other a matter of faith. This allowed thinkers to study theories that contradicted Catholic scripture or doctrine without compromising their personally held faith or leaving themselves open to charges of heresy or atheism. This idealistic quest to reconcile faith and reason was threatening to the Church, and the concept was abolished in the thirteenth century, making any theory which required an act of double truth heresy. Even Thomas Aquinas believed that there could be no conflict between reason and faith (a

belief that was later defended by the proponents of natural religion, though their arguments were not orthodox). He says in his *Summa Theologica*:

Sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith (for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end), but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity. ... Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason.... (*The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas* 8; part 1, q. 1, art. 8)

Nevertheless, the idea was resurrected during the Renaissance, and is prominent in the philosophy of Italian thinkers, notably Pietro Pomponazzi, who held that his views “were true only in philosophy but false in theology” (Pine 163), and the Italian school of Aristotelianism: “the question of what a man ‘really believes’ who finds a clear contradiction between rational truth and religious truth recurs throughout the whole tradition of Italian Aristotelianism” (Kristeller and Randall 12). It is unsurprising, then, that these thinkers should attract charges of heresy or atheism, which, as George T. Buckley explains in his book *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, were standard for thinkers following Aristotle, particularly those who, like Pomponazzi, chose to deny orthodoxy on matters such as the immortality of the soul (88).

George T. Buckley says that the Renaissance caused what he terms “a secularization of men’s minds,” where interest shifted from the church and state, to focus on the individual, and away from matters of religious significance (2). The ideas of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and orators were always going to conflict with the Church, even though their ideas became of increasing interest to theologians. Aristotle had transformed the thought of Thomas Aquinas, but reopening discussion on Aristotle was often dangerously close to heresy precisely because of his influence, as many of Aquinas’ ideas had become a part of Church doctrine. Studying Aristotle became fashionable again in the Renaissance. Cicero was widely admired, a fact which was troubling to the Church. George T. Buckley says, “from the beginning Christians had regarded [*On the Nature of the Gods*] *De natura deorum* and [*Concerning Divination*] *De divinatione* with suspicion,” because in these works Cicero “treated religious mysteries in a rationalistic way, just as if

they were to be tested by reason and not accepted in pure faith, ... he was speaking of the pagan gods, but at no time were the Christians so blind as not to recognise that an argument that can disprove the existence of one god can disprove that of another” (11-12). Indeed, the French scholar Étienne Dolet, who was imprisoned and executed by the Church on suspicion of atheism in 1546, was a great admirer of Cicero, and was thereafter “cited only as an example of what Ciceronianism carried to its extreme limit would produce” (Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance* 15). The works of Lucretius (available since 1473) and Diogenes were also studied during the Renaissance.

George T. Buckley explains that during the Renaissance “the works of Machiavelli were the greatest single source of atheism in Western Europe” (31). The name of Niccolò Machiavelli was so tarnished that his name has become a synonym for duplicity, cunning and treachery. “Machiavellian” characters, who were villainous and amoral, populated Renaissance drama (White *Machiavelli: A Man Misunderstood* 268). Machiavelli’s political tract *The Prince* advised the “prince,” a potential ruler, to “appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless and devout.... But his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how” (*Prince* 57). The idea that one could use religion for political purposes alone was, at the time, outrageous, though Michael White says in *Machiavelli: A Man Misunderstood* that “it would be a mistake to believe that Machiavelli was actively, publicly, anti-Christian” (210), although he notes that Machiavelli was “privately” not a believer (211).

### **Reformation: Doctrinal Disputes**

The Reformation is important in the history of atheism because it laid the foundation for the more rigorous questioning of religion during the Enlightenment. Church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch observes that in the “renewed Protestant mysticism and personal religion,” the “sincere and troubled belief” of the children of the Reformation “found its way into the Enlightenment,” and that the Reformation is a “prehistory” of the Enlightenment (698). The Reformation necessarily engendered growing toleration for a diversity of beliefs, a precursor to toleration doctrines during the Enlightenment, something which contributed to secularisation as it weakened the authority of the Catholic Church, and, indeed, all churches or confessional sects.

A principal factor in the growth of anti-clericalism and secularisation from the late Middle Ages onwards was the increase of doctrinal disputes and the development of new sects of Christianity. The Reformation was the culmination of a number of forces, political, religious and ideological. A major factor in the rapid dissemination of ideas was the advent of the printing press, which Martin Luther exploited skilfully. Without the printing press, Luther's *The Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 would not have had the power and influence that it gained so rapidly. Luther had been profoundly influenced by the humanism and anti-clericalism that had grown out of the Renaissance. *The Ninety-Five Theses* was primarily written to criticise the Church's practice of allowing sinners to purchase indulgences, making penance for sin a commercial transaction rather than an act of contrition, and Luther thought that it fostered debauchery and encouraged sin. It was viciously anti-clerical, and based doctrinal authority in the Bible instead of the Church, a theory called *sola scriptura* (meaning "by scripture alone," the belief that the Bible alone could be the foundation of true Christian faith). The work struck a chord in Europe, gaining Luther many followers. Meanwhile, in England, the culmination of King Henry VIII's "great matter," his campaign to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn, provoked a crisis when it was blocked by the Pope. Despite having been a fierce defender of the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy against the Reformation, Henry rejected Papal authority and declared royal supremacy over the Church in 1532. The Church of England was separated from Roman Catholicism in 1534, with Henry as its supreme head under God. The crown demanded a higher loyalty than religion (Porter 47, 105). The Council of Trent (1545-63) was convened principally as a response to Reformation and sought to redefine Catholic doctrine, particularly that doctrine which was disputed. The Catholic Church itself wrought the most radical changes on Catholicism in this period.

In such dangerous times, the matter of religion defined one's identity and destiny, not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the worldly and political sense, and therefore, for some, faith became a matter of convenience. There were still plenty of martyrs willing to die for their cause, but many people came to shift their religious alliance out of prudence, rather than faith. Protestants celebrated unequivocally Protestant monarch Elizabeth I's ascension and counted their Reformation a success, but, according to Christopher Haigh in his article "Success and Failure in the English Reformation," the feeling of optimism soon became ambivalence as "a generation

later ... the shine had gone off reformation” (29). William Perkins feverishly denounced this atmosphere, complaining that “the world now abounds with atheists, epicures, libertines, worldlings, neuters that are of no religion” (22).

The Reformation interrupted loyalties to religion, engendered religious debate, and redefined the relationship between the state and religion. Although atheism was still punished and deplored, this era nonetheless set the stage for the discussion and proliferation of what might be called “atheist ideas.” Most importantly, the Peace of Westphalia (1648), intended to put an end to the wars of religion that had been fought for over a century (notably the Thirty- and Eighty-Years’ Wars) established the right of citizens to practice religions without persecution which were not established by the state (even if they had only Calvinism, Lutheranism and Catholicism to choose from). While this seems like a small freedom now, it contributed to the rise of secularisation, often closely associated with the spread of atheism, as it lessened the power of the state by privatising religion. Yet atheists were still prosecuted, even when religious toleration was established.

### **Negotiating Faith and Reason: The Enlightenment and Beyond**

Thus, by the end of the Renaissance, a rift was developing between religious and secular systems of thought. The two did not have to be at odds, but, as the theory of double truth demonstrates, many thinkers felt it necessary that the logical faculty of reason make concessions to faith. During the Enlightenment, some came to see faith and reason as mutually exclusive. It has proved an enduring dichotomy and has determined the history of atheism since the Enlightenment. Therefore, it is necessary to map the development of the opposition between faith and reason throughout the Enlightenment and to the present day. This will enable a fuller consideration while also continuing to map the historical context of the history and contemporary meanings of atheism.

The Age of Enlightenment was a catalyst for the public emergence of atheism, and yet there are several narratives about atheism in the Enlightenment that are, when investigated more closely, little more than myth, namely, that atheistic ideas were dominant and widespread among Enlightenment philosophers, and that these ideas originated in the Enlightenment. The scepticism, anti-clericalism, and atheistic ideas which, in the minds of many, characterises the Enlightenment, developed out of a complicated and non-teleological history of scepticism and

atheism in Europe, heavily influenced by ancient Greek and Roman thought. Atheism in the Enlightenment was neither as widespread nor as popular a notion as modern accounts of the history of atheism make out. However, there were a number of mostly radical thinkers with atheist sympathies who were influential in their own time, and have had a continuing influence on the meaning of atheism. They made an indelible impression on Sade, who recycles many of their arguments in his own work.

The ideas of radical Enlightenment philosophers were considered by far the most dangerous, and, as discussed in the Introduction, had to be disseminated through clandestine manuscripts. Tellingly, Israel argues that *libertinisme érudit* or erudite libertines played a “notable role in preparing the ground for the rise of [the] Radical Enlightenment” (*Radical Enlightenment* 15) by “creating a sophisticated audience potentially receptive to its message” (15). Thinkers including Diderot, la Mettrie and Holbach supported materialist atheism, and advanced the view that faith and reason were incompatible. Notably, Diderot energetically “denounced the mixing of theology with philosophy as the worst kind of syncretism, a perfidious threat to intellectual freedom, rationality and society” (820).

### **Mainstream Enlightenment and Atheism**

In comparison to previous centuries, atheism rapidly grew in influence during the Enlightenment; yet, concurrent with this, was a growing panic over atheism, especially in the late seventeenth century. This panic was also a moral panic, since the greatest concern of most mainstream thinkers was that, if religion was decayed, the basis of moral law would likewise dissolve. This is an argument which retains power even in today’s secularised world. Israel explains in *Enlightenment Contested* that “the entire moderate mainstream concurred that ‘atheism’ should not be tolerated in a Christian society” because they held that an atheist “has no awareness of right or wrong, and no respect for justice” (165). In his doctrine of toleration, John Locke excluded atheists, which to him meant those who “deny divine providence” (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 140). His grounds for excluding atheists were that the denial of God also constituted a denial of morality and community. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration* he claims: “Promises, Covenants and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all” (53). Israel says that mainstream

toleration theories in the Enlightenment supported “a judicial and theological framework which could just as readily be used to curtail, as advance, freedom of thought and the moral autonomy of the individual” (146). Toleration doctrines at the time not only excluded atheism but other religions also; these doctrines were almost without exception intra-Christian doctrines of toleration. Yet it is important to note, as Israel does, that atheism in that time referred specifically to a “rejection of belief in a personal God who created the world, ordained morality, and rewards and punishes in the hereafter” rather than a total rejection of any notion of God (*Enlightenment Contested* 164). This definition of “atheist” tarnished many a reputation, as those who were not by modern standards atheist were accused of holding atheistic sentiments; the prime example is Spinoza. Of the spread of atheism, “everyone agreed the prime cause was philosophy” (*Enlightenment Contested* 165).

### **The Lens-Grinder**

Given that the moderate Enlightenment was suspicious of atheism, it is no surprise that atheists were generally reviled. No philosopher was more reviled than Spinoza, and it is perhaps for this reason that Sade so admired him, borrowing, at times, from Spinoza’s arguments, and even having his libertines read Spinoza as a part of their education. By many accounts a quiet, hermit-like, and affable man, Spinoza caused a sensation in Enlightenment Europe. Spinoza propounded a theory of natural religion, arguing in *Ethics* (in Latin: *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*) that God’s existence is proven by reason. Part one, proposition eleven reads: “God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists” (10). Spinoza says, “[i]f this be denied, conceive, if possible, that God does not exist ... then his essence does not involve existence” (10). Spinoza clarifies this point: “It pertains to the nature of substance to exist” (6; part 1, prop. 7) which, he reasons, is because substance “is the cause of itself, that is to say ... its essence necessarily involves existence” (6). As Spinoza observes, existence cannot be disproved, and so he concludes that “God necessarily exists” (10; part 1, prop. 11). Spinoza’s proofs for God also show that he was vehemently against Cartesian mind/body dualism, because Spinoza believed that there was only one substance, which was God: “Besides God no substance can be nor can be conceived” (13; part 1, prop. 14).

Spinoza was thought to be a materialist for suggesting that God is everything that exists, which is all one substance, although this interpretation only takes into account a very small part of Spinoza's theories. According to Spinoza, God has many attributes, not all of which are apparent and graspable, and, according to translators of *Ethics*, White and Stirling, Spinoza believed that only "two of these attributes, thought and extension, are the whole of existence as we perceive it" (Translator's Preface, *Ethics* xiii). The world is in God, not the other way around:

Besides God, there is no substance, nor can any be conceived (by proposition 14), that is to say ... nothing which is in itself and is conceived through itself. But modes ... can neither be nor be conceived without substance; therefore in the divine nature only they can be, and through it alone can they be conceived. But besides substances and modes nothing can be conceived. ...

Therefore nothing can be or be conceived without God. (14; part 1, prop. 15)

Even so, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi maintained that it is impossible to see Spinoza's God as anything but materialist, since he is just substance, and Spinoza did not ascribe to God a consciousness or will. His god is "non-personal, a God *who is not*" and "a nonentity" (Jacobi 520). For Jacobi, this kind of materialism was tantamount to atheism, a charge which Spinoza would attract from many sources throughout his life and after his death (520). Other interpretations of Spinoza hold that he is a pantheist, since he asserted that God was equivalent to all substance and therefore all of existence. In any case, given Spinoza's view that God is greater than the mere portion of attributes that make up existence as it is commonly perceived, it would be more accurate to call him a panentheist (one who believes that the universe is a part of God). The kind of God one spoke of was of consummate importance, and, because Spinoza's ideas were as unorthodox to Judaism as they were to Christianity, he was excommunicated from the Jewish community; a *chērem*, the highest form of exclusion in Judaism, was placed upon him (White and Stirling xxi). It seems clear, then, that it is not only the existence of God which must be affirmed to avoid the charge of atheism, but also the existence of God defined in a particular way.

### **The "War" between Faith and Reason: Theories of Nature and Materialism**

However, much of the movement against religion in the Enlightenment was fuelled by a dialectical debate concerning what were seen as opposing forces, those of



reason and rationality, and those of revelation and faith. Throrer writes of the Enlightenment:

If the seventeenth century was the century when the battle between scientific truth and other kinds of truth was fought out, to the detriment of all but scientific truth, the eighteenth is the century when the outcome of that battle is felt in all spheres of life; when the attempt is made to bring not only outward but all other forms of nature, and above all human nature, under the sovereignty of reason and of the scientific model (97).

This brash description is perhaps applicable to the radical Enlightenment and less to the moderate mainstream. According to Israel, it was the failure of “all efforts to forge a new general synthesis of theology, philosophy, politics and science” during the Enlightenment which “destabilised religious belief and values” and caused a “wholly unprecedented crisis of faith driving the secularisation of the modern West” (*Enlightenment Contested* 65).

Theories about how the natural world operated flourished in the Enlightenment, encouraged by the proliferation of scientific theories about the natural world. Many such views were considered dangerously materialist and unambiguously atheist. These theories greatly influenced Sade, who expounds a number of theories of nature in his works, and even describes such theories as the basis of his own atheism. Perhaps the biggest threat to the Church, the moderate mainstream and indeed all religious world views was an increasing interest in materialism, especially materialism which informed atheistic theories of the natural world. The revival of Greek atomism, which the Church had always viewed with suspicion, was an early incarnation of a system of nature, and, despite attempts to revise the theory so that it supported Christian theology, it again brought its adherents charges of atheism. Pierre Gassendi was perhaps the first notable proponent of Epicurean atomism, which he attempted to reconcile with Christianity by claiming God as the original author of the universe and creator of matter and insisting upon the existence of an eternal and immaterial soul (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* 51, 353). However, Thomas Hobbes was much more influential on the subjects of atomism and materialism that came into vogue in the later Enlightenment, although he did not draw from Epicurus or the writing of Lucretius explicitly. He was conflated with the atomists because of his materialist philosophy. Hobbes’ materialist philosophy implied that if there was room for a God in Hobbes’

theories, it was a material, not an immaterial, God (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 229-30).

Later on, figures such as Holbach, La Mettrie and Diderot took materialism to the next level, explicitly denying the existence of any type of God, even a limited one. To these thinkers at least, it was imperative that the full force of reason be brought to bear on what they considered to be the irrational, superstitious, and outdated ideas of religion and faith. Holbach caused a great deal of controversy with the (initially anonymous) publication of his book, *The System of Nature*, in 1770. Buckley says of the book: “many, if not all, of its theses had been formulated before, principally by Diderot, but never had they been so radically or defiantly stated and so rigorously argued” (252).

The disastrous Lisbon earthquake of 1755 had a profound impact on the Enlightenment *philosophes*, and serves to make plain the shifting tensions between society and religion and philosophy and religion. Pre-modern Christian societies often attributed supernatural or divine causes, and therefore human sin, to natural disasters. It was believed that, drawing from the biblical story of the great flood, human sins attracted divine retribution. After the Lisbon earthquake the intelligentsia began to search for natural rather than supernatural and moral causes for the disaster, which, according to Robin May Schott, “cut the cord that previously had linked natural and moral evils” (222-3). Kant was deeply affected by the disaster, about which he wrote several texts in which he attempted to find a natural, geological cause for the event, rather than attributing to it a supernatural cause such as divine intervention. The earthquake should not be seen as a catalyst for this change, but it serves as an indicator of how attitudes changed in the Enlightenment. The Marquis de Pombal’s expulsion of the Jesuits from Portugal in 1759 was (aside from Pombal’s well-known dislike of the Jesuits) primarily because of the Jesuit opposition to reconstruction. The Jesuits preached that the disaster could only be attributed to “the vengeful agency of God” and that therefore the “heretical reconstruction of a city” should “be immediately abandoned in favour of the mass repentance of the survivors” (Hamblyn 111). Such an argument seems to imply that God is not beneficent, and so runs into its own theological problems, quite apart from the fact that such arguments had fallen out of favour. In her book *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Neiman explains that the Lisbon earthquake had deep consequences for conceptions of morality in the Enlightenment: “natural evils no longer have any

relation to moral evils; hence they no longer have any meaning at all” (250), in a broader theological sense, secular conceptions of natural evil denied God’s providential intervention in history, which had long been taken for granted.

### **Natural Religion**

With the threat that so many new and materialistic theories of nature presented to Christianity, some thinkers attempted to reconcile theories of nature to theology by promoting so-called “natural theology.” There are several factors which help to account for the growth and popularity of natural theology; a contributing factor was the widespread anti-clericalism of the time, which had been growing since the Reformation. This was coupled with a deep suspicion of religious dogma, and a new enthusiasm for scientific methods, which themselves engendered a suspicion of revealed theology. Natural theology relies upon what can be known about the divine through reason and empirical observation of natural phenomena.

Isaac Newton was of enormous significance to natural theology because his theories of the natural, physical universe were lauded by both religious and secular thinkers, even though Newton was deeply religious. His position is declared succinctly in his book *Opticks*, when he says: “all material things seem to have been composed of the hard and solid particles above-mention’d, variously associated in the first Creation by the counsel of an intelligent agent [sic]” (378). Newton believed that the laws of physics could only have been created by an “intelligent agent,” but that this Creator must have operated along rational lines, an opinion still championed by contemporary adherents to the theory of intelligent design. Michael J. Buckley says that Newton believed that “the structure of movements in the universe and the system of relationships that make up a body demand intelligence and power in the ultimate force” (142). On the one hand, Newton’s position informed moderate Enlightenment philosophers’ views on the natural world, and many, notably Voltaire and Samuel Clarke, saw it as the answer to the problem of reconciling faith and reason (Buckley 129). On the other, Newton’s theism, and indeed, his rejection of an interventionist God, seemed heretical and unorthodox, and so his system of nature that seemed to support natural theology could equally be regarded as hindering the side of religion against unbelief. Given that Newton’s theories contributed to and encouraged a materialistic view of nature, and even informed the theories of

notorious atheist Holbach (Buckley 286-9) whom Sade so wished to emulate, he was just as important to the materialists as he was to the deists.

Very early on in the development of natural theology as a position, Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne criticised natural theology, since it attempted to limit God's power, by definition limitless, by confining it within the bounds of the "finite, fallible human intellect" (Buckley, 74). Later on, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), modelled on Cicero's *Of the Nature of the Gods*, examines the foundations of natural theology, defended by the character Cleanthes. However, the character Philo, believed to most closely represent Hume's own views, superficially affirms the existence of a God but takes a position reminiscent of Montaigne's when he argues that human reason is insufficient to know or make assumptions about God. Hume, although he often professed to support mainstream views on religion, did a great deal to discredit revelation and miracles, and, according to Jonathan Israel, advanced "distinctly further than Voltaire towards eradicating supernatural agency, and the transcendental" (53). Hume aims to show that miracles cannot be the foundation for a religion, and if one wishes to found religion on reason one cannot at the same time preserve a belief on miracles. He reasons that "no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle" since experience assures one of the laws of nature, and testimony of a transgression of those natural laws from another human being, such as the testimonies one finds in scripture, would be contradicted by other testimonies and experiences as to the preservation of natural law (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748] 675). Hume contends that religion can only be founded on faith, not reason (677).

It is, therefore, inaccurate to suppose that he is an atheist, despite his often Ciceronian irony in making declarations of faith, since Hume dedicated a significant part of his career to attempting to eradicate the pretensions of philosophy. He "sought to restrict the range of philosophy's applicability in the search for truth and, still more, its practical applicability" (Israel 54). It follows that Hume's views would indeed fit with those of his character Philo, applying Hume's argument for the reduction of the scope of philosophy to philosophy's search for evidence of the divine in nature. What becomes clear from a look at the arguments of these thinkers is that, even if some philosophers retained belief in God, it was a God greatly reduced in power compared with the conceptions of thinkers only a few generations before them.

Like Montaigne, Immanuel Kant objected to natural theology because it used human reason to arrive at knowledge of God, and he felt that human intellect was too limited to be able to make a lucid argument for God since reason must be used only to speculate about “objects of possible experience” (25). Kant says, famously, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, that he had to “suspend knowledge in order to make room for belief” (25). In the volume Kant refutes three arguments for the existence of God: the ontological, cosmological and physico-theological. His main objection to the ontological argument is that existence cannot be a predicate, and therefore, a perfect being can be conceptualised without having existence as one of its necessary predicates. Since the other two arguments also take existence to be a predicate, they are likewise debunked by this claim. Kant takes issue with the idea (shared by Newton) that God is a necessary being, as an originator or a first cause. In *Critique of Pure Reason* he says:

We must show that the regress in the series of causes (in the world of sense) cannot conclude with an empirically unconditioned condition, and that the cosmological argument from the contingency of the cosmical state – a contingency alleged to arise from change – does not justify us in accepting a first cause, that is, a prime originator of the cosmical series. (4).

Despite Kant’s objections to natural theology, he himself tried to reconcile rationality and religion. Kant’s rational religion is best expressed in his ethics, which are often regarded as secular. When considered on its own, Kant’s famous categorical imperative makes no mention of God or religion, and seems to regard them as superfluous to morality. Nevertheless, Kant believed that any earnest attempt to lead a moral life, even according to the categorical imperative, rationally presupposes faith, not necessarily in the dogmatic sense, but belief in God and revelation, a position that he defends in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

### **Revolution and Atheism**

The fall of the *Ancien Régime* was co-implicated in the fall in the Catholic Church’s authority and power, something which had a profound effect on Sade and which he enthusiastically (though satirically) promoted in his own writing. The Church and the monarchy were difficult to separate in pre-Revolutionary France, although the monarchy had supremacy over the Church, and could even exercise right of veto

over ascendant candidates for the papacy (Burleigh 29). As Michael Burleigh points out in *Earthly Powers*, the French kings had been styled “the most Christian” since the thirteenth-century reign of St Louis, and France was known as “the eldest daughter of the Church” (23). Clergy, Burleigh notes, had governmental functions along with spiritual ones, often “literally interpreting the high French officialdom into the low French patois spoken by their parishioners” (24). The Church lent the monarchy divine right and authority, while the monarchy privileged the interests of the Church and provided it with governmental support. Injure one, and the other suffers also. This co-dependency is one reason why the atheistic and radical philosophers of the Enlightenment were (and still are) seen as revolutionaries in spirit, if not in action. Sade was revolutionary in spirit and, to some degree, in action, although his aristocratic lineage and criminal records caused him to be persecuted by the revolutionaries just as he had been by the *Ancien Régime*.

Israel clarifies in that it was the “Radical Enlightenment – and not the Enlightenment as such” – which was the “only important direct cause of the French Revolution understood as a total transformation of the political, legal, cultural, and educational framework of French life, administration and society” (*Radical Enlightenment* 16). This is because, he argues, “political and social reformism of a kind denying the basic legitimacy of *Ancien Régime* monarchism and institutions was, in principle, bound to be more logically anchored in radical metaphysics denying all teleological and divine providence than in moderate mainstream thought,” which generally championed reason but also wanted to preserve the legitimacy of religious forms of knowledge (20). He also says that, because the monarchy was founded on the idea that it was divinely ordained and sanctioned, anyone, “democratic republican or not, rejecting divine providence,” as so many of the radical Enlightenment philosophers did, “was implicitly a forward thinking revolutionary” (22). However, this does not mean that Enlightenment philosophers wished to see Revolution, and the terror which went along with it, in action.

### **From Superstition to Neurosis: Binarism in Post-Enlightenment Thought**

Although suspicion of atheists and their perceived lack of ethics persisted after the Enlightenment, the rift between faith and reason widened in post-Enlightenment thought. Furthermore, by the early twentieth century, some questioned the continuing relevance of religion to modern life. The once unquestioned link between religion

and ethics was now weakened to the point where even a religious thinker like Kierkegaard surmised that the spheres of faith and ethics were quite distinct. Society was becoming increasingly secular. The faith/reason binary was a legacy of Enlightenment thought, and so demonstrates the applicability (and eerily prophetic nature) of many of the arguments Sade elaborates in his libertine novels. It is important to examine the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries not only because they bear the legacy of Enlightenment rethinking of religious categories, but because this period sets the stage for postmodernist rethinking of the binaries of faith and reason, and sacred and secular.

Nineteenth-century thinkers inherited the dialectical oppositions of the Enlightenment, but were no longer convinced that reason necessarily superseded faith in all matters. According to Thrower, there was a “growing revulsion from the application of materialistic and mechanical approaches to human life” (118). A good example of this revulsion is symbolised by the Romantic movement which had begun to develop in the late eighteenth century, and which, according to Thrower, sought to “redress the balance inherited from the Enlightenment” (118). Atheists were less hesitant by this time to proclaim openly their atheism, although the word still held negative connotations. For example, Percy Shelley published his treatise *The Necessity of Atheism* in 1811, and was expelled from Oxford for refusing to deny authorship. The development of atheism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is inextricable from the rise of secularism, and became increasingly preoccupied with promoting human rights and liberty (although adherents of religion have also done much to promote human rights and liberty).

Religion began to be regarded as an obstacle to reasoned and rational ethics, and as an obstacle to the continued development of a free society. George Holyoake was convicted for blasphemy in 1842, the last person to be convicted of that crime in England (Michael J. Buckley 11). In his journal the *Reasoner*, Holyoake developed an idea of “secularism” in response to what he felt was unjust persecution of atheists (he counted himself as one of them) by the “biblists;” he developed the concept in more detail in his book *English Secularism* (1896). Holyoake is careful to distinguish the secular from secularism: “the secular is a mode of instruction; secularism is a code of conduct” (1). Holyoake identifies secularism with free thought, specifically “self-thought ... applied to the criticism of theology, with a view to clear the way for life according to reason” (*English Secularism* 3). He defines it thus: “ethical motives

of conduct apart from Christianity are vindicated for the guidance of those who are indifferent about theology, or who reject it altogether” (*English Secularism* 3). Secularism is for Holyoake an ethical code of conduct for the non-religious. Buckley notes that Holyoake’s motivation in coining the term was to distance himself from the connotations of the title “atheist,” which was then felt to denote someone devoid of any kind of morality (10).

Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard is a central figure in this narrative of the development of a secular society as he redefined the binaristic categories of faith and reason by refusing to include faith within the bounds of reason at all. Kierkegaard’s view of ethics, and his reading of the Abraham and Isaac parable, was enormously influential in his day and has become important to postmodernist ethical theories, including those of Derrida. Kierkegaard’s refusal to subjugate reason to faith was not his way of rejecting or debunking faith, to prove it false or superstitious, but rather demonstrates that, by its very definition, faith supersedes reason. The principle that faith trumps reason had long been established, but it rested upon the idea that faith could not be confined by reason. Kierkegaard believed that faith superseded reason because faith is, by its nature, irrational. In order to believe, the Christian must bridge the chasm between what reason directs, and what faith demands. To illustrate his point, Kierkegaard famously analyses the ethical dimension in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is called upon by God to sacrifice his longed for son Isaac<sup>16</sup> upon Mount Moriah. Being a man of faith, Abraham obeys God unquestioningly. At the last minute, an angel of God stays his hand: “‘Do not raise your hand against the boy,’ the angel said. ‘Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your own beloved son’” (Genesis 22:12). In return for his piety, Abraham is given a blessing: “descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Genesis 22:17). Kierkegaard concluded that Abraham’s actions were distinctly unethical in almost every way: not only in his intent to murder his son, but also in his deception of his son and implicit betrayal not only of Isaac but of Sarah, his wife.

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac was not Abraham’s only son, but was a miracle child because he was born to Abraham’s wife Sarah long after her child-bearing years had passed. Isaac was the only son Sarah bore him, though after her death Abraham went on to have many sons with his wife Keturah. (Genesis 25:1-2).



Abraham's ethical transgressions are not absolved by the fact that he obeyed divine command, and that he did not go through with the sacrifice, for that would indicate that God somehow endorses unethical actions. Rather, divine command supersedes the ethical altogether, and so, Kierkegaard argues, must faith. Therefore the rational person must bypass the dictates of a rational ethics in order to obey God. Kierkegaard's conclusions seem to strike a death blow to the moderate Enlightenment project of constructing a rational basis for theism. Interestingly, Kierkegaard rejected the Church because he believed that the union between the Danish National Church and the government (an arrangement which meant that all citizens were members of the Church) caused corruption at all levels of the government and Church, perverting the ideals of Christianity. To Kierkegaard, to be a "true" believer was to insist on the separation between Church and state.

Nietzsche along with Kierkegaard, defined the tormented relationship between faith and unbelief in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche in many ways set the tone for early twentieth century atheism and at once became the face of it, when he penned the phrase "God is dead" in his 1882 book, *The Gay Science*. Though he was indeed a self-proclaimed atheist, and even held the view that religion was malign to modern man, his claim does not refer only to a "death of God," in the sense of a loss of faith, or even to a death of religion. The phrase is more accurately interpreted to mean that God is no longer able to stand as guarantor for truth or meaning. This has paradigm-shifting implications for theorising ethics, something which will be explained in Chapter Six. The "death of God" has come to be seen as the moment of departure for modern atheism. John D. Caputo says that "Nietzsche more than anyone else is responsible for the atheistic side of postmodernist thought" ("Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition" 270). Michael J. Buckley says: "Nietzsche himself explains: God has become incredible. What was once the content and subject of unhesitant conviction and religious confession has become unwarranted" (30). Nietzsche's madman in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Also sprach Zarathustra)* realises this, though his prophecy to the townspeople is premature: "I am not the mouth for these ears" (15).

Anthropological and psychological studies of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century regarded it as a human phenomenon which should be subject to scientific enquiry. They often advanced the view that religion was a relic of a superstitious past, something that humanity should outgrow. Studies were often

conducted into what were at the time judged primitive cultures, since researchers felt that they observing these cultures was somehow akin to looking into the childhood of civilisation, and therefore the beginnings of religious belief. It was common to see the Abrahamic religions, in a kind of pseudo-Hegelian move, as the most evolved on a scale of religions. For example, Emile Durkheim's important 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (*Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*) draws conclusions about the basic structures of religion and its place in society from a study of so-called primitive or "elementary" societies: Durkheim (problematically) focuses on the social and religious lives of groups of Indigenous Australians and Native Americans. This view went hand-in-hand with missionary activity and colonial conquest. The introduction of Christianity to those societies felt to be at an earlier stage of development was felt to be unifying, moralising and civilising. From these newer studies emanated the idea that religion accounted for the origins and structures of all societies, and that society would eventually evolve beyond the need for it. In his 1927 work *The Future of an Illusion* (in German: *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*), Freud expresses the view that religion is "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity," and that "it is to be supposed that a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development" (39).

Georges Bataille, although he draws on the work of sociologists such as Durkheim, Marcel Mauss<sup>17</sup> and Henri Hubert,<sup>18</sup> and also from the philosophy of Nietzsche, rejects a binaristic approach to religion and atheism, primarily because he does not believe it possible to exorcise religion from society. Bataille is of unique interest to this thesis because his theories of the erotic, transgression and the sacred are formed in large part through his readings of Sade. To Bataille, a secular society can still retain some sense of religion in the form of the sacred. For these reasons he is sometimes considered a proto-postmodernist thinker. He does not agree with the

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<sup>17</sup> Mauss' 1925 work *The Gift* deeply influenced and inspired Bataille's work on potlatch in *The Accursed Share* (*La part maudite*) (1946-9).

<sup>18</sup> Hubert collaborated with Mauss on the 1899 book *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, which laid out an incisive theory of sacrifice, and examined and explained the sacred nature of the sacrificial victim, a notion central to the way that Bataille redefines and rethinks the sacred and sacrifice.

religious idea that the sacred realm encompasses solely the pure and divine. Bataille rethinks the traditional notion of the sacred, seeing it as a transgressive force which the everyday world must expel by enforcing taboos against transgression, such as violence, the erotic, and death. Bataille's theories rethink the Christian notion of the sacred and the profane. He had an intimate relationship with Catholicism and, although he had lost his faith early on, he never truly escaped religion. Bataille believed that the sacred, though he redefined the term, was at the heart of both society and religion, and, as such, could not be abandoned. This is his main problem with modernity's wholesale rejection of religion.

However, Bataille was not interested either in reviving a traditional sense of the spiritual, or contriving some type of "new-age" spiritualism. Bataille was interested in returning to the sacred its transgressive nature and power. Whereas Christian theology has attempted to maintain a sacred which comprises only things deemed pure or divine, Bataille adopts a view of the sacred which speaks to the inner, spiritual life of humans, and the transgressive force of the erotic and the violent, both of which acknowledge the stark inevitability and power of death. Christianity has reduced the sacred to a "discontinuous and personal God" – and at the same time it has tried to avoid the death by inventing "a discontinuity unassailable by death: that is, the immortality of discontinuous beings" (119). Christianity has, in Bataille's view, reduced "religion to its benign aspect" by making anything which was once regarded as sacred but destructive, impure, or even evil, profane. Bataille, following Nietzsche, confronts death, since he believes death is capable of transgressing the boundaries of everyday life and accessing the sacred, which he regards as a destructive and consuming force. Bataille's theories demonstrate a shift in ways of thinking about religion because Bataille believes that the religious structures Western experiences of the erotic, death, and the divine.

### **Contemporary Atheism and Postmodernism**

Popular atheism is today more concerned than ever with the opposition between faith and reason. The debates which were traditionally confined to the academy have become commonplace, and have not changed much from the kinds of debates which went on during the Enlightenment. The works of Richard Dawkins, whose 2006 book *The God Delusion* was a bestseller, and Christopher Hitchens, whose 2007 book, *God is Not Great*, garnered him international prominence relatively late in his

career are exemplary of the increasing penetration of such arguments into popular culture. Even so, this is but one facet of the turn to religion in philosophy and society in the West. In contemporary philosophy there has been less concern with the binaries of faith and reason than with showing them to be unsustainable constructions, and attempting to find new ways of negotiating meaning in an increasingly secular world. As will be demonstrated over the next two chapters, the nature of Sadean transgression already complicates a simplistic reading of Sade's atheism as utterly excluding any possibility of a relationship with the religious and with God, and any reading of his ethics as purely secular. Postmodernist understandings of atheism and religion demonstrate how it is possible to think past this oppositional binary and how it might be possible to rethink terms like "atheism," "religion," and "faith."

While postmodernist philosophy might seem to reject revealed religion and the arguments of classical theism, such an interpretation would have to ignore both the increasing prominence of the religious in postmodernist thought, and the postmodernist rejection of dualistic thinking. One reason why postmodernist philosophy is sometimes considered to be post-religious or even anti-religious is its incredulity towards absolutisms and its resistance to totalising systems of thought, which tends to exclude from consideration the principles of many organised religions. However, the foundations of modern secularism, namely rationalism and secular humanism, can be equally problematic. They also appeal to absolute notions of truth, and to totalising principles such as the human capacity for reasoning, or a universal and inherent system of human rights based on the idea of a universal human experience.

The persistence of religion in modern life invalidates the claim that religion is somehow outdated or has gone out of style with the arrival of rationalism and the security of scientific knowledge, leaving behind a thoroughly disenchanted world where religion is mere superstition and can exert only a negative or even lethal influence on society. Replacing the sacred with scientific rationalism is only able to provide yet another refutation of the credibility of some religious beliefs and does not provide epistemological certainty. Given the shifting focus of philosophy, according to Alain Badiou in his book *Infinite Thought*, from "classical questions of truth" to the "question of meaning," philosophy is now less concerned with whether religious truth claims are credible than with the pressing question of why the religious endures

and even flourishes in a supposedly secular world (47). Postmodernism rejects binaristic thinking, because it tends to reduce a wide range of meanings, concepts and systems of thought to overly simplistic oppositions.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida advances the view that the “specter of Marx,” “haunts” capitalist society, which mistakenly believes itself to be the triumphant endpoint of social and political evolution, a view advanced by Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*. In a similar way, the religious has been said to “haunt” secular Western society, and can be said to “haunt” Sade and his libertines, who believe that they have intellectually outgrown religion. Despite the optimistic views of atheists in the early twentieth century, religion is not disappearing and indeed, has become more prominent in recent philosophical thought. This development has been interpreted variously as either a “turn to religion” or the “return of religion” in philosophy. However, the perception that religion ever really “went away,” that it needed to return, or that there was even something to return to, is a view that not only Hent de Vries, but Derrida, Levinas, and Caputo have all criticised. The “turn to religion” refers to the return of religion in contemporary philosophy, which, according to Vries, anticipates and responds to a turn to religion in contemporary culture. Derrida comments on this phenomenon:

Why is this phenomenon, so hastily called “the return of religions,” so difficult to think? Why is it so surprising? Why does it particularly astonish those who believed naively that an alternative opposed religion, on the one side, and on the other, Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism ... as though the one could not but put an end to the other? (“Faith and Knowledge” 45)

In the first place, religion is such an unstable concept that it cannot be given a singular or coherent definition. To provide such a definition is to constrict some of the diverse, disparate, culturally and historically determined experiences of religion, and perhaps, to declare religious some things which are not commonly felt to be religious. The term is dependent on historical context, and not only involved with questions of theology and dogma, but also religious practices. Moreover, the term is so subjective and elusive, that the more it is studied, the more the meaning behind the word itself slips away: “the subject of religion evaporates as it is approached from ever more methodological angles” (Vries 3). Nevertheless, we seem to know when we are in the presence of the religious. The result is that the religious “eludes the

reach of formal argument ... dislodges itself from any context, subtracts itself from any determinable reference” which not only makes it ungraspable but “marked by a certain secret, a mystery” (Vries 6). Therefore it is impossible to determine what “returned” or needed to return, and what could be perceived to have gone away in the first place. This question is something which Jacques Derrida considers at length in the essay “Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” (“Foi et savoir: Les deux sources de la ‘religion’ aux limites de la simple raison”). Since the early Enlightenment many have thought that religion is something which can, and *must be*, eradicated. There also exists the view that the superstitious religious, relic of ancient times, should be shed from society because it hinders progress and rational thought. It may be possible to back up this claim with evidence that societies have grown more secular over time, or that Church and scriptural authority have decreased, that scriptural and revelatory assertions have been debunked, or that there has been a desacralisation of the world and a corresponding surge in atheism. Nevertheless, although these things are all aspects of “the religious,” they are not *constitutive* of it. Hent de Vries says that it is the ephemeral nature of the religious which explains its “uncanny, indeed, haunting, character” (9).

In the light of the so-called “turn to religion” in philosophy, it is more difficult than ever to define atheism, as it becomes increasingly difficult to define religion. The more important and pressing problem which faces philosophy in the context of the “turn to religion” is the question of whether or not it is even possible to think outside theological categories, let alone binary categories. Theorists like Caputo, Vries and Paul Ricoeur have claimed that postmodernist philosophy is “not a particularly friendly environment to atheism” (Caputo 265), pointing to, among other things, the destabilisation of apparently secure modernist dichotomies between the atheistic and theistic, faith and reason, and theology and philosophy. The more radical thinkers of the Enlightenment established an atheist ideal of a totally secular society which is governed by reason, which developed throughout the increasing scepticism of the nineteenth century and was influential to the modern project of rationalism and efficiency. However, such radical secularisation is not an easily achievable goal; theology informs western history, culture and literature, and theological categories are integral to western language and thought. Abrahamic, or more specifically, *Christian* theology informs western thinking. It is inevitable that a wholesale rejection of the religious in the Western world essentially entails a

rejection of Christianity, the rejection of God is the rejection of a specific, Christian idea of God. Therefore, imagining secularism and atheism entails thinking within a Christian framework; to even reject these theological categories is to think within them. Although it is possible and even necessary to separate the Church and the state and to erase religion from public life, making it private and individual, it is not possible to expunge religion from society.

### **Derrida: Prophet or Radical Atheist?**

Influential interpretations of Derrida's work by thinkers including Vries, Caputo, Simon Critchley and Kevin Hart see it as the prime example of the "turn to religion" in philosophy. Vries says that "as [religion] dies an ever more secure and serial death, it is increasingly certain to come back to life, in its present guise or in another. No contemporary philosopher has provided us with more compelling arguments for this hypothesis than Jacques Derrida" (3). Arthur Bradley says that "Derrida's work has arguably been *the* defining site where theological debates within continental philosophy are played out," and that, while a definite theological turn took place in Derrida's later (post '80s) work, traces of the theological have always been present in his writing (22). Whatever theological or religious significance Derrida's work possesses is usually seen to reside in deconstruction, a form of analysis derived from Derrida's work. Deconstruction is a theory that can be deployed to interrogate and criticise binary oppositions, and it presents to some thinkers an opportunity for religion to be re-thought and potentially salvaged in a secular culture. Others, one of whom is Martin Hägglund, reaffirm Derrida's self-proclaimed atheism, and consequently deny that Derrida's work can be used to preserve religion in the face of an increasingly secular world. Hägglund believes that, far from being able to salvage religious categories, deconstruction can be used to "read religion against itself" ("The Radical Evil of Deconstruction" 134). Whichever view is taken, it is evident that Derrida's work is integral to evaluating the state of atheism in contemporary philosophy.

When speaking of a "return" of religion in "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida takes a political position when he critiques the notion that religion ever went away, since he sees claims to secularity and political neutrality as suspicious, given that they often disguise forms of violence. In the first place, Derrida establishes that, when one speaks of the return of religion, one seems inevitably to refer to the return

of Christianity, and he rejects the idea that it is only possible to speak of such a return in the context of the resurgence of fundamentalism. The West has exported Christianity even in seemingly secular rhetoric and politics: something Derrida calls “globalatinisation” or even just latinisation:

*Religion* circulates in the world, one might say, like an *English word* ... that has been to Rome and taken a detour to the United States. Well beyond its strictly capitalist or politico-military figures, a hyper-imperialist appropriation has been underway now for centuries. It imposes itself in a particularly palpable manner within the conceptual apparatus of international law and of global political rhetoric. Wherever this apparatus dominates, it articulates itself through a discourse on religion. From here on, the word “religion” is calmly (and violently) applied to things which have always been and remain foreign to what this word names and arrests in its history. (67).

Furthermore, this religion is disguised as secularity, as though it is possible for those political concerns to be “pure of religiosity” (63). Derrida attests that “the fundamental concepts that often permit us to isolate or to pretend to isolate the political – restricting ourselves to this particular circumscription – remain religious or in any case theologico-political” (63). He says that “nothing is more problematic” that a dissociation between “the essential traits of the religious” and traits which establish “the concepts of ethics, of the juridical, of the political or of the economic” (63).

Kept apart from every iteration of the religious that becomes implicated in politics, violence and history, is an idea of the religious; the pure, the unscathed, the “safe and sound” (77). This is one source of religion, of the “two sources” Derrida names in his essay “Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” Whatever is “under the name of religion,” (63) religion itself is kept safe and secure from any violence: Derrida says that it is “presence unscathed by presence,” “believing unscathed by belief” (61). The “drive to remain unscathed” is nevertheless compromised by “autoimmunity.” Any manifestation of religion in the world must protect itself, remain unscathed, but at the same time, it must attack whatever allows it to manifest in a public space, a move which necessarily opens it up to the possibility of violence and other threats to purity. Derrida discusses this in terms of the alliance between religion and technoscience which can be observed, for example, in televangelism, wherein the religion employs the very technoscience it



sees as potentially harmful and dangerous. It is possible, as Hägglund demonstrates, to save the idea of autoimmunity as a kind of general logic of religion. The autoimmunity which allows any community to survive at the cost of compromising its originary purity, but which then causes that community to attack itself in turn, which is indemnification – an attempt to self purify which also threatens survival – is, Derrida says, radical evil. Radical evil “both destroys and institutes the religious” since it makes possible the expression of the religious in the world, but also at the same time betrays, and causes the religious to betray, itself (“Faith and Knowledge” 65).

The other source of religion that Derrida suggests is the “fiduciary:” the promise to tell the truth, to be faithful, an oath sworn before a witness (66). That is, the experience of belief (70). He explains that these two sources, the “unscathed” and the “fiduciary,” are quite distinct; for instance, “it is possible to sanctify ... or to maintain oneself in the presence of the sacrosanct in various ways without bringing into play an act of belief” (70). Derrida remarks that religion is “the response” to the other (64), in as much as belief means to acquiesce to “the testimony of the other – of the utterly other who is inaccessible in its absolute source” (70). It is a responsibility that is “prescribed,” that is, given by the other, since to be responsible means to “give ourselves back, and up, to the other” (71). Whence religion: the openness to the other without boundaries, and without any holding back. As will become clear in Chapter Six, this radical openness is the foundation for a radical rereading of ethics and responsibility which makes possible a rereading of Sadean ethics. That it is one of the sources of religion “at the limits of reason alone” (42) is proof of the possibilities such a theory might open up for a productive reading of Sade’s atheism.

Derrida’s exploration of the notion of the death of God retains, at the same time as it destroys, a religious basis for ethics, and shows again the relevance of his ideas to challenging simple binaries. Derrida spends some time in this essay analysing Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. Derrida recounts Kant’s view that religions belong to one of two categories: “cults,” which seek “favours of God” and preach that humans only act to obtain such favours through prayer and desire, and “moral religions,” which dictate that moral actions are necessary for humans to attain to a level at which they may be worthy of God’s assistance (“Faith and Knowledge” 49). Kant sees Christianity as an example of a moral religion, a “reflecting faith” (“Faith and Knowledge” 52). Derrida observes

that to be moral in Christianity, therefore, one must act as though God either did not exist or had abandoned humanity. This would show “who is moral and who is therefore Christian,” as distinct from those who perform moral actions expressly for divine rewards (50). He says, “[i]n enabling us to think (but also suspend in theory) the existence of God ... the concept of ‘postulate’ of practical reason guarantees this radical dissociation and assumes ultimately rational and philosophical responsibility, the consequence here in this world, in experience, of this abandonment” (51).

Derrida therefore states that “Christianity is the death of God” because it “can only answer to its moral calling and morality” if “it endures in this world, in phenomenal history, the death of God, well beyond the figures of the passion” (51). The paradox of Christian faith and ethics which Derrida brings to light here is central to understanding the paradox of faith and ethics in Sade. Questions of faith are, in Derrida, the very foundation of religion.

Caputo believes that the reason that Derrida is so valuable to discussions of religion in philosophy is because there is a kind of faith in Derrida’s work, “religion without religion” and, indeed, that “deconstruction is itself faith (64).” To be precise, deconstruction is a faith in the impossible, making it *structurally* religious. To comprehend Caputo’s logic, it is necessary to obtain an idea of the way he reads Derrida’s concept of *différance*. *Différance* is a kind of “non-word, anterior to words,” a “condition for the formation of words” (8). The similarities between *différance* and the God of negative theology seem obvious here: God is the word which stands in for that being beyond being which negative theologians hold cannot be described through language (although it is their business to keep trying nevertheless). *Différance* is sometimes described in similar phraseology as the thing which cannot be named yet which makes meaning possible, the purposeful misspelling of difference which attempts to name a concept that cannot be articulated. Crucially, *différance* is a grammatological, not a mystical, artefact. God is the name given to a being whose ineffability comes from His transcendence of all human knowledge and perception and, indeed, of all being. *Différance*, on the other hand, is beneath language. Caputo says: “god does not merely exist, *différance* does not quite exist” (10). *Différance* is a kind of critique of the notion (developed by Ferdinand de Saussure) that signifiers are only meaningful because of their distinctiveness in relation to other signifiers. This distinctiveness can also be referred to as difference. Difference dictates that meaning is produced by the difference

between two signs or elements which fully exist and are self-present, but Derrida sees meaning as shifting and arbitrary, and not at any point fully present in a given sign. Therefore, *différance* questions this idea of self-presence and existence precisely because those elements could not exist apart from their difference to one another. Instead of *referring* to the difference between signs, *différance* *produces* the difference between signs. As Derrida puts it, *différance* is “the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the play of differences” (“Differance” 2). One can never arrive at a final, authoritative meaning because language is always open to contestation and reinterpretation. In this sense, meaning is always deferred. At the same time, meaning is deferred through chains of signifiers which derive their meaning from their differences from and relationship to one another. *Différance* makes all language deconstructible, and yet there are some concepts which Derrida posits as nonetheless “undeconstructible,” concepts like justice and hospitality, which, like *différance*, make language and ethics possible but are not entirely manifest in language.

Caputo says: “the religious is the responsibility of the subject to the wholly other, which is precisely what Levinas calls the ethical,” (206) a responsibility which is structurally religious because it puts the other first, is responsible to the other to the exclusion of all ethical duties. In this way it resembles Kierkegaard’s concept of the suspension of ethics in responsibility to God. Deconstruction, which desires the impossible, in other words, the wholly other, is therefore structurally religious. Caputo is especially interested in Derrida’s “messianic without messianism.” Derrida extrapolates, from the concrete messianisms, a structural messianism which is simply the openness to the future, to the “other to come” and to justice to come (*Specters of Marx* 74). Caputo says that “the structural messianic is built into deconstruction as the affirmation of the undeconstructible, which gives deconstruction the formal structure of a certain religion without (concrete, confessional) religion” (“Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition” 276). These distinctions will become more significant in Chapters Six and Eight, when Derrida’s notion of the “other to come,” and its usefulness to reading Sade, will be explored in relation to ideas about hospitality and ethical responsibility.

Caputo is well known for his unique approach to religion, which he calls “weak theology,” that he developed through his study of Derrida’s work. Weak theology rethinks the concept of God as a strong and omnipotent force, a concept

central to the Abrahamic religions, and replaces it with a “weak,” non-interventionist God, who is not omnipotent and in fact has no force whatsoever. Weak theology sees God as an unconditional claim. To clarify that statement, it is useful to look at the series of questions Caputo identifies in Derrida’s work. Caputo asks, “[i]s there something unconditional that is nonetheless without sovereignty? Is there something that makes an unconditional claim without laying claim to unconditional force or power?” (“Without Sovereignty, Without Being” 9). Caputo proposes the idea of a God that cannot even claim form or being, even in the sense of existence, a God that is, he says, “almost nothing” (9). This God lays an “unconditional claim” upon us, but not with the force of a sovereign being, rather as a provocation, a call or promise with “unconditional appeal” (14). Caputo uses Derrida’s analogy of hospitality as an example of the unconditional claim. The appeal to good made by the helpless and powerless stranger calling for hospitality is an unconditional call. The stranger displays the “power of powerlessness” that Caputo believes defines the weak God, who has no force to enforce what it calls for or claims, but who calls nonetheless, appealing unconditionally. Caputo explains that the call is an “affirmative call,” a “call for something unconditional to happen” (17). However, according to Derrida: “If all that arises is what is already possible, and so capable of being anticipated and expected, that is not an event. The event is possible only coming from the impossible” (*Paper Machine* 74). Caputo again uses the analogy of hospitality to illustrate this, “when someone comes who has been invited ... that is not hospitality; hospitality happens only when the uninvited one shows up at your door” (“Without Sovereignty, Without Being” 17). The promise of the God to come is equated with the promise of the coming of the impossible. Caputo says “only the impossible, only the coming God, can save us” (17).

A different response to Derrida’s work is that it is not religious, theological, or “messianic” at all, but rather *radically* atheist. This view exemplifies the extent to which, like religion, atheism desires to be pure – except it wants to be purified of the religious. Martin Hägglund seeks to undermine the “religious” or “theological” interpretations of Derrida by demonstrating a consistent atheism in Derrida’s work. He therefore refutes “the notion that there was an ethical or religious “turn” in Derrida’s thinking” (1). Instead of desiring God, immortality, or some impossible, ineffable, and unanticipated “other,” Hägglund says that in Derrida the nature of time and of survival precludes such a desire. Indeed, according to Hägglund’s

interpretation of Derrida's radical atheism, it is impossible to even desire or love God at all owing to the very nature of love and desire. Hägglund's reasoning rests on a notion of temporality, and the logic of "autoimmunity" which he sees at the core of Derrida's thinking.

Hägglund describes autoimmunity as a name for a kind of deconstructive logic whereby "everything is threatened from within itself" in the same way that survival is threatened from within by annihilation, as the passing moment constantly gives way to an undetermined and potentially destructive future. Hägglund calls upon Derrida's notion that all religions are founded upon "the unscathed," and so they essentially all desire absolute immunity in this principle, something which evil and profanity cannot touch. However, this is a false desire, since nothing can be unscathed (9), and indeed, anything pure, good, or sacred bears within it the possibility of becoming corrupt, evil, and profane. Hägglund says that, contrary to Christian thinking, one should not "desire to overcome" this corruptibility, because it is "essential to everything that is desired and cannot be removed" (9).

In Derrida the very question of desire, and what can be desired, breaks out of the model of traditional atheism and constitutes a radical atheism. While traditional atheism holds that God does not exist, it may not necessarily "dispute that we desire such an absolute being," nor does it dispute that we should desire the "ultimate good" or immortality (112). Hägglund says that God is the idea that "there can be something that is immune from destructibility" (111) and, especially according to the negative theologians, is "immune from finitude" and also "not a being" (118). In essence, God is the absolute, in the sense of being absolutely immune. Hägglund's argument is that Derrida's notion of the spacing of time (or the temporality of space) precludes a relationship or even a desire for anything that is non-mortal, or anything that is immune from destruction. Drawing from Derrida's statements that "God is death" ("The Theatre of Cruelty" 310), Hägglund states that God, as the absolutely immune, the immortal, is inseparable from death, because life is essentially mortal and open to the temporality that compromises and threatens it with death from within. For this reason, "the logic of autoimmunity is radically atheist, since it undermines the religious conception of what is desirable" (9). One could not even desire God as an "absolute good" (as Caputo suggests), since to be "absolute" in any sense destroys the possibility for anything to be (119). Hägglund says that Derrida's concept of the "messianic without messianism" is "another name for the relation to

the undecidable future” (132), and not, as Caputo has it, an unconditional desire for and openness to the coming of the other. Hägglund and Caputo represent two possibilities for reading Derrida, and their radically divergent views demonstrate that Derrida’s views on religion and atheism are far from straightforward or binaristic, and, indeed, his theories can be read in disparate and often opposing ways. Even so, in both readings, the structure of the religious, and the definition of atheism, is called into question and redefined.

This chapter has established that the concept of atheism has no stable meaning, rather its meaning is dependent upon historical and cultural frameworks of understanding, which do not remain static, but shift and transform. The chapter has traced some of these shifts in thinking about atheism, through the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century, modernity, and up to postmodernism. In the process it has shown that the label “atheist” has never been applied or taken up for consistent and self-evident reasons. It certainly does not immediately divorce the bearer of the label from religion, and, in many cases, serves to open up new opportunities for discussion about religion, and its attendant categories, of which atheism has, on occasion, been one. Therefore to say that Sade is an atheist implies many things: that he was likely engaged with theological and philosophical debates about Christianity, that he was engaged with the chequered and complex history of the term, that it *meant* something to him, something intimate – it does not imply a simple renunciation, a negative space, or a disavowal.

### Chapter 3

#### Materialism, Nature and God in the Sadean World

Were I (who to my cost already am  
 One of those strange, prodigious creatures, man)  
 A spirit free to choose for my own share,  
 What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,  
 I'd be a dog, a monkey, or a bear,  
 Or anything but that vain animal,  
 Who is so proud of being rational.

- John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, "A Satire Against Reason and Mankind"

Nature is a theoretical concept with which Sade engages extensively, and his materialistic theories of nature are often felt to be the greatest evidence of his atheism. Materialism, the idea that matter is the only substance which exists, was often taken to be synonymous with atheism because it could be interpreted as denying the existence of the soul and potentially also of deities and other phenomena usually taken to transcend the material. Even Spinoza, who affirms the existence of God in his works, was accused of being a materialist and an atheist because he held that there was only one substance out of which all things are made, which shows that materialism cannot be unproblematically connected to atheism. Sade uses materialistic theories of nature as evidence that an atheistic position is the only rational position to take, and yet, his use of these theories is not passionless and logical, but is motivated by his desire to be transgressive, to outrage religious beliefs about the world.

Theories of nature do not necessarily support any one philosophical point of view. On the contrary, because nature is a discursive concept, the definition of which is culturally contingent, it can and has been used to advance any number of theoretical and theological ideas, even those with conflicting philosophies and conclusions. Sade shows himself invested in the way in which the concept of nature has been used in philosophical and theological debates and its potential for transgression and satire. Therefore, exploring theories of nature are key to

understanding his philosophical and ethical positions. This chapter, then, will examine definitions of nature and its genesis as a theoretical concept. In order to illustrate the definition and provide context for reading and analysing Sade's use of nature, it will, also canvass a number of key theories of nature. Finally the chapter will explicate the ways that Sade employs theories of nature in his writing to establish philosophical positions but also to challenge and critique both Enlightenment and Christian theories of nature. However, such an investigation will show that, in Sade's works, appeals to nature, even to materialistic conceptions of nature, do not, and cannot, establish a coherent atheistic position.

### **The Nature of Nature**

Philosophers have never agreed on how to define nature, and Christian thinkers (despite almost uniformly agreeing that nature is God's creation) do not concur on its definition. It is best to proceed with the simple declaration that nature is a social construction, and what it describes is a matter of ideology. One common theory about nature is that describes everything that "is not human and is distinguished from the work of humanity" (Soper 15). Defining nature by its "otherness to humanity" (Soper 16) appears itself "natural" or self-evident, even though it is discursive and is the work of thousands of years of thought about nature. In Roman Antiquity, Cicero implied the existence of a "first" or primal nature untouched by human hands when he coined the phrase "second nature," which refers to the ways that humans harness and shape nature for their own ends: "by means of our hands we endeavour to create in nature a kind of second nature" (*Of the Nature of the Gods* 153). Second nature is often thought of as culture. Although Cicero sees humans as a part and a product of nature, he creates a dichotomy between the human world and a pre-existent natural world. This dichotomy has more or less persisted: John Stuart Mill explains that one of the most enduring definitions holds nature to be "What takes place ... without the voluntary and intentional agency of Man" ("Nature" 8).

By contrast, those activities in which humans engage, the products they create, along with human social and organisational structures, are seen as artificial, contrived, or cultural, and therefore are excluded from the natural. This, as Soper points out, implies that there is "a type of productive activity or creativity that is exclusive to human beings" (38). Humans are thought to possess subjectivity and consciousness, while nature is regarded as object. For instance, human activity is



considered to be fundamentally different from products of animal activity because it requires some rational faculty or deliberation, whereas animal activity is felt to be instinctive.

The nature/culture dichotomy is not inevitable or self-evident. There is an opposing view that nature encompasses everything in the physical (or material) world, nature is “a totality of being” (Soper 22). In an all-encompassing view of nature, humans are seen as an inseparable part of nature, as nature’s “children.” Whenever one speaks of “human nature,” one implies that humans “are possessed of pre-ordained features, and subject to their order of needs in the way that other creatures also are” (Soper 27). Although such a view might seem to confound the idea that nature is distinct from human agency, it often overlaps or coexists with it. For example, despite having coined the term “second Nature” to refer to human activity and productivity outside of the natural world, Cicero also describes humans as being a part of the natural world. Cicero argues that humans are able to act upon the natural world only because of those gifts that nature has supplied them with: “and what artificer besides Nature, whose cunning nothing can surpass, would have been able to carry out in the senses so much detailed ingenuity?” (*Of the Nature of the Gods* 147). He plainly attributes the work of humans to the creative force of nature: “How apt, again, are the hands which nature has given to man, and to what a number of arts they minister!” (151). This metaphor personifies nature as a creative force, as an artisan. The metaphor of nature as an artisan is borrowed in Christian apologetics, which describe God as an artisan (the metaphor of the divine watchmaker is a notable example), and is also taken up by Sade when he describes nature as a creative force.

The idea of nature as a totality has roots in Aristotelian metaphysics, and was developed into a cosmology and hierarchy of being by the neo-Platonists. This became the basis for the enormously influential theological concept of the “great chain of being.” The genesis of the idea of a great chain of being is chronicled exhaustively in Arthur Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being*. Lovejoy says that the idea has its foundations in Aristotle’s conception of the natural world, and Aristotelian and neo-Platonic conceptions of “plenitude” which the *Stanford Encyclopedia* defines as the theory that “if it is *possible* for an object to exist then that object *actually* exists” (Baker). Soper points out that in application it refers to “the impossibility of a vacuum or ‘gap’ in being” (21). From this principle came the

theory that the universe consisted of “an infinite number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents” up to an “Absolute Being” (Lovejoy 59). The great chain of being was, despite its foundations in pre-Christian thought, a Christian theological cosmology.

### **Systems of Human Nature**

Ideas of nature, religious or secular, have typically ascribed to nature an order or system, which, it is assumed, is immutable, and, furthermore, if interpreted or “read” correctly, can act as a guide for human conduct. In both philosophical (especially Enlightenment philosophical) and religious thought, it has been assumed that, by virtue of their capacity for reason, humans are above nature. Even so, they are not above the laws of nature, and are bound to them either because those laws are written in nature by God, or because those laws constituted a key to rational human action. Consequently many natural laws are regarded as moral and ethical. During the Enlightenment, the idea that rationalism and a moral order are inscribed in nature and, by that very fact, also in humanity, was both supported and interrogated. Although there is no self-evident “natural order” or “natural” moral imperatives, views of nature inevitably have moral implications that are inherent in the way that humans *think* about nature. Changing views on nature were therefore taken very seriously by Enlightenment thinkers, “for although the talk centred mostly on God, the real problem was the nature of ‘nature’ and of our relation to it” (Giovanni 100).

Ironically, nature was not only used to advance atheistic materialism but was also the indispensable basis of Christian apologetics particularly when apologetics took the form of natural theology. As an Enlightenment philosopher, even if a subversive one, Sade was influenced by Enlightenment attitudes to nature and its philosophical heritage, which includes Classical, Christo-theological, Renaissance and scholastic conceptions of nature. It is to nature that Sade repeatedly turns in his explicitly materialistic and atheistic passages of writing. Enlightenment thinkers either defended and developed Christo-theological nature, or, like Sade, refuted or attempted to confound it with secular conceptions (a radical undertaking).

### **Christianity and Nature against Itself**

Christianity sees nature as evidence of a designer’s hand and therefore sacred. From this initial assumption follows the view that God can be observed in nature, and that

the study of nature may therefore be able to reveal the nature of God or, perhaps, His will. Such an understanding is implicit in the metaphor of nature as a book, which, along with the Bible, forms the two books which humans may study in order to know God's will (see Howell; Pedersen). Moreover, for the Church, examining nature has always been motivated by the desire to tease out implications for human nature. For example, Catholic doctrine has frequently made reference to a God-given order of nature to support moral prescriptions. In her article "The Nature of Nature in Early Modern Europe," Lorraine Daston explains:

A privileged set of human relationships – almost all concerning sex, gender, and family – were held to be inscribed in the order of nature, transcending the justifications of merely human reason. According to Aquinas and a long line of natural-law jurists stretching into the eighteenth century, it was, for example, a given of nature that human offspring require the attentions of both mother and father; hence the institution of marriage is dictated by natural law for our species. The differences among animal species were laid down by nature; hence the horror of bestiality. From a later, Humean point of view, the entire corpus of natural law might be described as an argumentative machinery for transforming "is" into "ought," natural order into moral order. (156-57)

Since nature is part of creation, the natural order is as inviolate as any God-given law. Augustine of Hippo asserted in his *Confessions* that:

Therefore are those foul offences which be against nature, to be every where and at all times detested and punished; such as were those of the men of Sodom: which should all nations commit, they should all stand guilty of the same crime, by the law of God, which hath not so made men that they should so abuse one another. For even that intercourse which should be between God and us is violated, when that same nature, of which He is Author, is polluted by perversity of lust. (38-39)

Augustine's views on this matter are not unique. For instance, more than a century earlier Origen says in Book Five of his *Against Celsus* (*Contra Celsus*): "there are, then, generally two laws presented to us, the one being the law of nature, of which God would be the legislator, and the other being the written law of cities" (ch. 37). Ambrose, Augustine's mentor, says in a letter to Irenaeus that the laws handed down to Moses should not have been necessary: "had men been able to keep the natural

Law, which our God and Maker implanted in the breast of each, there would have been no need of the Law” (letter 73, par. 2). These views were influential for centuries, and to some extent they still persist today in the argument that homosexuality is “unnatural.” the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* encourages Catholics to disapprove of homosexuality on the grounds that it is “contrary to the natural law” (part 3, art. 6).

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, having studied Augustine, concludes in his treatise on fortitude and temperance in the *Summa Theologica* that “in sins contrary to nature, whereby the very order of nature is violated, an injury is done to God, the author of nature” (n.p.; 2<sup>nd</sup> part of part 2, q. 154, art. 12). Failure to comply with the natural order is therefore a sin against the creator, and it is obvious from Augustine’s views that a sin against nature is often assumed to be sexual. The order of nature could also be invoked in order to reinforce class divisions and inequality on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religious allegiances and other supposed markers of difference. For instance, the idea that women’s biological characteristics mark them as weaker than men and therefore subordinate to them has been taken for granted throughout most of Western history – until (relatively) recently when thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have argued convincingly against this perception. The order of nature is central also to colonial discourses, as Homi K. Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture*: “the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest” (101). Often discrimination, colonisation and even enslavement have been presaged on the idea of a divine natural order used to justify violence against those who violate this order. Christian conceptions of natural order have informed missionary work which has often been deeply implicated in colonialism and colonial violence, although conceptions of natural order need not be Christian in order to justify violence against those who transgress them.

The Church also uses scripture to establish the idea of a natural order. Aquinas’ works exemplify this; he believed that moral ordinances in scripture are prescriptive of a natural order, and that, although instilled in each person so that they become natural laws, are set out in writing in order that man may receive God’s grace. His views are clear in his discussion of the law of the New Testament:

Nevertheless the New Law [the New Testament] contains certain things that dispose us to receive the grace of the Holy Ghost, and pertaining to the use of that grace: such things are of secondary importance, so to speak, in the New Law; and the faithful need to be instructed concerning them, both by word and writing, both as to what they should believe and as to what they should do. Consequently we must say that the New Law is in the first place a law that is inscribed on our hearts,<sup>19</sup> but that secondarily it is a written law. (*The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas* 321; 1<sup>st</sup> part of part 2. q. 106, art. 1.)

As much as the Church has made an ally of nature, and seen its beauty as evidence of a divine designer, it has also made nature an enemy, and pointed to the cruelties, excesses and crudeness of nature as evidence of the profane and something to be resisted. Although the Church has historically positioned itself against beliefs like Gnosticism which see the world itself as flawed and even evil, its views on the excesses of nature, particularly the body and sexuality, demonstrate Gnostic influences and quasi-Gnostic beliefs about the world.

Gnosticism is a variant of Christianity which, although long declared a heresy by the Church, expresses an extreme view of nature as flawed and profane. Like Christianity, Gnosticism encompasses a variety of often disparate belief systems which are united by some distinguishing convictions. Like orthodox Catholics, Gnostics consider the human soul transcendent and divine, but, unlike them, believe it to be trapped in a flawed material world. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Philip,<sup>20</sup> the world was created “through a transgression” – not by the true God, but by a flawed being. The world is envisioned as a spiritual battleground between

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<sup>19</sup>A Pauline metaphor: Paul preaches the gospel of Grace in the context of circumcision. He defends the right not to be circumcised by saying that it is not necessary to observe the law because the law is justified in Jesus Christ: “know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.” (*NIV Galatians* 2:16).

<sup>20</sup> The Gospel of Philip was not discovered until 1945, near Nag Hammadi in Egypt along with several other Gnostic texts. Although the writings were lost for centuries, they helped to shape early Gnostic beliefs and they are the source of some of the beliefs which unite the many sects of Gnosticism (Rudolph 36-52).

nature, the material world, and the spiritual, and between the one God and the flawed, yet higher, being. This idea is even found in the scriptures: Ephesians 6:12 states, “For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens.” Scholar of Gnosticism Kurt Rudolph explains that Gnosticism casts a “negative judgement upon the whole of bodily and physical existence,” including the natural world, seeing it as a barrier between the human and the sacred realm of God (83). This also serves as an explanation for evil, because nature and even human nature are inherently impure and sinful since they do not partake of the divine. Although humans are impure by the fact that they are embodied, they have a spiritual, divine constituent and can overcome the profane physical world through redemption. Gnosticism sees divine knowledge as a path to redemption: “through knowledge, the inner spiritual ‘man’ is redeemed” (Rudolph 116).

Interestingly, the Gnostic condemnation of and rejection of the material world has been thought to lead to libertinism as easily as asceticism. The author of *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* Michael Williams, says that “the indifference to the body can be expressed through freedom by abuse, dropping the reins and allowing the body to graze at will or gallop in whatever direction its natural impulses and desires might lead it at any moment” (139). Williams is sceptical that Gnostics ever gave themselves over to libertinism, and argues that the idea that Gnosticism could lead equally to asceticism or libertinism is “a completely false construct” based on “problematic” evidence (164). Nevertheless the idea of the Gnostic libertine has seemed as likely as that of the Gnostic ascetic in the popular imagination, as evidenced by the perception of the “two-pronged” understanding of Gnosticism Williams hopes to debunk. At times, Sadean libertines seem to express Gnostic attitudes: they advance a Gnostic view of nature in order to employ nature as an ally (or even the source) of crime and, at times, paint nature as actively evil.

Rudolph writes that, much as Christianity attempted to reverse Gnostic theories of the cosmos and of nature, “there yet remained a certain aloofness from the world which time to time could become more articulate and which became closely linked with the idea, also accepted in Christianity, of the devil and adversary of God” (371). Williams writes in his article “Divine Image – Prison of the Flesh” that the often extreme asceticism and denial of the body in Christian monasticism is

influenced by “earlier Gnostic asceticism” and that it marks Gnosticism’s “domestication” (129). The privileging of spiritual over bodily pleasure, and eschewing the physical world as a mere prelude to the paradise of the afterlife certainly has a Gnostic flavour. It is hardly surprising that in the Christian milieu the surest way of achieving sainthood is martyrdom, it is the ultimate overcoming of the body’s materiality in the name of something which transcends the physical world.

It is in Christian conceptions of the body and sexuality where the distaste for nature, and the physical, is most apparent. As the next chapter will establish, Christian attitudes to the body are complex and do not come down to an elevation of spirit over body alone. However, the way that the Church approached sexuality, writes historian and sexologist Vern L. Bullough, “continually emphasised that the sexually active person was a sinner. The effect must have been to encourage a growing uneasiness about sexuality in the medieval world” (194). Sexuality was seen as polluting to the body and the spirit. Christian thought came to regard chastity and virginity as the purest state of the body. Peter Brown explains in *The Body and Society*: “different people were held to enjoy different degrees of prominence in the church according to whether or not (or how much) sex had touched their bodies. Virgins and celibates were top; widows were second; the married were third” (lxvi). The purpose of marriage was to act as a remedy for the sinfulness of sexual desire, a way of keeping it contained and limiting its potential for sin. According to thirteenth-century English priest John Colet, celibacy was the ideal state, and marriage “a concession, or indulgence, to human weakness” (Porter 40). Sex has always been regarded as a necessary evil in Christianity, one which the state of marriage barely redeems – says Muriel Porter: “virginity, protected by fasting and other forms of self-mortification, was the only sure way of achieving Christian perfection” (37). Even marriage for the sake of procreation was frowned upon by some Christian theologians. Augustine wrote in his treatise *Of the Good of Marriage*: “we may no way doubt that the chastity of continence is better than marriage chastity” (par. 28). Augustine’s comments here also indicate that chastity within marriage was an issue: sex was only sanctioned when it was procreative. Early Christian communities gradually came to look upon chastity and celibacy as the highest achievements, marking the victory of the soul over the body. The realm of nature is often characterised as “fallen” in Christian discourse, since it was complicit in the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden. Nature became the province of the beastly, of sex,

and of death, where things cannot be contained and all is subordinated to the chaos of a natural order, is frequently cast in Christian discourse as impure and therefore profane.

The Church's reaction to the personification of nature provides a case in point of the struggle Christianity faces in dealing with nature. Katharine Park explains in "Nature in Person" that personifications of nature gained popular purchase during the Renaissance: "the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw the appearance of two separate but related visual traditions: Nature as a lactating woman, and Nature as possessed of many breasts" (57). The first image may not have been so troubling from the Church's perspective because, as Park points out (64), the image of the nursing mother could be compared to iconography of the Virgin Mary or Eve, although the image of a naked woman itself carries the suggestion of sex, and even, where she was depicted holding a vulture, of death (62). This latter image can be most securely attributed to Cesare Ripa's sixteenth century illustration of nature as a woman. The vulture perched on her hand symbolises, explains Ripa, matter, which "destroys all corruptible bodies" (*Iconologia, or Moral Emblems* 56). The image of the many-breasted woman is much more troubling to the Church for it links with the pagan worship of Diana of Ephesus (the Greek goddess Artemis) (65). This is unsurprising, considering the great interest in Classical themes during the Renaissance. Given the troubling and potentially destructive aspects of the world depicted in personifications of nature, Christianity needed to impose order upon nature, to justify, and provide an explanation for, its cruelties and impurities.

The fallen state of nature and of human beings has special consequences for thinking about the incarnation of Jesus in the flesh, because, as the son of God, he cannot be fallen or impure. Furthermore, according to Christianity, God rules over all of nature. Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus frequently displays his divine lineage by performing miracles which prove his mastery over natural forces. For example, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus calms a storm which threatens to swamp the boat carrying Jesus and his disciples. The disciples "were filled with awe and said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him'" (Mark 4:41). At another time, Jesus curses a fig tree, saying, "May you never bear fruit again," and it immediately withers (Matthew 21:19). Once again, the disciples are amazed by his mastery over nature. Jesus also walks on water, raises the dead, and transforms water into wine. The submission of nature to Christ's will is a mark of his



divinity and so he provides an example to which a precious few saintly individuals can aspire to emulate by having perfect faith in God (like the non-divine Moses, who controls nature by parting the Red Sea in Exodus 14:21).

Christian attitudes to the body, sexuality, nature and human nature reflect what Bataille believes is a fundamental shift in the way that the sacred and profane are defined in religion. Bataille says that Christianity changed the nature of the sacred by rejecting all impure things, such that impure things became profane. Bataille says that “[t]he realm of sacred things is composed of the pure and of the impure. Christianity rejected impurity” and so, “impure sacredness was thenceforth the business of the profane world” (*Erotism* 121). For example, Bataille mentions the development of Satan in Christian thought: he began as a divine creature, but in committing the sin of pride and putting his will before God’s will he became an impure creature. Yet “nothing could stop Satan from being divine,” he “had not become profane, strictly speaking: he retained a supernatural character because of the sacred world he came from” (121). Bataille observes that “only in Christianity did the existence of the impure world become profanation in itself,” and so impure sacredness, such as that possessed by Satan, became profanation, which amounts to “the use of the sacred for profane purposes” (122). Christianity sees nature and the erotic as connected in some ways, although it stigmatises this connection as profane. As a consequence eroticism became profane, even though the Church must support sex within marriage for the sake of procreation.

### **Natural Religion**

As already noted, natural theology became popular in mainstream Enlightenment thinking because it appeared to reconcile theories of nature, rationality and emerging scientific knowledge with a religious conception of the world and a transcendent God. Since the writings of the early Church fathers such as Origen, Tertullian and Augustine, Christian thinkers had often maintained that Christianity was supported by natural law (and indeed, divine law); the notion of natural religion was not unprecedented. A result of the emergence of natural theology was that Christian thinkers went some way, despite themselves, towards divorcing religion from reason and philosophy and promoting a materialist view of nature. The idea, as Israel notes, that “what is ‘divine’ in scripture can be known to be such only through testing its precepts and claims by means of our natural reason” means that “natural, textual, and

philosophical questions of whatever sort can only be genuinely investigated omitting all appeals to faith, God, theology, or ecclesiastical authority” (*Enlightenment Contested* 670). Michael J. Buckley says that in natural theology there was a process of “self-alienation” – “there was a contradiction between this content and the form it advanced. Religion was treated as if it were theism” (346). Though there was still fierce conflict between the radical and mainstream Enlightenment, few questioned that human reason should form the basis for any enquiry, including into the divine, a necessarily materialistic starting point even if the conclusions it reached supported orthodoxy. This paradox is exemplified in the watchmaker analogy, which takes observation of technology created by human ingenuity as a metaphor for divine creation.

The idea of the universe as a machine set in motion by God, the metaphor of the “divine watchmaker,” gained popularity around the eighteenth century, but was strongly opposed by both the radical Enlightenment and the conservatives. The watchmaker analogy is best known through the theory of William Paley, set out in his book *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1801). Paley’s work begins with the hypothetical instance of a person happening upon a watch. Observing the watch, he reasons, one would have to observe “that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose” and, once the watch had been observed, it is “inevitable” for one to conclude that “the watch must have had a maker: that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use” (6). Paley argues that, like the watch, nature is inexplicably orderly, and, as subject to certain laws or a certain order, it can be assumed to have been *designed*:

Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. I mean that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art, in the complexity, subtlety, and curiosity of the mechanism; and still more, if possible, do they go beyond them in number and variety; yet, in a multitude of cases, are not less evidently mechanical, not less evidently

contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end, or suited to their office, than are the most perfect productions of human ingenuity. (13)

The existence of the analogy shows that the precision and rationality of the machine had become a standard to which nature was compared, given the development of automata and clockwork, and the lead up to the “golden age of automata” in the mid-nineteenth century.

Buckley concludes that “the origin of atheism in the intellectual culture of the West lies thus with the self-alienation of religion itself” (363). Certainly, works such as Holbach’s *System of Nature* seemed at once shocking, and, in its argumentative strategy and some of its premises, uncomfortably familiar to proponents of natural theology. Buckley says that the *System* could “take the arguments” of people like Newton, and “stand them on their heads, co-opting for its universal materialism the very evidence that centuries of physicotheology had used to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God” (253). Nonetheless, materialist systems of nature, while they had expelled God from the world, usually attempted to uphold some socially acceptable theory of morality and political order. Furthermore, they inherited frameworks for comprehending nature from Christian conceptions of the world, such that the notion of the great chain of being, a divine natural order, was transmuted into an idea of a rational natural order. Moral and social prescriptions could certainly be extrapolated from such a system, which offers human beings some notion of how to behave in the absence of divine direction, something which could address the fear, common in the Enlightenment, that without religion social order would rapidly dissolve.

### **Secular Morality, Rationality, and Order: Secular Nature**

The ideal of a rational natural order dates back to before Classical times, and for as long was linked inextricably with religion and the divine. Classical thinkers held that nature was created by the gods and, as a creation, was orderly and rational, the source from which humans drew their own innate ability for rational thought. Close remarks in his article “Philosophical Theories of Art and Nature” that “Stoic writers, and particularly Cicero, repeatedly refer to nature as a providential administrator to mankind, and as an infallible norm of reason and law” (177). Plato argues in *Laws* that human laws are derived from nature because laws have as their end the good, and what is good is determined by both divine and human nature. There is an order

of “goods;” divine “goods” are prior to and higher than human “goods” (*Laws* bk.1). As a result, nature is rational and ordered; a cosmic codex which can guide human behaviour. Plato was not original in seeing creation as a teleological process, but, says Constance Glacken, “he seems to be the first to see it as the work of an intelligent, good, reasoning and divine artisan” (45). Plato’s thought influenced Christian theologians and the idea of the natural world as a divine and orderly work of art remains attractive to Christian apologists. Even if, like Aristotle, some Classical thinkers did not agree with the concept of a divine creator, they nonetheless held nature to be inherently orderly. Both Plato and Aristotle concede that, despite its inherent rationality, and therefore its suitability as a source of human law, nature does not provide humans with knowledge of what is and is not virtuous. In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates declares that he “has no idea what virtue itself is” and that he has never met any person who did possess such knowledge – a revelation that deeply shocks Meno (115).

The general consensus in Antiquity that nature alone did not provide humans with fully developed moral capacities was later appropriated by Christian theologians. However, instead of making this a mandate for furthering philosophical and ethical learning, Christian theologians used the idea as evidence of the authority of Scripture and divine law. Adherents of natural theology argued against this notion, feeling that all Creation and, by extension, divine and moral law, were inherent in nature and able to be empirically observed or logically inferred.

The idea of a rational nature was necessary to support Enlightenment theories of rationality and human nature which were at that time, crucially, political considerations. Just as Christians saw nature as a blueprint for human nature because it is God’s creation, some philosophers saw the order in nature as an indication of how human society should function, although the way in which nature defined, and what kinds of social guidelines it could offer, varied widely from thinker to thinker. Theories of nature could also be used to support an entirely materialistic ethics, which is something that will be examined in detail in Chapter Six. For example, Hobbes appealed to nature in order to argue for the necessity of monarchy (Sade, on the other hand, appeals to nature to argue against the monarchy). He saw nature as essentially ungoverned, with humans in a perpetual state of “war of every one against every one” in which they, by right of nature, have a right to everything, “even to one another’s body” (*Leviathan* 107; ch. 14). Nevertheless, Hobbes thought that it is “the

first and fundamental law of nature” that humans ought to seek peace, but since, by the laws of nature, humans must do whatever they can to defend themselves, the best solution was to give up, presumably to a sovereign or state (by means of a contract or covenant, which is not without Christian connotations) the natural right to defend one’s “own nature,” a surrender which can then guarantee certain civil protections and liberties in exchange for this right. Hobbes considered religion to be indispensable to politics, deriving from a “natural seed,” for, “by God’s commandment and direction,” humans created religion “with a purpose to make those men that relied upon them the more apt to obedience, laws, peace, charity, and civil society” (77; ch 21). Because he subordinated religion to the state, despite his (some say, strategic or ironic) adherence to Christian doctrine, Hobbes was branded an atheist.

A reaction to Hobbes’ pessimism, Rousseau’s consideration of natural law stemmed from his desire to understand what caused inequality in society, and whether it could be connected to nature in any way. Rousseau believed in the Christian God, but his conceptions of nature and ethics seem secular when compared to Christian orthodoxy. Rousseau took the idealistic view that nature instilled in us compassion or pity:

I do not believe I have any contradiction to fear in granting to man to the only natural virtue, that the most excessive detractor of human virtues was forced to recognize. I am referring to pity, a disposition that is fitting for beings that are as weak and as subject to ills as we are; a virtue all the more universal and all the more useful to man in that it precedes in him any kind of reflection, and so natural that even animals sometimes show noticeable signs of it. (62)

He believes that “from this quality alone flow all the social virtues,” since, he asks, “what are generosity, mercy and humanity if not pity applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to the human species in general?”(63). Rousseau holds that this feeling is suppressed by reason, which motivates man to self-love and self-preservation at the expense of others, and so compassion and pity are stronger “in the state of nature than in the state of reasoning” (63):

Reason is what engenders geocentricism and reflection strengthens it. Reason is what turns man in upon himself. Reason is what separates him from all that troubles him and afflicts him. Philosophy is what isolates him and moves him

to say in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: “Perish if you will, I am safe and sound.” (63)

His ideas became popular owing to the ways that they could be applied to support the position that morality is rational and innate. Voltaire satirised Rousseau in *Candide*. When Candide and Cacambo are captured while in Paragauy by the Oreillon tribe. The Oreillons, though uncorrupted by society and civilisation, are far from innocent and good. They plan to eat Candide and Cacambo because they believe that Candide is a Jesuit priest, and they have a hearty dislike of the Jesuits. Cacambo says, archly: “what would Maître Pangloss [Candide’s mentor, a parody of Leibniz] say now, if he could see men live in a state of nature?” (41).

The idea that morality was inscribed in nature was not uncontested. Hume, who is generally described, like Locke, as an empiricist,<sup>21</sup> did not agree that morality was inherent in the law of nature, although he felt that virtue and vice excited emotions in humans, and that this was the only way of determining right from wrong:

For granting that morality had no foundation in nature, it must still be allowed, that vice and virtue, either from self-interest or the prejudices of education, produce in us a real pain and pleasure; and this we may observe to be strenuously asserted by the defenders of that hypothesis. (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 258; bk. 2, part 1, sec. 7)

He later says: “Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality therefore, are not conclusions of our reason” (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 399; bk. 3, part 1, sec. 1). Hume did not deviate from convention in his determination of what constituted vice and virtue, and he continued to insist that vice produces negative emotions, while virtue inspires positive emotions. His work is echoed in the Sadean idea that vice inflames the passions, which doubtless perverts Hume’s intended message.

Spinoza, too, contested the notion that morality was inherent in nature and stemmed from reason. While he supported the theory of a natural order of law, Spinoza scandalously did not support the theory that this derived from God, or at any rate did not support the traditional idea of nature derived from God. Spinoza believed that the universe was one substance, and that substance is God: “Besides God, no

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<sup>21</sup> Empiricism refers to the notion that one can only know what can be observed, directly or indirectly, through sensory experience.

substance can be nor can be conceived” (13; part 1, prop. 14). It follows from this that “God is one, that is to say, in nature there is but one substance, and it is absolutely infinite” (14; part 1, prop. 14). Accordingly, it cannot be concluded that, in Spinoza’s thought, nature derives from God, since they are one substance. Likewise, it cannot be said that God *created* nature, since elsewhere Spinoza declares: “One substance cannot be produced by another substance” (6; part 1; prop. 6). Spinoza’s God is not even a creator: He has no recognizable attributes other than what is observable in nature, and the fact that He (“It” would be more accurate) is “absolutely infinite” (13; part 1, prop. 13). Given Spinoza’s notoriety during the Enlightenment as a grand atheist, it would be reasonable to assume that Sade had more than a passing acquaintance with his philosophy. Indeed, Sade mentions Spinoza by name. In *Juliette*, Madame Delbène instructs Juliette: “refer yourself again and again to the great theses of Spinoza, of Vanini, of the author of *Le système de la nature*” (20), in order that Juliette dispel any doubts she has about the fact of God’s non-existence.

### **Materialism and Determinism**

It is doubtless in La Mettrie and Holbach that Sade found a view at the very least sympathetic to his own (if these thinkers did not, in fact, directly form that view). In *Man a Machine* La Mettrie explains at length how the desires, aches, and humours of the body can influence the “soul,” which is later conflated, not with a separate spiritual being, but rather with the imagination or the mind. This is to show that the mind is at the mercy of the body, and the body’s desires often win over reason. Later, he makes the case that many criminals are motivated by sensations of the body over which reason has no hold: “it is much to be wished that excellent physicians might be the only judges. They alone could tell the innocent criminal from the guilty. If reason is the slave of a depraved or mad desire, how can it control the desire?” (119).

Holbach’s thinking shared much in common with the thought of La Mettrie. While he actively spoke out against the hedonism that he believed to be implicit in La Mettrie’s work, Holbach, too, developed a system of thought which contributed to the determinism in Sade’s work. In his attempt to refute the fallacy of the order of nature, which he sees as humanity’s attempt to impose organisation upon nature, Holbach asserts that confusion is only a part of nature. He believes that what seems confusing or disruptive in nature to humans is as much a part of a natural order as is

anything else, but that humans are too blinkered to see this. For example, humans view death as confusing and disruptive because it ends their existence as conscious beings, but on the level of matter, very little changes. Death is a human category. To this end, he makes the case that evil is only a perception, and that the wicked are as natural and immutable in essence as are the virtuous:

Man constituted, or modified, in the manner we term virtuous, acts necessarily in that mode, from whence results the welfare of his associates: the man we style wicked, acts necessarily in that mode from whence springs the misery of his fellows: his nature and his modification being essentially different, he must necessarily act after a different mode: his individual order is at variance, but his relative order is complete: it is equally the essence of the one, to promote happiness, as it is of the other to induce misery. (37; ch. 5)

To Holbach's thinking, the wicked cannot be held personally responsible for their actions, although it is the duty of society to punish them. Sade, with his far more radical view of justice, does not see that they should be punished at all. The result of Enlightenment rationalism applied to an order of nature seems to be a monstrosity, but Sade shows that it is only the logical endpoint of a view which utterly dispenses with personal agency, and therefore, with personal responsibility.

Conceptualising nature as a rational blueprint for human behaviour, or as materialistic and essentially indifferent to humans, who are subject to nature, undermines teleological assumptions (found in Scripture, but which date to Classical times) about the place of humanity in nature. The Church had a vested interest in maintaining the dominion of humans (specifically, "man") over nature, and the idea that humans have a divine purpose and end. The development of industry reinforced the popular view that humans should have dominion over nature by virtue of their advanced rational faculties, and this was supported in many ways by Enlightenment rationalism. This view was countered by an increasingly popular and typically Romantic (and Rousseauian) idea that civilisation was ruining nature, which was inherently pure, and that humans had no more right (and, to some minds, less of a right) to nature than did any creature. The development of advanced machines and automata had a significant impact on the conceptualisation of nature in Sade's time, and formed a rhetorical framework which would be used both by Sade himself and by the institutions that he wanted to attack.



David Hume examines the watchmaker theory in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Modelled after Cicero's *Of the Nature of the Gods*, Hume's dialogues likewise feature three philosophers who argue about the nature of God. The opinions characters express in both works are likely less radical than those of their respective authors, precisely because the authors wished to avoid the charge of atheism. The characters in Hume's work agree on the existence of God, although Philo, whose views most resemble Hume's, is strongly sceptical about the possibility of proving God's existence. Philo and Demea argue against the third philosopher, Cleanthes, who expounds his teleological argument for the existence of God: that the world, like a machine, is designed. Philo attacks this argument for being too anthropocentric:

Allowing that we were to take the *operations* of one part of nature upon another, for the foundation of our judgment concerning the origin of the whole (which never can be admitted), yet why select so minute, so weak, so bounded a principle, as the reason and design of animals is found to be upon this planet? What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe? Our partiality in our own favour does indeed present it on all occasions; but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against so natural an illusion. (19; part 2)

Despite this, the analogy of nature as machine was also used to disprove the teleological argument and thereby destabilise the notion of a creator-God, a scandalous argument at the time. La Mettrie used the example of the machine to prove the inherent materiality of nature, and debunk the argument for the existence of a separate substance comprising spirit or soul. La Mettrie's *The Natural History of the Soul* (*L'histoire naturelle de l'âme*) caused a sensation when it was published because it was uncomfortably close to Spinozism and therefore to atheism. The scandal saw most copies of the book confiscated by police, transferred to the Bastille as contraband and, later, condemned by parliament, since, by rejecting Cartesian dualism, and reducing the human mind to matter, it undermined the foundation of religion (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 795). Israel explains that by "conflating body and mind, La Mettrie rules out all teleology and all prospect of the permeating presence of a world-soul along Platonic or Stoic lines" (795). At the time, Cartesian dualism, which holds that there are two substances, the material and the mental, was

enormously influential in both philosophy and theology and the Church had long held that the soul was immaterial.<sup>22</sup> La Mettrie prudently denied the charge of being a Spinozist, but, with the publication of his *Man a Machine*, which claimed that the universe was a single substance, “differently modified” (148), he could no longer pretend to be at odds with Spinozism. La Mettrie believes that “everything is the work of imagination and that all the faculties of the soul can be correctly reduced to pure imagination in which they all consist” (107). Thus judgement, reason, and memory are not absolute parts of the soul, but merely modifications of this kind of medullary screen upon which images of the objects painted in the eye are projected as by a magic lantern” (107). These kinds of arguments had a profound influence on Sade, who would repurpose them for his novels.

### **Sade’s Pragmatism: The many uses of Nature in a Libertine world**

Sade is a materialist atheist who inherits the arguments of Spinoza, La Mettrie and Holbach, but, as will be established, these aspects of his thought do not fully encompass or explain his work. While Sade’s works contain a number of dissertations on nature supporting atheist positions, these positions are so many and varied that it is difficult to say which views were held by Sade personally. In addition, many of these arguments, while they show Sade to be a man of learning and erudition, do not prove him to be an entirely original thinker. Sade lived in a time when ideas about atheism, materialism and natural theology competed with traditional religious ideas, and the sheer variety of his arguments is evidence of this. As discussed in Chapter One, Sade was, at times, a merciless satirist, so it is difficult to tell which ideas are presented in all seriousness and which are not. Sade’s uses of nature as a rhetorical tool and a theoretical basis for libertine arguments is too impassioned, ambiguous, and disordered that they cannot possibly constitute a firm basis for an atheistic and materialist understanding of nature as a philosophical position. Rather, theories of nature are used as instruments for transgression.

Sade did not remain passively complicit even in those concepts of nature to which he ostensibly lends support; he appropriates and satirises them. Sade’s use of various theories of nature contributes to a satire of the rationalism which informs

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<sup>22</sup> The idea that the soul is immaterial is often taken for granted, but it is, at least in part, inherited from Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of the world.

those theories, and, by extension, the rational revolution in thought which was ostensibly the project of the Enlightenment (which was by no means a consistent or teleological project). These theories are contradictory and do not compose a coherent system, but the purpose of this is not to confuse the reader; instead, it is to reveal something about the society which produced them. Sade's critique of Enlightenment rationalism therefore amounts to a critique of morality based on these theories. Sade critiques both rationalism and Christian theological theories of nature as part of his wider social satire, which is present in all of his creative works.

Sade is extraordinarily pragmatic in his use of theories of nature, in the sense that he picks and chooses whichever theories best suit his purpose in a single narrative moment. That is not to say that the theories he uses are arbitrarily chosen; it is still possible to infer from the way that Sade uses ideas of nature which positions he occupies. Indeed, Sade's use of satire is a way of establishing a position for himself, and is one important aspect of his antagonism towards Christian theology and ethics. For Sade, as for others this chapter has investigated, human nature and ethics are the most pressing areas of inquiry. Since it is a consequence of his materialism, his philosophy of nature challenges a religious order of nature, and takes advantage of the ambiguous views of nature Christianity held.

Sade's work contains the idea that humanity is inherently corrupt, and that, furthermore, this corruption is aligned with the corruption of nature. This is very close to the Christian (specifically Augustinian) idea of original sin. Coeur-de-Fer,<sup>23</sup> when attempting to convince Justine of the moral justice of the natural order, says that nature desires vice and evil acts, and that this fact "should stifle remorse in the tyrant's soul or in the malefactor's; let him not constrain himself; let him blindly, unthinkingly deliver himself up to causing every hurt the idea for which may be born in him, it is only Nature's voice which suggests this idea" (495). Nature must maintain a balance between virtue and vice: "she demands that there be crimes to dress the scales" (496).

The concept of debt and atonement is identical to that of debt and repayment in contract law.<sup>24</sup> This is a feature of atonement which makes Sade's dedication to

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<sup>23</sup> In English: "Iron heart."

<sup>24</sup> Many Christians have problems with this metaphor, preferring to see this bond as a covenant, because the idea of a contract can be theologically troubling. Nevertheless, the concept of atonement

sin all the more complex. In his work, there is an abundance of contracts, promises, oaths, and the like formed between libertines and their victims, families, fellow libertines. The Sadean libertine takes immense delight in making contracts and promises, but this delight is not founded in securing bonds and keeping oaths. Typically enough, they take delight in making promises only to break them. This transgression recalls the original transgression of humankind, but it is peculiar in that the libertine is never called upon to atone.

### **Just a Materialist?**

Sade adopts materialist philosophies as a means to establish a solid position as an atheist, however, his use of competing theories can render his position as an atheist incoherent. He was a voracious reader of atheistic and materialist thinkers, among them Holbach, La Mettrie, and Hume. Sade was a great admirer of Holbach's *A System of Nature*. In a letter to his wife in 1783, Sade says that

... *The System of Nature* is verily and indubitably the basis of my philosophy, and I am and shall remain a faithful disciple of that philosophy even at the cost of my life, if it came to that ... a book that undermines and destroys forever the most dangerous and most odious of all fantasies, the one that has caused more bloodshed here on earth than any other. (*Letters from Prison* 336)

These philosophers developed theories of materialism to the point of atheism, contending that matter was the only substance out of which all things in existence are made. In so doing, they challenged the dualistic idea of the world as constituted by both matter and mental or non-physical attributes, an idea embodied in Cartesian mind/body dualism. Sade's materialism is manifest in his theories of nature. In correspondence, Sade asserts that

theism cannot for a moment stand up to the slightest scrutiny, and one would have to be completely ignorant of the workings of Nature not to recognize that it operates on its own and without any primary cause, and that so-called primary cause, which explains nothing and which on the contrary requires

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for one's sins is underpinned by metaphors of debt and repayment, as Gary A. Anderson explains in *Sin: A History*: "In the New Testament the metaphor of sin as debt is ubiquitous. Jesus frequently told stories about debtors and creditors as a way of illustrating the dynamics of sin and forgiveness" (31).

explanation, is naught but the *nec plus ultra* of ignorance. (*Letters From Prison* 336-37)

In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, echoing Sade, Dolomance says: “this God, whom fools behold as the author and maker of all we know there to be, is simply the *ne plus ultra* [sic] of human reason” (209). Nonetheless, Sade’s materialism and the theories of nature which he espouses cannot simply be read as a symptom of his atheism. Despite the beliefs of some philosophers (including Spinoza and Aristotle) that materialism can be moral and does not necessarily entail an absence of the divine, atheism and materialism have been viewed since Classical times as going hand-in-hand. No doubt Sade was aware of just how threatening materialism was to the Church, which has battled to eradicate materialist philosophies throughout its history.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sade enjoyed the good fortune of financial independence, freeing him from reliance on institutional support, which could be very restrictive: any scandal caused by an affiliate would reflect badly on the institution itself (a famous example of the consequences of bringing an institution into controversy is the expulsion from Oxford in 1811 of the poet Shelley for having authored *The Necessity of Atheism*). There were not many atheist or materialist philosophers who had the option of making their views public. An aristocrat, and imprisoned for a great deal of his life, Sade had the freedom to write, though not always to publish, what he pleased (although he eventually answered to the Napoleonic government). The act of constructing a system of nature which failed to include God, or included Him only as a first cause, was tantamount to a confession of atheism. Sade’s writing on nature was problematic not only because it was atheistic, but also because he critiqued and challenged a number of dominant philosophical and theological positions on nature.

When read as a part of his entire system of thought, a system based on evil and transgression, Sade’s materialism takes on a different meaning. Indeed, “materialism” cannot sum up Sade’s position; it is only one aspect of his philosophy. Other aspects of his work must be taken in to account. Of Sade’s materialism, Bataille says: “though he was certainly a materialist, this did not solve his problem: that of the Evil which he loved, and of the Good which condemned it” (*Literature and Evil* 110-11). If nature is purely material, then there is no possibility for evil and good according to a natural law, only according to human social laws.

### Sade's Moral Determinism

Sade draws conclusions about morality and social justice from those systems of nature which are at once wholly logical and a perversion both of the intent of the authors of the theories and traditional morality. This is a hallmark of Sade's writing, and the main technique he uses to construct his satire. Says Phillips: "it is wholly in character for Sade to carry the logic of current philosophical ideas to their ultimate and often shocking conclusion" (*How to Read Sade* 32). The consequence of this is, to an extent, to discredit those ideas, but even more so to demonstrate that no theory (even when such a theory comes from the mind of Hobbes or Rousseau) is immune from being used against the very moral conclusions that thinkers had hoped to render incontestable. Sade pushes the theoretical limits of the various arguments over the nature of nature sometimes to the point of incoherence or contradiction, as is evidenced by his determinism.

Sadean libertines use theories of nature as justification for their debaucheries. Nevertheless, this is more than mere justification: the libertines construct a moral framework by arguing that, since nature has instilled in human beings the capacity to commit crime, even to revel in it, then one can no more be held responsible for acting on criminal and erotic desires than one can for breathing. In *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man*, the dying man declares that humans are nature's "pawns," drawing from the determinism of Holbach and La Mettrie:

We are the pawns of an irresistible force, and never for an instant is it within our power to do anything but make the best of our lot and forge ahead along the path that has been traced for us. There is not a single virtue which is not necessary to Nature and conversely not a single crime which she does not need and it is in the perfect balance she maintains between the one and the other that her immense science consists; but can we be guilty for adding our weight to this side or that when it is she who tosses us onto the scales? No more so than the hornet who thrusts his dart into your skin. (174)

In *Justine*, the libertine Coeur-de-fer says that man should "blindly, unthinkingly deliver himself up to causing every hurt the idea for which may be born in him" since "it is only Nature's voice which suggests this idea; such is the only fashion in which she makes us her laws' executors" (495). Sade reveals the monstrosity of

reason by taking reason as far as logically possible and, in so doing, questions the motives of any morality based on such rationalism.

Interestingly, in the mouth of his libertine Dolomance, Sade refutes the idea of God as watchmaker, yet reinstates in the same paragraph the binary between that which creates and that which is created. Dolomance ridicules the “divine watchmaker” argument: “Might the pocket watch be the watchmaker? Very well then, they will continue, Nature is nothing, it is God who is all. Another stupidity!” (210). However, Dolomance goes on to say: “There are necessarily two things in the universe: the creative agent and the being created; now, to identify this creative agent is the single task before us, the one question to which one has got to provide a reply” (210). He then argues that the creative agent is, in fact, nature.

Sade’s materialism is obvious in his obsession with the machine, particularly in an erotic and satirical context. His idea of man and of human sexuality as machine, which is clearly influenced by La Mettrie, is borne out of the encompassing idea of nature as machine, and of humanity acting in accordance with nature. The implication is that, if sex is a natural but machinated process, then nature is at once watch-mechanism and watchmaker. Sade creates an eroticism which replaces God with nature as watchmaker, so that nature becomes a challenge to God as creator. While Sade’s works include libertine inventions, real machines to be used for debauchery, it is the idea of man-as-machine which reveals the relationship between materialism and atheism in the Sadean text.

The cold, clinical, machine-like quality of his erotica has been viewed by some as a failure of his writing, and not an expression of his philosophy, but when examined in relation to his materialism, it takes on a deeper meaning. At the most superficial level of interpretation, it can be said that Sade uses the body as machine metaphor to establish his materialist position: the body is no greater than the sum of its physical parts, and there is no value to these parts besides their potential for providing and receiving physical sensations. Accordingly, the hierarchy of the parts of the body which can be found in Christian understandings of the body is inverted: the anus, ordinarily the most profane, impure and base part of the body is elevated to the highest place in the hierarchy because it provides the most (blasphemous) pleasure. Sade extends the metaphor in the display of the erotic tableau, and the idea of the orgy as machine. Roland Barthes considers the portrayal of the orgy as machine in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. The human body consists of parts which are the

basis for the greater machine, “a substructure constructed around the basic patient,” which is realised in the orgy, “and saturated when all the body’s sites are occupied by different partners” (152). The act of intercourse is a basic machine, but in Sade it is seen as “an open apparatus” in which each new partner increases the number of sites to be saturated, defined by “the interlocking of all the parts” (152-53). There is the sense that the orgy has the potential to continue growing until it subsumes all into a massive machine, in which there is no room for independent will, thought or subjectivity, only parts that must interconnect. Says Barthes, “the machine will tolerate no one’s being solitary, no one’s remaining outside it,” a statement which has special implications for examining the sovereignty of the libertine, an examination which Chapter Eight will undertake (153). In this way Sade makes an ironic anti-Cartesian statement: there is nothing outside the physical, and the body does not even constitute a closed or autonomous system since it is part of a greater composition. We cannot even liken Sade to a panentheist (a word which has come to be associated with Spinoza, which refers to a belief that all things are a part of God, who extends beyond all things) since this greater composition is not even a totality; it is always an open apparatus. Although Sade establishes an atheistic materialism in the erotic machinations of the orgy, Sade places the machine in the larger context of his theories of nature, a move which produces different and often competing meanings for the debauches of his libertines.

### **The Meaning and Meaninglessness of Death**

Indeed, Sade takes materialism to its extreme when he argues that nature as an entity is fundamentally indifferent to everything, including death (this idea is then betrayed, in ways that will be explored later on). Sade argues in a typically Holbachian fashion that, since death neither destroys matter nor renders it inert, the category of death is a human construction not recognised by nature: “death is only imaginary; it exists only figuratively and has no reality” (*Juliette* 69). Sade sees death as just another human construction, a category; for Sade, the *unreality* of death proves nature’s apathy. This is an ironic inversion of the pathetic fallacy, the idea that nature reflects human emotions or circumstances. A poetic device, the pathetic fallacy does not claim that, in actuality, nature indeed recognises and reacts to human emotions in appropriate ways (by becoming cloudy when there is sadness, for example). But a personified nature which reacts to human emotion is perhaps not so different from one



personified, like the idea of a rational nature, to react to other philosophical systems. Sade paints nature as apathetic precisely to counter these ideas. In *Juliette* this theory is put in the mouth of Sade's licentious parody of Pope Pius VI (an extremely unpopular figure at the time and therefore a fashionable target for satire), as a justification for murder:

[B]ear it ever in mind that there is no real destruction, that death is itself nothing of the sort, that, physically and philosophically viewed ... a man's birth is no more the commencement of his existence than his death is its cessation; and the mother who bears him no more gives him life than the murderer who kills him gives him death; the former produces some matter organized in a certain way, the latter provides the occasion for the renascence of some different matter; and both create. Nothing is essentially born, nothing essentially perishes, all is but the action and reaction of matter. (772)

This argument is borrowed from Holbach, who observes in *A System of Nature* that "nothing in nature is either born, or dies, according to the common acceptation of those terms" (27), and likewise holds that nature is composed of matter in motion, death being only a new arrangement of particles with no real meaning, and, furthermore, the only way that humans, lacking a spiritual component, can be called immortal.

The contrast between this argument and the stance of the Church on death is all the more ironic coming from the mouth of Sade's depraved Pope. Christians believe that death can be overcome because it has been overcome by Christ, and this is signified by an overcoming of the material world. Sade denies death by pointing out that the material body, in as much as it is composed of matter, is eternal, if constantly changing. Death cannot be overcome because not only is there nothing which can overcome it, there is nothing to overcome. This is apparently an idea that meant a great deal to Sade, the man, since in his will he requested, in all earnestness, that when he died he be buried in an unmarked grave on his estate at Malmaison near Epernon:<sup>25</sup> "the ditch once covered over, above it acorns shall be strewn, in order

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<sup>25</sup> There was another famous historical figure who owned property at Malmaison: Joséphine de Beauharnais, the wife of Napoleon, who once sentenced Sade to death *in absentia* for his writing. Joséphine lived at the Château de Malmaison from the time of her divorce until her death in 1814 (see Knapton's *Empress Josephine*).

that the spot become green again, and the copse grown back thick over it, the traces of my grave may disappear from the face of the earth” (112). In his death, Sade wanted to reject the Catholic idea of the “good death,” by rejecting any and all ritual surrounding death, even a proper burial. That request was not granted. Instead, Sade was buried in the Charenton cemetery and, when his body was later exhumed because of a need to excavate the cemetery, his skull was taken for phrenological examination by Dr. L. J. Ramon, who had treated Sade in life as a patient. Ramon concluded, ironically enough, that the skull, later lost, “was in all respects similar to that of a father of the Church” (*Letters from Prison* 41), a comparison Sade would likely have found entertaining. Sade equates death with life because, through death and inhumation, matter is returned to nature, which then uses the resources of the decaying matter to fertilise new life.

Whatever the associations that Christianity has connected with nature, and whether those have rendered it evil and profane or divine in the Church’s eyes, there is one idea that the Church is bound to condemn, and that is the idea that nature is indifferent or neutral. In *Juliette*, Sade advances the theory that nature (so often referenced, especially in Aquinian Catholic doctrine of natural law, to defend morality) is in fact indifferent to morality, and yet he betrays this idea by personifying nature in various ways. For Sade, as for the Church, the idea of nature is essentially reduced to human nature, his theories eventually used to support an ethical worldview. To conclude his dissertation on nature in *Juliette*, Pope Pius VI gives numerous instances when, he says, “in all ages and everywhere, man has placed his delight in destroying, and nature hers in permitting it” (782). The Pope argues that there is a proclivity to murder and destruction in human beings, a proclivity placed there by nature, the creator. He even claims that religion has been used as nothing more than a “cloak” to legitimise torture and murder, acts which are performed but for the joy of it, in accord with natural laws. This argument is notable for its opposition to the Rousseauian fancy of nature’s innocence, which Sade took great glee in repudiating. Although God is removed from the equation, the idea of a natural order that is religious is inverted. Sade perverts the idea of a sacred natural law, so that sinning becomes an act *sanctioned by* nature, instead of an act *against* nature. Because his society saw nature and civilisation as opposed (an idea which in many ways endures to this day), Sade seeks to pervert nature, and to revel in its

excesses and its baseness – its profanity – and so to expose the farce of civilised society, he transgresses against it.

### **Nature's Cruelty and Natural Evil**

Although Sade's materialist theory of nature is sufficient to eject God from the realm of material things, Sade is not content with anything less than the utter destruction, not only of the spiritual and divine realm, but of the physical, too; and this is the final turn that his philosophy of nature takes. The next argument, though a consequence of the first, is almost contradictory in the motivations that it ascribes to an apparently apathetic nature. To the Sadean mind, nature is cruel, and humans, with the capacity for cruelty given to them by their creator, which is nature, must not deny that capacity. Despite all of his arguments about death and destruction being in accordance with nature, Sade at times sees nature as a creative force. However, Sade sees destruction as a way of aiding nature's capacity to create: the Pope in *Juliette* believes that acts of destruction are greater than acts of creation. His logic is that, if man multiplies, "he is wrong because he takes away from nature the honour of a new phenomenon since the result of the laws which govern him is necessarily new creatures. If those who have been issued forth do not propagate, nature will issue forth new ones and enjoy a faculty she no longer has" (69).

Sadean libertines have at times used similar views of nature in order to justify non-procreation in ways that overtly contradict doctrine. Dolomance argues in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* that homosexuality, far from being the unnatural act that the Church paints, is in a greater accord with nature than heterosexuality since there is no danger of procreation from it. "Far from outraging Nature, on the contrary – and let us be well persuaded of it – the sodomite and Lesbian<sup>26</sup> serve her by stubbornly abstaining from a conjunction whose resultant progeniture can be nothing but irksome to her" (276). Not only is this view anti-Catholic in the sense that it challenges the Catholic, philoprogenitive order of nature, but it is downright Gnostic in its anti-procreative cautions. In this passage, Sade references an order of nature, not to dissolve moral categories altogether, but rather to support a destructive

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<sup>26</sup> The use of the word "lesbian" here is an artefact of translation, since the term did not come into wide usage until the twentieth century, and therefore, could not have been used by Sade. Sade would normally have used the term "tribade" to denote female homosexuality.

libertine philosophy with its own set of ethics based on a materialist view of nature. Nevertheless, he subverts a purely materialist view of nature by making nature the target of his impotent rage, a kind of surrogate for God.

Sade places nature in the same position as he places God. Bataille says of Sade: “at other times he is an atheist, but not a cold-blooded one: his atheism defies God and battens on sacrilege; it usually substitutes *Nature in a state of perpetual motion* for God” (*Literature and Evil* 110). Sade’s arguments for making nature equivalent with matter in perpetual motion (and he states obliquely that all is but “the action and reaction of matter,” [*Juliette* 772] which can be seen as evidence that he includes humans as a part of nature), combined with his materialism, would seem to provide evidence of Spinozism in his philosophy. Certainly, any statement of support for a one-substance universe in Sade’s society would have been taken as an outright declaration of allegiance to Spinoza (which is why La Mettrie was interpreted as a Spinozist), a dangerous position to take. Yet it is not at all clear that Sade sees nature as encompassing all things, and all things being in nature, since he clearly distinguishes between nature as a creative force, and the results of this force, the created, that is, humanity. Nature might as well be called God, and Sade a deist – it would be much more accurate than labelling him a Spinozist. Because of its position as creator, nature in his system of thought becomes the target of the same insults and rage that God once did. The state of nature as “perpetual motion” is important because this attracts Sade, and is the source of an almost jealous rage.

Bataille reads in Sade a principle of endless expenditure of energy. But to expend energy endlessly requires prodigious energy to begin with; it is impossible since it requires a state of perpetual motion. The Sadean libertine sees nature in a state of perpetual motion and attempts to achieve this state by transgressing against nature: somehow, by subverting nature’s creative process through destruction, the Sadean libertine believes that it might be possible to encourage further creation. Klossowski says that, in Sade’s philosophy, “we discover in nature the traits of that God who created the greatest number of men with the aim of making them run the risk of eternal tortures” (“Nature as a Destructive Principle” 72). Sade’s advances a view of nature here which presents a challenge to Christian theodicy, as found in the work of Leibniz. Leibniz coined the term in his *Essays on the Justice of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil* (1710), which sought to provide a solution to the problem of evil: why God, presumably an omnipotent and benevolent creator,

tolerates the existence of evil. Leibniz argued that God had created the best of all possible worlds and so, accordingly, “it must be known that as in a well-constituted republic as much care as possible is taken of the good of the individual, so the universe cannot be perfect if individual interests are not protected as much as the universal harmony will permit” (*On the Ultimate Origin of Things* 106). Leibniz posited that evil and suffering serve the good by providing a contrast to it: “The most illustrious composers often introduce discords into their harmonies, in order to excite and pique, so to speak, the listener, who, anxious as to the outcome, is all the more pleased when soon all things are restored to order” (5-6), and ultimately, suffering serves an overall good: “As regards especially the afflictions of good people, we must hold for certain that there results for them a greater good” (106).

Sade is clearly disgusted by this idea, since he turns it on its head (a typical move) by making good the thing to be resisted and subverted. The example of his heroine Justine shows that good exists only to drive the libertine to further evil, to provide an opportunity for crime, and therefore for the satisfaction of lust. As Klossowski points out, Sade’s attack on nature is much like his attack on God, unanswerable and unanswered. Sade’s libertines preach vehemently the atheistic arguments which nullify such a rage against nature, and yet retain that rage, with the result that even though libertines attempt to liquidate moral categories, they remain trapped by them. Klossowski says, “[the libertine’s] conscience, though it accepts nature as the supreme instance, has not yet given up the mechanism of moral categories which, in his struggle against God, has been found to be useful and necessary” (“Nature as a Destructive Principle” 73).

The basis of Sadean philosophy is much closer to Gnosticism than strict atheism, and even Klossowski reads in Sade’s work a “Gnostic theory of the fall of the spirits” (*Sade My Neighbor* 101). Sade’s Gnosticism, however, comes down to an ethical rejection of the religious. Although the Sadean philosophy of transgression is not in keeping with the practices of the Gnostics,<sup>27</sup> it remains true to the *spirit* of Gnosticism, because transgression is able to overcome the physical world. The debauchery of Sade’s libertines is an expression of a Gnostic sensibility, because it is destructive of the limits of the profane world. Sade’s Gnostic desire to annihilate the

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<sup>27</sup> Even so, Gnostics have been accused of sexual transgressions by the Church in the past.

physical world is all the more blasphemous and heretical perhaps even than an atheistic materialist view of nature, since the Gnostic interpretation of nature as profane is directly at odds with Catholic orthodox views of nature as sacred, and the material world as therefore good. In addition, Sade's anti-procreative stance identifies him with radical Gnostic sects, the most famous being the Cathars, who believed that it was a sin to bring life into a flawed world. This idea seems redemptory, and to a certain extent it is, though not in the traditional sense. By overcoming nature, it seems possible to access endless energy potential, similar to the Greek concept of *dynamis*,<sup>28</sup> (Cohen) which Aristotle used to denote primary potential energy. Subverting nature through destructive transgression makes possible a state of endless potential for new creation, since new creation cannot take place until what is already in existence is destroyed. Nevertheless, as Klossowski explains:

it is not the concept of nature in Sade, a concept originating in Spinoza and which Sade takes as "nature destructive of its own works," that will explain the phenomenon of transgression ... This concept only serves as an argument for murder, for the vanity of murder, as well as for refuting the law of the propagation of the race. It does not elucidate the transgressive enjoyment, which aspires at *nothing* save to renew itself. ("Sade, or the Philosopher-Villain" 10)

Sade's transgressive sensibility, even as it pertains to the destruction of nature, exists ultimately for libertine enjoyment. Libertines set up a system of nature in order to destroy it; this not for the sake of destroying morality (nothing so noble as that in Sade's works), but rather to have the pleasure of transgressing. In this respect, even when rationality abolishes the framework, whatever that may be (religion, morality, etc.), libertines will simply find another. They must restore the binaries of sacred and profane, taboo and transgression, creator and destroyer, in order to endlessly renew and inflame their passions.

The systems of nature in Sade's texts are constructions which serve a number of purposes. In the first place, they function as a critique of the various positions on nature at the time, and in this way Sade takes up the position of outsider to the Enlightenment tradition, by virtue of this establishing himself as an Enlightenment

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<sup>28</sup> Or *dunamu*, which refers to potentiality, potency, or ability, and is contrasted, in Aristotle, with actuality.

philosopher. In the second, the various arguments for a materialist nature constitute a significant part of his attack on the metaphysical category of God, and the institution of the Catholic Church. However, these arguments serve to build a new framework of order only so that it can be destroyed. Sade's use of theories of nature do not suggest that he adheres to a typical kind of materialism where nature might be seen as material and so apathetic or indifferent to the activities of human beings. Even when libertines argue that nature is apathetic, this is a rhetorical move designed to transgress as much as to convince.

## Chapter 4

### Sade's Confession: The Transgressive Scene and the Audience

“My kind of debauchery soils not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I may conceive in its course, that is to say, the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop.”

- Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*

Sade, perhaps more than any other author in recent history, has explored and challenged the neurosis and obsessions that Western culture has with the idea of sex. This, much more than his materialism, his involvement with the Revolution, or his significance to psychoanalysis, is why he is indispensable to a discussion of philosophy. It is not interesting in itself that Sade wrote about sex. Rather, it is the precise *way* that he wrote of it, the construction of his sex scenes and the way that they are located in a philosophical and libertine discourse, and the metaphysical meanings of his fetishistic practice of writing. Sex in Sade has what could most accurately be termed a metaphysical significance; metaphysical because sex is the core of the libertine being; all things in the Sadean world are thought through in terms of sexuality, and it is sexuality which illustrates and is the point of libertine dissertations. Sade uses erotic writing as a tool to transgress not only religious norms and laws, but also Enlightenment understandings of the world and ideas about nature. Sex in Sade is never as pleasurable to libertines as when it is coupled with the transgressive, when it incorporates crime. In his work, Sade makes transgression inherently sexual, but he also makes sex inherently transgressive. This is a transgression of societal and cultural taboos. What is unique and valuable about transgressive sex in Sade's work is that it implies that *all* sex is transgressive, that transgression is a fact of societies that comes into being and is sanctioned by the creation of prohibitions.

Sade's sex scenes are scenes for an audience, and, as such, are in keeping with a long tradition of confession. Sade's novels could be called metatheatrical, since he needs an audience for his transgression, which is why his sex scenes have the feel of scenes from a play. Reading a metaphysics of sexuality in Sade will also



demonstrate the ways that Sade uses sex to confront the religious, and expose the contradictions and complexities of the way sexuality is viewed and spoken about in his time. In his outrageous writing, Sade breaks taboos, transgresses, tests the limits of society but this is *for society's sake*, which is not to say that Sade was somehow philanthropic in his theories, it could hardly be said that he wanted or expected to change society for the better. Rather, Sade's often satirical works show society itself through a glass, darkly.

Sex in discourse is never just a biological act, and the term itself does not have a stable meaning which points only to this act. Anthropologically speaking, reproductive sex has been important in establishing and keeping power in kinship groups and dynasties. Sex and religion cannot be separated at this anthropological level, and it has served a similar function in religious groups and societies, which, historically, have been kinship groups. There are rules governing who is able to have sex with whom, and under what circumstances, and these rules are still a matter of deep importance and contention. Sex served to order society, which was but one small part of a cosmology, in which sexual order was immensely important. In fact, in his 2003 book *The Western Construction of Religion* Daniel Dubuisson refers to Western religion as belonging to the category of "cosmographic formations" which are discursive formations designed to link individuals to a social and cosmic order (17). A good example of how integral sex is to the cosmic order is narrated in Genesis, and referred to as the sin of Onan. The sin of Onan is often thought of colloquially as masturbation; however, in the passage in Genesis 38:8-10 detailing the sin, God is only displeased with Onan because he went against custom by refusing to plant his seed in his brother's widow, and instead "spilt his seed on the ground every time he slept with his brother's wife, to avoid providing offspring for his brother" since the first born of that union would be considered the dead husband's child (Genesis 38:9). God puts Onan to death for disturbing the cosmic order by refusing to reproduce with his brother's wife, which he was required to do by the laws of Levirate marriage, which states that a man must, in the event of his brother's death, marry the brother's widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Levirate marriage has been practiced by many societies (Weisberg 5) but in the biblical context it is a law that ensures that the line of inheritance will continue through the deceased brother's line by providing him with an heir, and it also reinforces bonds within a kinship group which would otherwise be weakened or dissolved by a death

(Weisberg 25-27). Now, such an injunction is regarded with distaste and may even be considered to promote incest. Prohibitions on incest and marriage laws have similar cosmological foundations, but this will be examined later in the chapter.

Foucault, who famously advanced the notion that sex is discursive, cautions: “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a *historical construct*... [added emphasis]” (*The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 105). Foucault interrogates the meaning of sex and explains that sex helps constitute individual and collective subjectivities in the Western world:

How is it that in a society like ours, sexuality is not simply a means of reproducing the species, the family and the individual? Not simply a means to obtain pleasure and enjoyment? How has sexuality come to be considered the privileged place where our deepest “truth” is read and expressed? For that is the essential fact: since Christianity, the Western world has never ceased saying: “To know who you are, know what your sexuality is.” Sex has always been the forum where both the future of our species and our “truth” as human subjects is decided. (“Power and Sex” 110-11)

Society has had to develop often highly specialised discursive traditions in order to speak about sex, sexuality, and the erotic. Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that Western society has produced discourses for talking about sex specifically to produce a way of finding out “the truth” of sex:

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. (56)

Foucault says that Western civilisation is “the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession” (60). This tradition of confession reaches back to before the Middle Ages, and has pervaded all of society: “western man has become a confessing animal” (59). It informs all aspects of life, from the judicial systems; “one confesses one’s crimes” to interpersonal relationships; “one’s thoughts and desires” and the medical profession; “one’s illnesses and troubles” (59). Foucault argues

against the hypothesis of repression, according to which the Victorian age ushered in a strict set of rules for speaking about sex, repressing its expression in language. Far from being confined to a single discursive formation, there has been a proliferation of discourses related to sex, all motivated by finding out the truth of sex. According to Foucault, Western culture has lacked an “ars erotica,” a way of speaking about or finding the “truth” of sex. Of those societies which had an *ars erotica*, Foucault names “China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies,” societies which celebrated an erotic art wherein:

[T]ruth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice and articulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself. (57)

Foucault’s generalisation here is open to debate, especially since Western culture has been influenced by Roman antiquity, and Foucault himself reasons in *The Use of Pleasure* (volume two of the *History of Sexuality*) that Christianity did not represent some total reversal of or complete break with so called “pagan” sexual morality and practice. Whether or not Western culture has been totally without an *ars erotica* is open to debate, especially since the Christian relationship to the body and desire as expressed in art and iconography is much more nuanced and complex than a turning aside. The implications of Christian mystical experience and spiritual ecstasy for the body will be discussed later on in this chapter. Foucault’s “confession” metaphor is still useful and authoritative, especially when seeking an understanding of the Marquis de Sade. Foucault says that, instead of an *ars erotica*, Western societies use a confessional model to speak of sex, in which:

It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and the quality of the pleasure that animated it. (63)

Since the confessional model is Christian in origin, it seems to be the consensus of many scholars that Christianity wrought changes in sexual practices and discourses: specifically, that it has relegated sex to the realm of the profane. Certainly, Bataille has argued as much. Foucault problematises the dichotomy between Greco-Roman culture and Christian culture regarding sex in volumes two and three of his *History of Sexuality*. Concerns and debates over sexual ethics,

conduct and desire long predate Christianity. They did not come from nowhere in the early Christian mind, but were “already present at the core of Greek and Greco-Roman thought” (15). For example, the anxiety over sex that is often felt to be purely a Christian invention has precedents in Greek thought:

Medical and philosophical reflection describes it as posing a threat, through its violence, to the control and mastery that one ought to exercise over oneself; as sapping the strength the individual should conserve and maintain, through the exhaustion it caused; and as prefiguring the death of the individual while assuring the survival of the species. (125)

Nevertheless, Foucault cautions, “it would be a mistake to infer that the sexual morality of Christianity and that of paganism form a continuity” (*The Use of Pleasure* 20-21). Foucault does measure a difference between the form and motivation of anxiety over sex as opposed to Christian anxiety. While Christian anxieties lead to a “juridico-moral codification of acts, moments, and intentions that legitimated an activity that was itself a bearer of negative values” (*The Use of Pleasure* 138) designed to protect the soul while making an accommodation for sexual desire within certain institutions, Foucault defines the Greek anxieties about sex within a theory of the subject, reflection on sexual morality aimed to “develop a technique of existence” or create a “possibility of forming oneself as a subject in control of his conduct” (138). This was “because it was the most violent of all the pleasures, because it was more costly than most physical activities, and because it participated in the game of life and death, it constituted a privileged domain for the ethical formation of the subject” (139). This last idea clearly carried over into the practice of confession and the idea that sexuality is at the core of self-knowledge, which Foucault himself explains in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In the conclusion to *The Use of Pleasure*, he speaks of a “practical unification” of elements of sexual morals and codes that “recentered the arts of existence around the decipherment of the self, purification procedures, and struggles against concupiscence. So what was now at the core of the problematisation of sexual conduct was no longer pleasure and the aesthetics of its use, but desire and its purifying hermeneutics” (254).

He asserts that the nineteenth century saw the development of a scientific sexual discourse, a “scientia sexualis” (*History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 58). The discourse of sex has become scientific and medical; it is a way of identifying and partitioning

off certain expressions of sexual desire as perversions, to the extent that it is almost impossible to speak of a normal sexuality. It would be difficult to find a person more victimised by this process than Sade, whose name has become a permanent part of this discourse but who would never live to see his name used in such a way. Sade lived on the cusp of the development of new sexual discourses, and so it was history which would make of him an erotic martyr, someone who was incarcerated because he could not contain his perversions. He was indeed incarcerated over charges of sexual misconduct, but the reasons for his incarceration are far more political than outrage over the transgression of a societal taboo. Sade himself was not overtly interested in the medical, but it quickly became interested in him. Since the first publication of his work, Sade has been analysed through the lens of the psychology of sex, the medical discourse that Foucault identifies. However, Sade's significance here is not because of this categorisation of him, but rather, the metaphysical significance of sex in Sade. Indeed, it will be argued that this is a much more important extrapolation of the meaning of sex in Sade, since it allows for a reading of his philosophy which is not constricted by the idea that it is an expression of a mental illness or perversion. Foucault thinks that, by attempting to confine sex to the medical, scientific, and clandestine, it has, far from being regulated or confined to the bounds of the home and the heterosexual married couple, led to "an explosion of unorthodox sexualities" (49). That is not to say that the West has invented any original vices – even Sade was not the first sadist – he has simply come to name and to mean something, in fact quite different from anything he actually wrote about: a category, a perversion, a mental illness, and lately, a fashionable<sup>29</sup> sexual subculture linked to masochism.<sup>30</sup>

The sacrament of penance, by cataloguing as well as pursuing the sexual confession relentlessly, and by its clandestine nature, has been implicated in sexual sin in the past, and with recent scandals relating to child molestation in the Church,

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<sup>29</sup> Quite literally, as it turns out. Designers (Galliano, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and Vivienne Westwood, to name a few) have long played with elements of the " bdsm " subculture in producing garments: fetish items have become fashion.

<sup>30</sup> The sexual order of masochism is seen as sadism's inverse and its natural partner, but the philosophy from which it is drawn has very little in common with sadism. Deleuze analyses this difference in *Coldness and Cruelty*.

this issue has resurfaced. The stock character of the lecherous priest has often been linked to the confessional booth, such that the confession has gained sexual connotations. This is not only an effect of language: there is evidence that the Church has had to produce guidelines for the treatment of *sollicitatio ad turpia*; solicitation, which the *Catholic Encyclopedia* defines as “making use of the sacrament of penance, directly or indirectly, for the purpose of drawing others in to sins of lust” (Fanning). Numerous popes have penned documents on the subject, Benedict XIV wrote the *Sacramentum pœnitentiæ* in 1721, and, more recently, the *Crimen sollicitationis*, a letter approved by John XXIII, was circulated with the Church in 1963, outlining the procedures for dealing with solicitation. The crime is treated seriously, the penitent is bound to report the solicitation, and cannot receive penance again until it is reported, and the confessor, if found guilty, is suspended from office, and excluded from celebrating Mass. The presence of such documents indicates that solicitation has been a problem for the Church in the past. There have been specific procedures created more recently to protect minors from the sexual advances of priests which have affected the practice of confession. For example, if a priest makes a confession of such a crime, the confession is to an extent exempt from the seal of confession, which would otherwise guarantee confidentiality.

What is important about the confessional and language is that, as Foucault says, “[o]ne could plot a straight line from the seventeenth century pastoral to what became its projection in literature, ‘scandalous’ literature at that” (*History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 21). While, according to Foucault, the language used by the confessor became “veiled” after the fifteenth century compared to that used in the Middle Ages (18),<sup>31</sup> the “scope of the confession – the confession of the flesh – continually increased,” such that penance became more important for so-called sins of the flesh (19). Foucault says:

According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications ... a twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important moment of transgression from

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<sup>31</sup> One of the effects of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent was to discipline and regulate the practices of the Church as a response to Protestant accusations of corruption in its ranks.

the act itself to the stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire. (*History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 19-20)

And so desire was transformed into discourse: “The Christian pastoral prescribed as fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech” (21).

### **Sade’s Confessional**

Sade exemplifies the mode of the confession in sexual discourse. His works are so dense with this kind of confession that they read as a catalogue of perversions, in which every detail, thought, and feeling is obsessively narrated. Sadean libertines are obsessed with producing the “truth of sex,” and they work tirelessly to ensure that what they consider to be false truths are overturned. Additionally, sex clearly constitutes the core of the libertine being. It is the metaphysical truth of libertinism, such that libertinism is not simply a path or philosophy that one follows, but is the ontological foundation of an identity. Yet Sade’s confession stands apart. It cannot be considered to be an example of the Freudian practice of confession in the scientific or medical sense, for that came later. Even though the roots of this practice had already been laid down, Sade was little interested in being diagnosed, of all things, although later doctors would become interested in the medical implications of Sade’s life and works. Sade’s confession is to the religious, like a penitent facing a priest, except that Sade inverts the role of penitent; his confessions of transgression are themselves a transgression.

That is not to say that Sade is a penitent in the traditional sense, but that the act of speaking about sex, of confessing crimes and sexual sins, is important in establishing full recognition of an individual’s libertinism, and also in arousing the listeners to greater debauchery. The structure of *The 120 Days* is such that the confession makes up the greater part of the book. The story-then-orgy structure is common in Sade’s novels, though none of his other novels emphasise this structure as explicitly as in *The 120 Days*. Even the title of *The 120 Days* recalls *One Thousand and One Nights* (otherwise known as *The Arabian Nights*), the collection of stories which is also fatally linked to what happens when the story ends (Scheherazade must keep her audience enthralled or be put to death). *The One Thousand and One Nights* had been translated and published in French in instalments from 1704 by Antoine Galland, resulting in widespread popularity of the works in

the eighteenth century, not only in France but across Europe. It at least partially inspired eighteenth-century orientalism, although, as Robert Irwin observes in his *Companion to The Arabian Nights*, “it would be a mistake” to regard this translation as the “only source behind the mania for the Orient” (242). Nevertheless, it was incredibly influential, inspiring what is estimated to be “almost 700 romances in the oriental mode” published in France during this time (241), including Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* and Voltaire’s *Candide*. The structure of *The 120 Days* also recalls other story collections, such as Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The collections frequently included bawdy and sexual stories, balanced by stories with a more pious theme (along with perhaps the most scandalous stories, which mixed religion and erotica).

These collections of tales are defined by the way that the myriad narratives are linked to time and the passing of the days. In *The 120 Days*, daily procedure requires that, from the hours of six to ten at night, a storyteller should recount tales designed to “inflame the imagination,” as a prelude to the orgy (246). The storytellers are four women, all ex-prostitutes who have themselves become libertines. They narrate their sexual experiences with men who are either libertines or have highly unusual fetishes, for no mainstream sexual encounter could secure a libertine’s interest. The storyteller is often interrupted by a libertine’s desire for details: at one stage, Duclos is interrupted by the Bishop, who asks for clarification on a point, and, when it is given, chides her because that information was essential to the company being fully inflamed: “You observe that you failed to mention everything, and that what you have just recounted forms still another passion” (401). Foucault quotes Sade when he describes the effect of the confession on all forms of sexual discourse: “Sade takes up the injunction in words that seem to have been transcribed from the treatises of spiritual direction” (21). He then quotes the *Président de Curval* of *The 120 Days*: “Your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you describe relates to human manners and man’s character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance” (273). The confession is designed to gain an accurate insight into the precise perverse nature of the subject described. This, too, is shared in common with the tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer, where the different characters and the stories they tell are archetypes of human nature, together forming a kind of catalogue of human nature and society.



After the “confession” of the storyteller, the libertines are often spurred to act out similar fetishes to the ones just described. For example: Duclos describes her encounter with a libertine with a specific ritual: “...taking a stool and placing it between my legs, he sat down in such a way that his prick ... was as it were at a level with the hole upon which he was to offer a libation. ... with one hand he fringed himself, with the other he separated my buttocks, ... I felt myself soaked” (298). Afterwards, the libertine Durcet is moved to carry out the same procedure. After a suitable girl, Zelmire, is found: “she was placed at the foot of the couch, made to lie upon her belly, her rump was raised by means of cushions, the little hole was in plain sight. The lecher’s prick begins to rise, he falls to kissing and fondling what lies under his nose. He orders Julie to frig him ... the lecher swears, the fuck flows, and the bell sounds for dinner” (299). The other libertines soon follow suit, Zelmire is “to an uncommon degree regaled during the subsequent orgies, and everyone simply had to kiss her ass” (299-300). After hearing about Duclos’ experiences with men who have scatological fetishes, “the entire evening was devoted to unclean activities of roughly the same species that had been treated in the story” (371).

The story *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man* is structured around the deathbed confession. The dying man is asked to repent of his sins, and he concurs, but only repents of those sins he believes he has committed in not serving nature more fully. He says, “I repent not having acknowledged [nature’s] omnipotence as fully as I might have done, I am only sorry for the modest use I made of the faculties (criminal in your view, perfectly ordinary in mine) she gave me to serve her; I did sometimes resist her, I repent it” (166). The priest, far from managing to convince the dying man to repent in the traditional sense, is himself eventually convinced by the dying man’s logic, and, by the end of the dialogue becomes “one who Nature has corrupted” (175). The entire story would be a typical conversion scene, except here the deathbed conversion which ordinarily sees the dying man redeemed, instead vindicates the life and views of the dying man and corrupts the priest attending him. This must strike any reader as interesting since the priest’s corruption as detailed by the dialogue itself had little to do with nature (which is, in any case, cultural), but rather rhetoric. A certain conception of nature may serve as justification for an argument, yet it is always the rhetoric itself, the philosophy and politics of libertine company which corrupt. Corruption never seems to happen naturally. *Justine* is in the more traditional sense a confession because the heroine

genuinely desires absolution and deliverance from sin, although she herself never willingly commits the sin. She becomes a kind of sexual martyr for her beliefs, in the vein of Saints Agnes of Rome and Lucy of Syracuse, both of whom were, according to some accounts, condemned to be raped and sent to brothels when they refused to consummate their marriages because they wished to remain virgins (see Kirsch; Bridge). While Agnes and Lucia, according to their stories, are spared this fate by divine intervention, Justine, significantly, is not. Her confession, even if, as she fears, she has “offended heaven with impure recitals,” (737) seemingly manages to turn her sister from her life of crime, at least, in her own novel; in *Juliette*, her fate is very different.

### **Sade and Sex in the French Revolution**

As subversive and politically engaged texts, Sade’s erotic novels demonstrate just how destabilizing a force sex is to the order of some societies. Sade’s writing is not only an effort to engage in major philosophical debates of the time, notably the debates over nature and human nature, but also a way to explore his revolutionary ideas. Sade was not the only revolutionary to write clandestine and erotic works, and, in doing so, he played off a long tradition in his society. Before his involvement with Robespierre and the Revolution, Saint-Just published *Organt au Vatican*, a collection of cantos which was highly critical of the Catholic Church and the monarchy. The Comte de Mirabeau<sup>32</sup> also wrote erotic works, among them *Erotica Biblion*, *My Conversion*, and *The Education of Laura*, which is believed to have inspired Sade’s *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (Bloch 48). *Philosophy in the Boudoir* also seems to have taken cues from *My Confession*, since Sade’s heroine Eugénie is converted to a life of crime and libertinage. Ironically, these erotic works all use the language of Christianity, “conversion,” “erotic bible,” in order to critique it, a tradition which Sade continued. Lynn Hunt says in her book *The Invention of Pornography* that “politically motivated pornography helped to bring about the Revolution by undermining the legitimacy of the ancien régime as a social and political system”

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<sup>32</sup> Mirabeau and Sade met when they were both imprisoned at Vincennes when Sade, who had been denied a walk, spied through his cell window Mirabeau taking in the fresh air. Sade yelled obscenities down through the window at him and so the two took an instant dislike to one another (Lély 230). Even so, Sade retained an admiration for Mirabeau’s work, quoting him often.

(301). As has been mentioned, erotic literature increased the scandal around Marie-Antoinette, and Sade himself writes of the perverse pleasures of heads of state. In *Juliette* the heroine has encounters with the King of Naples and the duke of Savoy, and a male libertine, Borchamps, relates his encounters with and the libertine sensibilities of Catherine, the Empress of Russia (who was considered sexually deviant because she ruled alone after the death of her husband and took many lovers) and Princess Sophia of Prussia, who is based on Wilhelmina of Prussia. Upon meeting the King of Naples, Juliette declares him “slow-witted, simple-minded, blind – in fine, a king” who is ruled by his wife, who is a ‘whore, like her sister’ (Marie-Antoinette) (926). Borchamps says of the Empress of Russia: “all manners of enjoyment were desired by Catherine” (875). He narrates a story of how he is admitted into Catherine’s confidence, whence she implicates him in a plan to murder her son, Paul, who she describes as “that contemptible creature I failed to avoid bringing into this world” (879).

Revolution also relaxed censorship and freed up the publication of political and non-political pornography because “obscenity was much lower on the revolutionary list of concerns than were counterrevolutionary publications” (302). Hunt says that political pornography reached its “zenith” during the Revolution, but then “virtually disappeared,” replaced by pornography that was not politically motivated (302). This in turn helped to bring about a legal regulation of pornography in the next century, but Hunt suggests that it took time for it to lose its “association with subversive philosophy and politics” (304). She conjectures that the revolutionary connotations of pornography, which spread to libertinism and public expressions of sexual desire outside of print, made the regulation of pornography (and by extension sex) a far more urgent matter throughout Europe. Although, as Hunt suggests, politically motivated pornography may have declined, pornography remains to this day incredibly politically charged. It has not lost its revolutionary connotations, for it is still the subject of debates about censorship and freedom of expression or speech, debates which are always moral at their core. In his book *Eros Revived*, Peter Wagner defines pornography in the Enlightenment as “a vehicle of protest against the authority of the Church-State” (6). Portraying aristocrats and Church figures as debauched was the height of fashion, and helped to paint the monarchy and the Church as riddled with vice. Sade was perhaps unique among revolutionaries in providing a living example of such excess and vice in his very

person, which is why his very person had to be incarcerated and thereby made into an example. There is no doubt that Sade had reservations about the political systems of his time: in a conversation with the King of Sardinia, Juliette voices a typical revolutionary opinion:

In our day there is nothing more superfluous than a king; renounce that empty title before it is gone too far out of fashion, step down from your throne now, voluntarily, before, as may well happen, you are dragged forcibly off it by the people whose eyes are beginning to tire of its height. (568)

Sade goes so far as to attribute to the Enlightenment the planting of the seeds of the Revolution. Juliette continues: "... and think not that much is lacking before the change comes about; as men grow steadily more enlightened they begin to appraise critically what formerly dazzled them: well, the likes of you do not benefit from scrutiny" (568). However, Sade's greatest concern was the role of the Church in state affairs, as demonstrated by the pamphlet "Frenchmen, Some More Effort if you Wish to Become Republicans." His concerns are put in the mouth of the libertine King of Naples, Ferdinand, who is an atheist, but Machiavellian in his realisation that religion is necessary to rule: "Kings always encourage religion, religion has since the very beginning lent sinews to tyranny. The day man ceases to believe in God he will assassinate his rulers" (968). Juliette replies: "there is no telling which he may decide to destroy first ... but, be sure of it, once he has overthrown the one, it will not be long before he finishes off the other" (968). Despite her emphatic belief that philosophers should be free from Church and government rule, Juliette concedes a need for a ruler of "the rabble" (969). Juliette says that "I wish final authority to remain with the government, while the authority it leaves to the upper class and to philosophers would be utilised by them only in the interests of their individual passions" as long as these promote state interests (which, according to Ferdinand, are keeping the population down, and the lower classes in poverty) (969-70). Sade's political outrage seems to be motivated by his outrage at the universalising principles behind it. He took just as much offense to the excesses of the revolutionaries and he did to those of the aristocracy, though, his feelings towards the latter may have been tempered since he numbered himself among them.

### Sexuality, Nature, and the Religious

Sade's philosophy, ethics, and views of nature are all expressed through the erotic; the erotic also defines his atheism, and therefore his relationship to God and religion. By addressing theories of nature through the erotic, Sade provides a counter to the Church's history of addressing the erotic through theories of nature. In his study of Sade and Jean Sacher-Masoch, *Coldness and Cruelty (Le froid et le cruel)*, Deleuze argues that libertine arguments are purely demonstrative, in effect, a setting or prop for the erotic tableau (29). Libertines envision scenes and then have them carried out, precise adherence to their vision of the scene being paramount. Barthes observes that Sade's sex scenes are like *tableaux vivants*: "the Sadian group is often a *pictorial or sculptural object*" [my emphasis] (154). Sade's erotic scenes resemble the rhetorical device of ekphrasis; they aim to describe a visual work of art and to translate the visual into the literary. For example, during Borchamps' encounter with Catherine, the orgy is described as a scene, the characters introduced: "The lust objects appointed for the impending games appeared forthwith," the narrator positions the actors and instructs the audience: "Install yourself there where you have a clear view of me ... and consider my pleasures ... I am going to taste the supreme delights of offering you a display of thorough whorishness; cynicism is part of my character, I like to make a discreditable parade of myself, scandal excites my mind" (880). Borchamps describes the scene: "The girls undress their queen, then shower her with the prettiest caresses. Three of them suck, one her mouth, another her cunt, the last her asshole; they are replaced at their posts by the other three; the first team relieves the second; and the exercise was conducted at a very smart pace ... I had never beheld anything so voluptuous as this exquisite ensemble" (880-1). The reader is notified when the scene changes: "Another scene was enacted immediately" and "[a]fter a little everything changes again" (881). Each time, Borchamps describes a new tableau, a picture of debauchery: "It was she who now friggd the girls, each in her turn" (881). Later, the dénouement: "the living image of Catherine's son was the first victim to appear on the stage" (884).

Every scene has its audience. The audience are not only the libertines who watch and participate; they are the outraged, the religious, who are all the more outraged for they are forced to become voyeurs in the process. The transgression is in the enactment of the scene before such an audience. Such a scene for a group of like-minded libertines would mean very little. This certainly supports Deleuze's theory:

he writes: “the libertine may put on an act of trying to convince and persuade; he may even proselytize and gain new recruits. But the intention to convince is merely apparent” (18). Theories of nature in Sade are used not primarily to educate, but to provide a context for eroticism and violence. As Deleuze explains, Sade uses these theories in order to critique mainstream Enlightenment ideals, to “demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence” (18). In the context of Sade’s attack on religion, this violence becomes more than a theory of language, and Sade’s weapon of choice is sex. Although it is true that speaking of any type of sex in an open manner in literature was frowned upon in Sade’s time, it is safe to say that it is the subversive and non-normative nature of sex in Sade’s work that guaranteed him infamy and literary longevity. After all, pornographic literature was a booming trade in the eighteenth century, and, as long as it was kept in the private sphere (which the form of the novel guaranteed), it did not *overly* outrage people’s morals, being generally accessed by, and accessible to, men: “pornography as a structure of literary and visual representation most often offered women’s bodies as a focus of male bonding. Men wrote about sex for other male readers” (Hunt 44). Hunt explains:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, pornography was written for an elite male audience that was largely urban, aristocratic and libertine in nature. In the eighteenth century, the audience broadened as pornographic themes entered populist discourses, a development given even greater impetus by the French Revolution. (43)

Pornography during this time “extended its audience down to the popular classes” and began to be mass-produced (Hunt 305). Sade’s work was based on a desire to cause outrage and revulsion, and, though Sade often published anonymously to avoid punishment, his work was intended to bring the pornographic into the public eye. Despite Sade’s statements of desire expressed in his will that he fade into obscurity, since most of Sade’s work is aimed at undermining various social institutions as well as satirising the Enlightenment, it was intended to achieve a certain level of fame. The physical body and its desires, is, to Christianity and the Church, the single most troubling part of nature. Sade takes advantage of this by presenting transgressive sex as being in harmony with nature’s wishes. It is therefore important to contextualise just what the Church’s view on the body is, and how this fits in with a Christian order of nature.

### **The Sinful and Sexual Body in Christianity**

The Church, and Christianity in general, has a complicated relationship with the earthly or fleshly body, which it embraces as created (in God's image, no less), but also condemns as profane and capable of sin. These views of the body are generalisations, since Christianity's attitudes to the body have been constructed out of doctrines and writings which themselves have been developed over a very long time. Nevertheless it is safe to say that many of the Church's conceptions of the body are formed by a Platonic hierarchy of the body and the mind. The body is envisioned as weak, and needs to be ruled over by the mind, which is rational, for the sake of the protection of the immortal soul. The soul, which is thought even higher than either the body or the mind, can be sullied by sinful bodily acts and lust. According to Catholic doctrine, humanity has a tendency to sin (not necessarily created by the Fall of Man), which it calls concupiscence. The flesh has sinful desires which can imperil the spirit: in Galatians 5:17: "The desires of self-indulgence are always in opposition to the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are in opposition to self-indulgence: they are opposites, one against the other; that is how you are prevented from doing the things that you want to" and in Galatians 5:19: "When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: sexual vice, impurity, and sensuality." The creation myth upon which Christianity is founded contains the idea of punishment for wrongdoing or sin manifest in the body. God curses (in some interpretations, prophesies consequences instead of actively cursing) Eve such that she will experience pain in childbirth, and so the consequences of her sin are transmitted from one generation to the next, and are visited on the bodies of all women. This punishment inspired the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, the idea that the fall of man resulted in a state of sin transmitted down the generations.

Issues in the interpretation of scripture are clear in the many beliefs which proliferate out of the idea of sin being linked to the body. Second century theologian Tertullian believed that all women, having inherited Eve's sin, were the "devil's gateway," and that women must bear the responsibility for bringing sin into the world, thereby causing the death of the son of God (Porter 18). This is only the first instance of punishment for sin being manifest in the body. King Herod was struck down and eaten by worms for refusing to give glory to God. Similarly, although Matthew states that Judas dies by hanging himself, which is perhaps the most commonly accepted version of his death, Acts 1:18 states that "he bought a plot of

land with the money he was paid for his crime. He fell headlong and burst open, and all his entrails poured out.” It is again implied that sin is linked to the body in gospel accounts of Jesus healing the sick. This healing usually involves an exorcism, which implies that sickness is the result of possession by demons. Possession was associated with sin, and if a person was possessed, it was supposed that they had sinned and so left themselves open to demonic influence.

However, the issue of the body in Christianity is far more complicated than simple condemnation. The body is also a location of experience of spiritual ecstasy, suffering, and revelation. It can be used as a way of portraying holiness and signs of piety, and, perhaps most importantly, it is the starting point for observations about the divine. The practices of mystics, in particular, mortification, are often singled out as the greatest example of Christianity’s rejection of the body, even though they conversely portray the unparalleled value of the human body as a path to the divine. Caroline Walker Bynum writes that “control, discipline, even torture of the flesh is, in medieval devotion, not so much the rejection of physicality as the elevation of it – a horrible yet delicious elevation – into a means of access to the divine” (162). Body and soul, so often thought of in hierarchical terms with the body low and the spirit high, was often “mingled” in “theological and psychological discussion” (162). Because it was created by God, and because it is the first point of reference for any observation, the body has been used as a kind of guide to the divine realm.

Even the early Gnostics, groups often thought of as practising the most extreme form of bodily renunciation, saw the body as being as close to the divine form as possible for a created being. Michael A. Williams observes that, as regards the body, Gnostics often seemed “convinced that truths, both pleasant and unpleasant, about their origin and destiny could be traced within its form and functions” (143). Even if, as Williams says, Gnostics believe that “the human body is not the work of the transcendent God,” it is still able to provide valuable insight into the divine realm since it “bears the divine image like nothing else in creation” (143). The upright carriage of the human body was important in the distinction between animal and the close-to-divine human form. In more orthodox Christian thought, the physical body is important since it reflects Christ’s incarnation; he was both truly human and truly divine.

As with Christian conceptions of the body, the body in Sade’s philosophy can be a confusing concept since in it is linked suffering and pleasure. Sade no doubt



reviled the Christian sanction against bodily desire; nevertheless, his treatment of the body is not a total inversion of the Christian. For example, bodily mortification is represented not just as punishment, and is not only inflicted upon the victim, but is also a way to induce suffering which inevitably heightens pleasure. It is a rare libertine who does not enjoy masochistic (in the medical sense) pleasures along with sadistic ones. In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Dolomance introduces Eugénie to masochistic pleasures: “With all my heart; I ask but one favor of Eugénie: that she consent to be flogged as vigorously as I myself desire to be; you notice how well within natural law I am” (280). Although Eugénie initially protests: “I believe my blood is flowing!” Madame de Saint-Ange instructs her: “Courage, my angel, courage; bear in mind that it is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure” and Eugénie is later brought round to this way of thinking: “I am dying from pleasure! That whipping ... this immense prick” (281).

Sex is important to Christianity since it is seen to have implications for the health and destiny of the soul. Bodily sin looms largest because of the way it can diminish the soul, and so Christianity’s views on the body and on nature are of the greatest significance in its views on sex. Sex is usually seen to have an overwhelmingly negative effect on the soul, and its destiny after death. Clement of Alexandria wrote that “[m]an became like the beasts when he came to practice sexual intercourse” (88). As the previous chapter established, the Church has used the idea of the natural order to judge many things, but perhaps none more harshly than sex and sexual behaviour. For instance, the Church now uses the concept of a “natural order” to argue against contraception. The argument against contraception is based on the idea that preventing or harming the natural process of procreation is sinful. Pope Pius XI’s well known 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, which was written in response to the increasing availability of birth control, dictates that any action “exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin” (par. 56). This document, controversially, also acknowledges that sex within marriage can be licit even when it is not used to procreate, such as when it is used in the “cultivating of mutual love” (par. 59). Since then, the Church has sanctioned natural family planning, while continuing to forbid the use of artificial contraception. The argument that sex should

be allowable only when it is procreative is used to forbid a number of sexual acts, all of which are to be found within the pages of Sade's novels.

The erotic is a category that Christianity wished to abolish from very early in its history. Early Christian ideals of sexual purity emerged out of a Jewish tradition. Peter Brown writes that "the Christian notion of sexual renunciation ... carried with it the distinctive flavor of its radical Jewish origins" (*The Body and Society* 34). Even so, there is a crucial difference; the sexual purity held sacrosanct by the early Jewish community, while it fostered some small groups of celibates, such as the Essenes, was based on the ideal of marriage. Even radical groups believed that married couples and their families were felt to be the building blocks out of which a "new Israel" would be constructed, "an Israel renowned for its disciplined sexuality, from which the abnormalities associated with the present age had been removed" (Brown 40). The "present age" of which Brown speaks is the pagan age, and the "abnormalities" he refers to are the practices of "promiscuity, public nudity, and homosexual love," a disgust for which was encouraged in the Jewish community, an example followed by the Christians in their attitude towards same-sex relationships (40). While Jewish communities looked to purity and sexual restraint within marriage as the way of the future, Christian communities gradually turned to an ideal of chastity and celibacy as the highest pinnacle of achievement marking the victory of the soul over the body. Brown explains that at least part of the motivation for Christians to renounce sex altogether was the drive to create a distinctive Christian community united by strict codes of sexual behaviour. It was to provide an example of Christian physical and philosophical restraint: "outsiders could admire it as a form of physical heroism equivalent to the observed capacity of Christians to face down the chill fear of death" (*The Body and Society* 60). Sexual continence was also a way that a person could mark him or herself as exceptional within the Christian community. Using sexual chastity as a mark of heroism is something that was inherited from the Greeks, Foucault points out that many Greek heroes are celibate, shown to have a control over their own bodies that is synonymous with athleticism and strength of will. Nonetheless, in Greek thought this kind of celibacy was based in a desire to control oneself, not an idea that the body and its desire were sinful in and of themselves.

Christian control over the body and sexual desire were also implicit in a culture of prophecy, and the authority afforded to a prophet. Brown says that

“prophecy was a fact of life in the Early Church” (*The Body and Society* 65). A “pure” body was “a more appropriate vehicle” for the reception of “divine inspiration,” and it also helped to establish authority of prophecy (67). In the Bible, virgin girls appear as prophets: “The next day we left and came to Caesarea. Here we called on Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who were prophets” (Acts 21:8-9). In Philo’s account of the life of Moses, Moses rejected sex after his encounter on Mount Sinai (Brown, *The Body and Society* 67). Despite these examples of early renunciation, it took time for the idea to gain momentum. For most Christians, chastity was a state they would only be expected to maintain later in life, after becoming widowers, or after having raised a family. Even so, sex, even for procreation, has always been regarded as a necessary sin.

The idea of intimacy in marriage being a positive thing is relatively new. As explained in the previous chapter, even marriage for the sake of procreation has been frowned upon by Christian theologians in the past. Porter relates Augustine’s view that “continence is better than marital intercourse even for the sole purpose of procreation, because the city of God would be more quickly filled and the end of time hastened if all people would only restrain themselves from all sexual activity” (26). Augustine, like many Christians of his time, would have eagerly anticipated the Parousia, that is, the second coming of Jesus. Augustine thought that sexual desire was the result of sin, and that purity could be won through rationality. The early aspirations towards purity and holiness emphasised an ascetic life, characterised by a lack of sexual desire. Though initially this was a monastic ideal, Porter says that “the monastic ascetic ideal spread, and was increasingly emulated by non-monastic clergy and laity. The result was that, by the fourth and fifth centuries, monastic literature was imbued with an almost hysterical fear and hatred of sex, and particularly of women, which far exceeded the more restrained attitudes of the monastic pioneers” (22-3). Brown says that priestly celibacy was driven as much by the demands of the laity as it was by a desire on a part of the priests to remain chaste. For the laity, the “effectiveness of the Eucharist as a privileged vehicle of intercession” was compromised if the priest who handled the Eucharist was not pure and free of bodily lust and sin (*Through the Eye of a Needle* 518-19).

The acceptance of marriage occurred only when it was itself received as a way to suppress and confine sexuality. Porter writes that many influential figures saw

human nature as fallen and inherently prone to sexual desire, such that, for most men, celibacy was not an option; only marriage could sanction these desires. For the notoriously oft-married Henry VIII, marriage was only a way of keeping sexuality in check: “for Henry, it was only sacramental grace, available through the sacrament of matrimony, that redeemed the sinfulness of human sexuality” (Porter 47). Even Martin Luther, who was controversial because of his writing that marriage and celibacy were equal in holiness, saw sexuality as sinful, even in marriage: “Luther suggests that even in the explicit act of procreation a married couple commits sin, a sin that is nevertheless forgiven by God because God has given permission for the married state” (48). The modern church is scarcely free of the idea that sexuality is irredeemably sinful. The Church has always viewed sexual desire as the single greatest flaw in humankind, making them profane creatures whose only possibility for redemption lies in the spirit.

The complex politics of the sacred and the profane in the body are played out in Christian conceptions of the nature of Christ. The orthodox Catholic position is that Jesus is at once fully man and fully divine, a paradox which illustrates the difficulty of defining the profane in Catholic theology. It also raises uneasy questions about the nature of Jesus’ fleshly body. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt by the Church to resolve the problem of Christ’s fleshly body by way of the spiritual, even if this does not altogether abolish the physical. Assuming that Jesus was, as it is said, “fully man,” one must assume that he had the same bodily attributes as other men, which raises the question: is Christ’s body a profane body, or, at least, are areas of Christ’s body, traditionally taboo areas such as the anus or the genitals, profane? As divine, can Christ’s body be a profane or sexual body? Certainly, Jesus had knowledge of bodily processes, in Mark 7:18-19, he says: “Can’t you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes into the sewer?” All food is “clean” because it passes through the body. Jesus must have the same profane bodily processes as any human. Slavoj Žižek explores the monstrosity of Christ through Hegel in his book *The Parallax View*. He says: “Protestantism, finally, posits the relationship as real, conceiving Christ as a God who, in his act of Incarnation, freely identified Himself with His own shit, with the excremental real that is man – and it is only at this level that the properly Christian notion of divine love can be apprehended, as the love for the miserable excremental entity called ‘man’” (187). In

his book *The Sexuality of Christ* Leo Steinberg examines the common (yet disturbing to modern eyes) trope in Renaissance painting which depicts the child Christ with his genitals exposed. Steinberg explains that the genitals are meant to signal that Christ was “complete in all the parts of a man” and so prove the “marriage of the Godhead with human nature” (26). The Gnostics avoid this paradox by removing the fleshly element altogether: Christ is divine, and as such he did not suffer physical pain on the cross because of his divine nature. Kurt Rudolph says that Christ appeared only as a “semblance” or illusion of a fleshly body, an idea which is a necessary result of Gnostic “anti-cosmic dualism, according to which a clear devaluation attaches to what is earthly and bodily” (157). However, Christ has become the ascetic ideal to many Christians. Christ is believed by the overwhelming majority of interpreters to have been sexually continent throughout his life, although it has been claimed in recent popular literature that he was sexually active (notably, with Mary Magdalene).

### **Breaching the Cosmic Order: Death, Sodomy and Incest**

Christianity’s complex problems with the fleshly body are inherent in the way that it links sex with death. In many ways sex is inextricable with death in some Christian views. This has lately been most scandalously visible in the practices of bodily mortification of some Christian mystics. Mortification of the body is necessarily linked to spiritual enlightenment and ecstasy. The complexity lies in the previously mentioned way that Christianity views the body and the soul as interconnected. This means that spiritual ecstasy is accompanied by physical ecstasy (see Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*). Only figures that are sexually continent are assumed bodily into heaven: Mary and Jesus. Mary was even said to have been sinless from her conception, and free from concupiscence – she lived in marital celibacy and so was simultaneously chaste and dutiful. They are perhaps the only people who escape total bodily death (Jesus dies, but he is resurrected). This reinforces the link between sex and death, because only those who can free themselves from the reproductive cycle can escape this fate. Death is the fate of sexual sinners, but it is also promoted as the only escape from sexual desire. In Christian lore, females are often depicted as dying in defence of chastity. Many female saints were martyred in defence of their virginity: St. Agnes, St. Philomena, and St. Maria Goretti, to name just a few.

The problems that Christianity has with the body and desire are explored in Sade, albeit in a satirical and twisted way. Sade acknowledges the link between sex

and death by attempting to abolish death as a category and subsume it into sexual practice. Murder is a large part of the many debaucheries in Sade's works. It is as inevitable in a Sadean orgy as orgasm, and corpses are frequently present in the erotic tableau. It is in descriptions of necrophilia that the most direct link between sex and death is made. Necrophilia in Sade is no secular perversion, but is entrapped in a web of religious and ethical meaning. As has been explained in the previous chapter, Sade rejects death as a part of nature since it is a human construction. Death is a change of state, but, since it often preserves the body, it cannot preclude sexual activity. While it is Justine's hope that death will free her from the sexual horrors that she has been subjected to, the reader of *Juliette* knows that it is Justine's fate after death to have her body violated a final time, for not even death can enable Justine to escape her fate. This passage aligns with a purely materialist view of death. Justine has only changed states; her body remains and can still be made to perform a function in the material world. She cannot be safe in passing into death because death is a human construction, an abstract idea which is not reflected by any immediate change on the level of matter, which is simply recycled:

Our four libertines surround the corpse; and although it has been horribly disfigured, frightful designs nevertheless shape themselves in libertine minds, the shattered vestiges of the defunct Justine become the subject of lewd covetings. The infamous Juliette excites her friends as they snatch the clothes from the body. The lightning, entering by way of the mouth, had burst out through the vagina; fierce jests are made upon the path by which the fire of heaven chose to visit the victim. "Yes," Noirceuil said, "praise be to God, he merits it; there you have the proof of his decency: he left the ass untouched. It is still a beautiful thing, this sublime behind which caused so much fuck to flow; does it not tempt you, Chabert?" (1190)

This ending of *Juliette* provides the ironic counterpoint to the false ending of the novel *Justine*. Indeed, there is a clue to the falsity of this ending in the novel *Justine* itself. When Justine is abused by a judge who has used his position to extract a false confession of guilt from her, she cries in despair as she is taken to prison and he goes free: "And the villain leaves peacefully! And divine lightning strikes him not!" (736). Several pages later, Justine meets her death when she herself is struck by "divine lightning." The author's final reflection on his tale must be read ironically: "If, in keeping with designs it is not for us to fathom, God permits that it be

persecuted on earth, it is so that virtue may be compensated by heaven's most dazzling rewards" (743). In *Juliette*, the final words on Justine's death are very different: "Woeful and ill-starred creature, 'twas written on high that not even the repose of death would safeguard you from the atrocities of crime and the perversity of mankind" (1191). Yet as with many of Sade's perversions, the presence of a fetish itself introduces a paradox. If necrophilia is acknowledged as a perversion, then death is acknowledged as a state of being that is outside of a sanctioned order of nature. The libertine Olympia espouses a materialist view of death when she says:

"Two things I have never understood, my friends," that amiable and witty woman began, "they are respect for the dead, and respect for the wishes of the dead. Assuredly, both these superstitions relate to the notions people entertain touching the immortality of the soul; for were they convinced materialists.... then respect shown to bits of decomposed matter would appear such palpable nonsense that nobody would think to espouse it." (959)

"It has been understood for a very long time," Juliette says at the end of Olympia's speech, "that the enjoyment of a recently assassinated individual may be truly very voluptuous; the constriction of the anus is especially appreciated by men" (960). Clairwil elucidates the religious implications of such a crime: "there is a kind of imaginary impiety therein to heat the mind" (960). The sinful implications inflame the passions.

Despite Sade's use of different theories of natural law to replace a system of religious law, the erotic milieu in Sade's work presents a challenge to the concept of natural order which is foundational to Catholic doctrine. There is a specific hierarchy of sexual acts in Sade which are aimed at outraging the dominant and "natural" sexual order that is endorsed by the Church. The Catholic natural order is based in the reasoning that, because procreation is only possible through heterosexual intercourse (intercourse using the reproductive organs), this is the only pairing and sexual act which can be considered "natural," and since nature is, by virtue of its creation, divine, it is also the only union that is permitted by God. To subvert this, in Sade's "natural order," sodomy becomes the chief sex act. Sodomy is heretical, and it is a powerful heresy because it outrages the order of nature. Firstly, sodomy is non-procreative, and so it undermines both the natural order based on the creation and propagation of the species, which is fundamental to the divine purpose of human life. Secondly, it has homosexual connotations which challenge the very foundations of a

natural sexual order based on the apparently self-evident sanctity of heterosexual intercourse. However, sodomy is not only forbidden between two men, but also between a man and a woman, even if they are married, owing to the Church's general ban on any non-procreative intercourse. Lastly, for all this, it subverts the institution of marriage, which is of vital importance in defining which sexual acts are and are not tolerable in Catholicism.

The term "sodomy" comes from the biblical story of the Sodomites. Like any passage of the Bible, the meaning of the story is contested and does not in any way clearly signify the interpretation which has long been popular. In Genesis 19, two angels of Yahweh travel to Sodom, where Lot implores them to stay in his house. Verses 4-5 read:

They had not gone to bed when the house was surrounded by the townspeople, the men of Sodom both young and old, all the people without exception. Calling to Lot they said, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Send them out to us so that we can have intercourse with them."

Lot refuses and instead offers the men his young virginal daughters, but the men insist and begin to attack Lot. They are struck with blindness, a kind of symbolic castration, and in the morning, the angels instruct Lot to flee the town, since Yahweh intends to destroy it. The "sin of the Sodomites" has been interpreted by some, prominently Mark D. Jordan, to be a lack of hospitality, the maintenance of hospitality being an important duty in the Bible.

Sodomy is a category that has represented the most purified and horrific form of the erotic to the Church. In his book *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Jordan says, "The irrational force of the Christian condemnation of Sodomy is the remainder of Christian theology's failure to think through the problem of the erotic" (175). This is interesting since, although sodomy has been an ambiguous term at best throughout history, it was Christian theology that created it and gave it definition: "sodomy is as much a theological category as trinity, incarnation, sacrament, or papal infallibility, ... it is doubtful whether any operation can purify it of its theological origins" (29). For a sin that has been so thoroughly and gravely condemned, it is a relatively new invention. Jordan says, "Sodomy is a medieval artefact. I have found no trace of the term before the eleventh century" (1). Jordan attributes its creation to the theologian Peter Damian, who coined it "on analogy to blasphemia, "blasphemy," which is to say, on analogy to the most explicit



sin of denying God” (29). It was never merely descriptive of an act, or even of an array of acts, but always linked to sins against God. Diarmaid MacCulloch explains, “Sodomy was a general word, ... it was part of a notion of extreme debauchery that involved a whole variety of unregulated sex acts” (*Reformation* 622). Furthermore, MacCulloch observes, in Augustine’s view, sodomy was a more extreme iteration of the disorder associated with sexuality: “sodomitical sexual activity was such an intense form of this disorder that it resulted in total chaos in God’s natural creation” (623). Of course, Christians have denounced same-sex relations, which sodomy later came to signify, from the Church’s earliest days, and the story of Sodom has, likewise, long been interpreted as a condemnation of same-sex relations, although this is contested.

Like sodomy, incest in Sade is a parody of an order of nature, a mockery of religion and a critique of social distinctions. Harari and Pellegrin suggest in their article “Exogamy and Incest” that incest in Sade is a critique of cultural norms which arbitrarily proscribe certain sexual relationships and sanction others, and an effort to elevate desire above knowledge. They argue that incest, by suggesting a freedom of desire and violating the sanction against sexual relationships between kin, it is “an attempt to demystify and demythicise our cultural foundations, an effort to liberate – by means of the illicit act – the many modalities of desire” (1217). This works because “incest is the refusal of differences, the crime of non-differentiation, which at first results in the intermingling of kin and ultimately abolishes all cultural distinctions” (1217). It destabilises regular bonds of kinship, familial piety being high up on the libertine’s list of taboos. It also transgresses another taboo: the refusal to participate in exchange which structures not only the economy but the hierarchy of society. For example, the short story “Eugénie de Franval” is about a man, Franval, who develops a desire from his daughter Eugénie as soon as she is born, grooming her throughout her youth so that he can seduce her as a teenager. Franval keeps his daughter for himself so that she cannot be married out, cannot participate in the exchange which accompanies marriage. This derides social order. The hierarchy of power is unusual in the libertine society, in that libertines will take whatever is within their power to take, and exchange only that which, in the exchange, has the power to arouse them sexually with its transgressive qualities. Incest in Sade mocks the rite of exchange, and, indeed of marriage. Thus, this passage from *Juliette*:

By two o'clock that afternoon Noirceuil's dual project had been carried out: he had become the wife of one of his sons, the husband of the other, while I found myself the husband of my daughter and the wife of Fontanges. (1176-77)

Later, Juliette is engaged in a scene with Noirceuil, his sons, and her daughter, Marianne. First, Noirceuil rapes Marianne, and afterwards makes a proposition to Juliette:

What do you mean to do with her, Juliette? You are not the sentimental fool, you are not the idiot to have feelings for this loathsome spawn of your abominable husband's blessed testicle; so sell her to me. Sell the slut, Juliette, I wish to buy her from you; let's both soil ourselves, you in the pretty sin of vending me your child, I in the still more rousing one of paying you to assassinate her. (1186)

Juliette agrees, and together they immolate Marianne in a fireplace, an act which Juliette finds sexually arousing. By giving away her daughter to a man, Juliette parodies the exchange that takes place preceding a marriage. At the same time she designates herself as a ruthless Sadean woman, in the traditional mould of the female libertine.

### **Virgins and Whores**

The place of women in Sade's work is informed by the shift in the perception of female sexuality and anatomy which is widely considered to have taken place in the eighteenth century, and also by the Church's view of women. Thomas Laqueur explains in his article "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology" that for centuries it had been commonly thought that women's bodies were fundamentally the same as men's, except that their genitals were inside the body instead of out. Parts of the female reproductive system corresponded to the male: ovaries were referred to as testicles, and so on. Although women's bodies were thought of essentially the same model as men's, there was a hierarchy of sexual sameness in which man represented the perfect body, while women's bodies betrayed a "lack," and were imperfect. As Laqueur describes, this changed in the eighteenth century: "An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of women in relation to men" (3). Women's bodies came to be seen as fundamentally dissimilar to men's bodies.

Increased scientific knowledge played a role in this revolution of thought, but Laqueur notes that this was not enough to engender such a difference of representation. Laqueur posits that “new ways of interpreting the body were rather ... new ways of representing and indeed of constituting social realities” (4). Laqueur observes, “Even the political pornography of Sade is grounded in a theory of generation” (1). Sade represents women as fundamentally different from men, and much of this has to do with their reproductive capacity.

In Sade’s erotic milieu, women are either separated from men by their ability to reproduce, or they are accepted by men by casting that ability aside. Instead of privileging female pleasure because it is thought to encourage reproduction, Sade creates a paradigm wherein reproduction is seen as an obstacle to pleasure for the female libertine. For male characters, the capacity of the female to reproduce is either something to be derided or which produces revulsion, or something to be exploited for its potential for transgression. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, there are numerous stories of transgressions involving pregnant women. For example: “he used to be a whipper of pregnant women’s bellies, has latterly perfected that by causing an enormous weight to fall on the pregnant woman’s belly, thereby crushing her and her fruit at one stroke” (635). Later a tale is told of a man whose “taste is to promote abortions” (657): “He now places two pregnant women in a room and obliges them to fight with knives (he observes them from a safe position); they are naked, he threatens them with a gun he keeps trained upon them, and promises to shoot them dead if they begin to dally and falter” (663). The stories of the torture of pregnant women pleases the libertine Curval, about whom, it is said “[his] loathing for pregnant women is only too notorious” (485). Curval believes that citizens of France should emulate “the inhabitants of Formosa, where pregnant women under thirty are, together with their fruit, ground in a large mortar” (520).

Curval’s horror of pregnant women stems from a political desire to curb overpopulation in France, but also a disgust over the act of reproduction as a biological and Catholic drive which he (or Sade, as author) wishes to subvert. After these tales are told, one of the prisoners, Constance, who has fallen pregnant at the beginning of the tale, is tortured: “Sentenced to die the next day but unaware of her impending fate, Constance appears; her nipples are scorched, molten wax is allowed to trickle down her belly, she yields four teeth, Messieurs prick the white of her eyes with needles” (664). When she is killed, “Curval himself opened Constance’s belly

and tore out the fruit” (670). Juliette encounters a libertine Duke, named Leopold, whose obsession is impregnating women so that he can abort them. Evidence in the text suggests that the Leopold in question was probably Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor, and brother of Marie Antoinette: Juliette describes Leopold as “Austria’s brightest star, the Medici’s great successor,<sup>33</sup> the celebrated brother of France’s most illustrious whore” (622). Leopold confesses his fetish: “I am the father of the infants they are ready to whelp, and I sired them solely for the sake of the delicious pleasure I shall have in destroying them. I know of no greater satisfaction than causing a woman I have ingravidated to miscarry” (618). In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Madame de Saint-Ange instructs Eugénie that she should “be the sworn enemy of this tedious propagation,” informing her that Saint-Ange “despise[s] propagation so intently” that she would abandon Eugénie if Eugénie were intentionally to become pregnant (61).

Despite the inherent misogyny and the inescapable gender hierarchy in Sade’s works, those same works also present a female archetype that is more liberated and able to exercise more agency than many likely to be found in the literature of Sade’s time. She is the female libertine, the most notorious of whom is Juliette. Juliette is not an altogether unusual protagonist in that there are many famous and enduring works narrated by prostitutes: John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748) and Abbé du Prat’s (a pseudonym, commonly attributed to Abbé Jean Barrin) *Venus in the Cloister* (*Vénus dans le cloître, ou la religieuse en chemise*) (1668), are two examples of this genre, known colloquially as the “whore dialogue.” Juliette, unlike many portrayals of prostitutes in fiction, enjoys her profession, and has chosen it freely. Instead of oppressing her, it is an opportunity for her to gain power, influence, and wealth. She is not a victim but a libertine which is, by Sade’s definition of libertine, the victim’s opposite. As a libertine whore, Juliette is complicit in scenarios which mimic the plight of victims in Sade’s works: she is whipped, tortured, beaten and restrained, but these things can only amuse and arouse

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<sup>33</sup> The Medicis were a powerful family who had great influence in politics and banking, were by virtue of marriage connected to royalty, and produced four popes. They were therefore exceptionally well connected. Their dynasty lasted from the fifteenth century to the early- to mid-eighteenth. Juliette’s comment would seem to be an acknowledgement of the power and influence of the Medicis, and a poke at the social hierarchy which allowed them to gain and exercise such power.

her because of her libertine appetites. Kathryn Norberg says in her article “The Libertine Whore” that “the libertine whore is not, however, a hapless victim who stoically endures humiliation and pain. She knows pain, but it does not cause her to suffer” (230-1). In one scene, Juliette meets an executioner, Delcour, who, she soon deduces, is aroused by the murder he must commit as a part of his job. Juliette finds this thrilling, and propositions him thus:

Beat me, outrage me, lash me; isn't that what you do with women every day; aren't those the foul violences which, electrifying you, make you capable of the rest? ... Well, you've a job to perform tomorrow, start preparing for it today. There is my body. It is at your disposal. (311)

The female libertine is a “child of nature,” while the virtuous female is at all turns oppressed and eventually punished for her virtue. Catherine the Great, who was known for her ties to the Enlightenment, is presented, not as a weak ruler like the kings that Juliette encounters, or as a pretender to the throne as she was perceived in popular culture at the time, but as a strong woman who is acting in accordance with nature, who is ready to be a great despotic ruler of Russia. Sade portrays her as a libertine, a paragon of sexual excess, and while this is to some extent satiric, and even buys into a stereotype of the female ruler as sexually debauched, it is also in line with the Sadean ideal of the female libertine. It is a striking inversion of the usual order in which the lascivious woman leads to the fall of man and the virtuous woman is a saint. Sade clearly scoffs at the Christian elevation of the virgin, replacing it with an order of nature in which the whore is the ideal.

### **Attraction and Repulsion in Sade**

Thus Sade's transgressive libertinism has a special meaning for the erotic, and particularly the paradoxical way that Christianity views the erotic. Bataille explains: “the inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness [sic] to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is a religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish” (*Eroticism* 38-9). The erotic is thus sacred, and essential to the inner life of man. In a sense, it guarantees the spiritual, separating the human from the animal, since the erotic is not solely for reproduction, and, being inefficient, cannot be appropriated by the world of work. Expressions of the erotic are inherently excessive; they possess no rational or reproductive goal, and are

completely incompatible with the mundane, profane world of work, a world with which Bataille was undoubtedly familiar, having been a librarian for most of his life. This is why Bataille believes that “sexuality, thought of as filthy or beastly, is still the greatest barrier to the reduction of man to the level of thing” (158).

Christianity has both denied the erotic its sacred character and denied that the sacred *is* erotic. Bataille states that “eroticism fell within the bounds of the profane and was at the same time condemned out of hand. The development of eroticism is parallel with that of uncleanness. Sacredness misunderstood is readily identified with evil” (124). Bataille suggests that “Christian theology identifies the moral degradation following the sins of the flesh with death,” which is why, as described in the previous chapter, Christianity has attempted to cast the erotic into the realm of the profane (*Eroticism* 106). This does not lessen the transgressive power of the erotic because of Christianity’s relegation of the very principle of transgression to the profane world. Bataille says: “just as the simple taboo created eroticism in the first place in the organised violence of transgression, Christianity in its turn deepened the degree of sensual disturbance by forbidding organised transgression” (127) such as that found in rituals. Violence, like sex, has been relegated to the realm of the profane. The erotic is a reminder of the inherent violence of the flesh. It is a form of violence linked with sex. Sade’s perversions are so destabilising because they are a reminder of the distant though familiar violence of sex.

Bataille’s idea that Christianity has “deepened the degree of sensual disturbance” by forbidding transgression is demonstrated in Sade’s writing through the principle of attractive aversion. The greatest power of Sade’s erotic works is the disgust they elicit from the reader. Still, instead of putting the reader off – forcing the reader to put the book down and walk away from Sade forever – this sense of aversion entices the reader to continue, to seek what other outrages the pages of the book may contain. In this way, the books do exactly what Sade wished them to do, they give the reader pleasure: the pleasure of aversion. In his article “The Crimes of Virtue and the Love of Aversion,” Christopher Lane describes the apparently paradoxical nature of pleasurable aversion in Sade, that Bataillian idea of the taboo creating eroticism. Lane considers Freud’s claim that libido and disgust are linked in relation to the vehement reactions of conservatives, fundamentalists, and the right wing to transgressive sex, and says that:

[A]version is a psychic block between repression and representation, fundamentalism seems to *incorporate* the psychic qualities against which it pronounces ceaseless disgust; in this way it *retains* the vehemence of denegation. By investing excitedly in denied pleasure, the Christian Right collapses all distinctions between fantasy and act. (345)

The idea of aversion is subverted in itself, because its meaning “to turn away” is negated by the passion of the reaction to the object of aversion and indeed the desire to speak endlessly about that object. According to Lane, “the averted object works with the comparable intensity of a love object – indeed, that Christians ‘perversely’ love and enjoy those sexual acts that they seem to abhor” (345). Susan Neiman says that “it’s not accident or prudishness that led people to ban [Sade’s writings]. They titillate and repel in ways you shouldn’t be titillated and repelled” (170). Any cursory reading of Sade can confirm that this is more than a side effect of his writing. It is doubtless an intended effect of the eroticism, in all its transgressive glory. Sade is not subtle in suggesting that the Church has a corrupt love of the forbidden, as the scene between the Pope and Juliette in *Juliette* illustrates. Sade writes ironically that he hopes a reading of his work will elicit arousal in the reader. It does just that, not only for any readers who also have an interest in transgressive sex, but also in those who find it repulsive. An arousal of the passions is achieved regardless. Bataille theorises that which is innate in Sade’s writing. The sense of aversion which was no doubt an intended effect of Sade’s work, is aimed, as all other acts of moral degradation therein, at the Church, at God. In so doing, his work points to the hypocrisy of the Church’s attitudes towards the realm of the sexual, implying that in its repulsion lies an attraction.

### **The Incommunicable and Excess**

Beauvoir says that Sade is not compelling for his writing, least of all for his erotic writing, but for what he is trying to communicate through that writing: the incommunicable. “His books take hold of us as soon as we become aware that for all their repetitiousness, their platitudes and clumsiness, he is trying to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is, nevertheless, a tendency to be incommunicable” (“Must We Burn Sade?” 4). In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille says that the “evident monotony of Sade’s books” is “due to the decision to subordinate literature to the expression of an inexpressible event” (115). Of a certainty, he drew

inspiration from Sade, writing numerous erotic texts as well as straightforward philosophical works. Bataille, too, spoke extensively of the incommunicable, that “inner experience,” which he believed is what sets humanity apart from animals, and which is best expressed in the erotic. Bataille says that “eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man,” and in this regard, it sets human sexuality apart from animal sexuality since it “calls inner life into play” (29). It requires a subjective consciousness which is lacking in animals. The excesses of his language, of the antics of his libertines, ironically stand for something that no amount of verbosity, of outrageous and copious language can express; they mask a frustration at the heart of language. The Sadean text is defined by its excess, because it deals with the erotic, and for Bataille, the erotic is excessive and stands opposed to the world of work.

There are always limits on excess, and for Sade, this limit is ultimately language. Karmen MacKendrick observes in *Counterpleasures* that in the Sadean novel, “when everything has been said again, all sense is shattered,” Sade revels in the senselessness of language, carrying even this to excess (49). Sade’s anger at God here takes on decidedly Nietzschean features. Since God is absent, language is meaningless, because the “death of God” heralded by Nietzsche signifies that God can no longer stand as guarantor for truth and meaning. Sade directs this meaningless language, in the form of his blasphemies, the materialist diatribe of an atheist Pope before an orgy, at the absent God. God stands in for the audience. Because of Sade’s isolation, the act of invoking an audience is essential, but solely in the imagination, since he must never have been sure of his works receiving a flesh-and-blood audience. Even so Sade was driven by a perverse need to write. Language could only take on meaning, communication could only be possible, if Sade were to invoke God. Once again Sade must take a *via negativa* approach to writing, saying everything but what he wants to say, in an effort to convey the incommunicable.

In Sade, the sexual is always transgressive, and the particular mode of the transgression is sin, because it is aimed at a religious tradition. Sade uses materialist theories, often in the form of an order of nature as a justification for transgression, but this does not stand up to scrutiny since transgression is by definition a trespass against a certain law. He doesn’t follow a law of nature, like other atheist materialists, no matter his atheist attitudes. Sade’s philosophy and ethics being codified in sex means that sexual transgression in Sade is problematic for his atheism because it has metaphysical significance. Sade’s being against reproduction, even if



libertine logic says that this serves nature's decidedly Gnostic-sounding ends, seems to allude to the contradiction in the Sadean system between materialism and transgression.

## Chapter 5

### Sade's Challenge: The Paradox of Sin and Atheism in Sade's Philosophy

“When atheism wants martyrs, let it say so and my blood will be ready”

- Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*

“The divine Marquis”<sup>34</sup> is a title which Sade has earned surely as much as that of “libertine” or “pornographer.” The sympathy for the figure of Sade which has emerged in philosophy and in artistic portrayals which see him as something of a freedom fighter can be read as one of the symptoms of a contemporary trend to claim historical figures as atheists, constructing an atheist martyrology (including figures such as Galileo and Giordano Bruno) as part of an atheist ideology (in which certain freedoms are viewed as rights).<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the title “the divine Marquis,” which is much older than the attempt to claim Sade as a freedom fighter for the atheist cause, more accurately refers to the relationship Sade had with religion, despite what has been said about his atheism, or, perhaps, because of it.

Sade's atheism is of a certain kind, a type of atheism which guarantees an ongoing dialogue with religion, and, more specifically, with Christianity and classical theism, since Christian theology, and Christian ontological and metaphysical categories were what most influenced his thought. Although Chapters Three and Four have already discussed in some depth features of Sade's atheism and problematised aspects of his atheist materialism, they did not exhaust the discussion. To elucidate the salient features of Sade's atheism as found in his work, this chapter adopts two main strategies. First, the chapter will, of necessity, examine atheistic arguments found in Sade's work in order to make the links between his ideas and

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<sup>34</sup> A title which seems to have been coined at some point in the nineteenth century, although it is difficult to trace back to the person who coined the term. It is used by Apollinaire in his essay “The Divine Marquis.”

<sup>35</sup> It appears contradictory to speak of atheist martyrs, except ironically, since martyrdom is an imitation of Christ's suffering and a test of faith. However, the comparison in relation to Sade is apt, not only because he uses the metaphor of the atheist martyr himself, but also because it encapsulates the internal contradictions and themes which characterise Sade's relationship with religion.

those in vogue at the time, and to show how he strategically employed those arguments. Second, this chapter will go on to problematise this intellectual basis in the light of Sade's commitment to transgression, and co-opting of categories of sin, vice, evil, and blasphemy. By exploring the iterations of atheism in Sade's libertine novels, this chapter will advance the idea that Sade's atheism is predicated on an impassioned ethical objection to Christianity, which takes the form of co-opting and transgressing Christian metaphysical categories.

In a very passionate way, Sade wishes to be free of religion and to free others. Sade was educated by the Jesuits, and so his learning was founded on the intertwining of scholasticism and Christian dogma, reason and religion. Although Sade came to reject the notion that the two can be reconciled, it is a legacy which left an indelible mark on his thought, as it did on the thought of many others in his time, famously Voltaire. Sade is also concerned with the institutional power of the Church, but also with the less identifiable but more widespread and enduring power of Christianity and religion itself. As described in Chapter Two, in Sade's day it was still a risk to proclaim one's atheism publicly, though this did not stop atheism from enjoying a clandestine popularity and finding a sympathetic audience amongst the writers and consumers of clandestine literature. Sade's life was not an easy one, and a number of thinkers (Simone de Beauvoir in "Must We Burn Sade?" and Pierre Klossowski in *Sade My Neighbor*) have recognised in his work and his private correspondence an anger which they feel shaped his life philosophy and creative output. Sade's involvement with the Revolution, for which he wrote a number of pamphlets, his anger at his imprisonment and the entire judicial system which is evident in almost all of the surviving letters from prison make it clear that he had a great deal of anger against his society which frequently manifests itself as a cry of rage against Christian religious categories and norms.

Sade's relationship with the religious has interesting implications in the light of the "turn to religion" in postmodernist philosophy. Sade can scarcely be called a postmodernist thinker; he is too much the Enlightenment *philosophe*. Yet Sade's work is of significance to the postmodern, for the religious and ethical statement that his lived atheism constitutes, which can be traced throughout his work. John Phillips points out in *The Marquis de Sade: A Very Short Introduction* that it is "Sade's atheistic individualism and profound distrust of all collective enterprises and of the ideologies that underpin them" which has attracted the attention of a range of

postmodernist radical thinkers, from Nietzsche to Lyotard (118-119). It is interesting that Sade's individualism should fascinate postmodernist thinkers, since it is one trait which sets him apart from his contemporaries. That is not to say that some Enlightenment thinkers did not have some conception of individual agency, autonomy and ethical choice, but many Enlightenment thinkers occupied themselves with attempting to find a universal (and secular) basis for ethics; they were interested in the collective above all else. By contrast, Sade wanted individual rights to be enshrined in law, or, alternatively, for laws to give way to individual rights. No doubt being imprisoned for many years under such national laws, whether monarchical or revolutionary, honed his distaste for them.

By declaring himself atheist, and living atheism in a certain way, Sade set himself apart, attempting to live up to his ideal of the sovereign man. Nevertheless, the act of establishing himself as an individual through his atheism is undermined by the very motivations which drive him to do so. Sade is not a negative atheist, for whom the sacred traditions of the religious have no meaning. He does not passively disavow God. His rage at God, at religious institutions, and at society in general, make his atheism more than a simple act of disavowal. It is an attempt to make particular social, political, philosophical and moral statements, and this guarantees that Sade can never disengage from his ongoing dialogue (or argument) with religion, making Sade's atheist disavowal of God a highly charged symbolic gesture. As a symbolic gesture, this disavowal does not abolish God; to the contrary, it continually invokes Him.

### **Frenchmen, Some More Effort: The Tree of Superstition and the Tree of Liberty**

Sade's relationship with religion was formed at least in part out of the political and religious turmoil which preceded the French Revolution. Sade's position in his society at the time of the Revolution would have been complicated to negotiate: he was an aristocrat in an anti-monarchical atmosphere, yet he was sympathetic to the revolutionary cause, and gained some respect as an orator in revolutionary circles (Plessix Gray xii). His sympathy for the revolutionaries, Plessix Gray asserts, may have grown out of his "hatred of Paris and Versailles and his thorough disdain for his peers" (x). Although Sade was an active campaigner for the cause of the Revolution, he was horrified by its attendant violence, and found the idea of murder in the name

of universal laws (even apparently innocent laws such as liberty, equality and fraternity) abhorrent, something which, as counter-intuitive as it sounds, is expressed even in the mouths of libertines. Despite his animosity towards his mother-in-law, he spared her life when it would have been threatened by the Revolution. Simone de Beauvoir comments that “it was a world governed by those universal laws which he regarded as abstract, false, and unjust. When society justified murder in their name, Sade withdrew in horror” (“Must We Burn Sade?” 15). This complex relationship is played out in Sade’s work. Plessix Gray points out that *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, while satirising the mores of the “corrupt aristocracy of his own time” (x) also contains a “parody of revolutionary principles” (xiv), in particular those of Robespierre and those found in Rousseau’s *Social Contract (Du contrat social ou principes du droit politique)*. Since, as Sade writes in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*: “royal power has always buttressed clerical power” (105), his criticisms and reflections on politics in the Revolution are tied up in his thoughts on religion, and therefore exploring his political statements in context will be useful to uncovering the source and type of his atheism.

*Philosophy in the Boudoir* is one of Sade’s most politically engaged works, principally because of the pamphlet it contains: “Frenchmen, Some More Effort if you Wish to Become Republicans” (104). This pamphlet is key to any examination of Sade’s atheism and politics, for it directly deals with the relationship between religion and the state. It is also one of Sade’s more straightforwardly satirical texts. It parodies the form of the pamphlet in disseminating political ideals and in so doing mocks revolutionary principles and monarchical ideals alike, and its location in a libertine dialogue hints that there might be an underlying meaning not explicitly expressed in the text’s argument. Even then, Sade gets far more explicit in the argument of the second half of the pamphlet which proposes that under a revolutionary government crimes including murder and rape should be permitted because they are in line with the violence of the Revolution and its principles. This latter dimension of the pamphlet’s satirical mission will be elucidated shortly after the tract’s argument, which at first seems convincing and earnest, is explained.

“Frenchmen...” argues that if republicans wish to eliminate forever the tyranny which had oppressed them, they must “give the tree of superstition its final stroke” (105) and eliminate Christianity in France altogether. Plessix Gray, pondering on Sade’s intention in writing the dialogues, says that “the only passages

of *Boudoir* unquestionably written in earnest are the articulations of Sade's atheism" (xvi). The anonymous fictional author of this tract argues that, if Christianity were to endure, "we would suffer the arrogance, the tyranny, and the despotism of the priests ... the dogmas and mysteries of that unworthy and uncanny religion that dulls the pride of the republican soul" (105) and be enslaved under tyranny again. The author cries: "Frenchmen, I repeat! Europe is waiting for you to deliver her from both scepter and incense ... the bonds of royal tyranny are too intricately involved with the bonds of religion" (106). He says that a republican's only gods must be "Courage and Liberty" and that ultimately "the Tree of Liberty,<sup>36</sup> overshadowing the ruins of the Holy See, will focus the weight of its victorious branches on covering all those despicable Christian idols" that republicans should destroy (106). He reiterates that "atheism is the sole philosophy of rational minds" (108).

The author's vitriol is directed at the Christian God, whom he paints as ridiculous: "God created us to worship him, and we spend our days mocking him!" (110) and the clergy: "it is the priests alone who still hold this nation captive at the feet of its chimerical god" (111). The pamphlet is not concerned with all religions, only with Christianity, for the author seems content to have people submit to the worship of other, in his opinion more suitable, though outmoded, gods such as Mars and Minerva: "since we believe faith is necessary, let us imitate the religion of the Romans: the actions, the passions, the heroes – those were the respectable objects of their worship. Such idols elevated the soul, they electrified it!" (107). He says later: "give us a religion that is suitable for free men. Give us back the pagan gods" (109). His defence is that "this religion will permit at least a few virtues to blossom, while the other religion, that we used to be weak enough to profess publicly, will generate nothing but crime" (111).

Sade's moral outrage at Christianity and the more violent aspects of the Revolution is directed at the laws that underpin these systems. While Christian laws and the humanistic, secular laws of the moderate revolutionaries were undoubtedly disparate, they shared in common an appeal to universality. To Sade, this universality

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<sup>36</sup> The tree of liberty became a popular revolutionary symbol not only in France but also in the US. Jean Baptiste Lesueur's 1790 painting *The Planting of a Liberty Tree in Revolutionary France* demonstrates the symbolic importance of the idea of the liberty tree in France at the time.

is fatal to the individual, to his rights, autonomy, and subjectivity. In *Juliette*, the libertine Chigi puts it thus:

The law, we say, prohibits doing this or that, this or that is hence unjust; than this manner of judging none is more deceiving, for the law is oriented toward the general interest; now, nothing is at a further remove from the general interest than individual interest, its very opposite; hence, nothing less just than the law which sacrifices all individual interests to the general interest.  
(730)

The ethical validity of capital punishment is problematised in the pamphlet on the same philosophical grounds, paradoxically as a part of a defence of murder. The tract claims that, while humans obtained from nature “the freedom to lay hands on one another,” the law “cannot possibly obtain the same privilege, because, unfeeling in and of itself, the law cannot be accessible to the human passions that legitimize the cruel act of murder” (119). It claims that this law has no effective prohibitive function: “it has never prevented any crime, since it is committed daily at the foot of the scaffold” and, furthermore, that it is a bad calculation, since “instead of our having one less person we suddenly have two less people” (120).

Sade as himself, not as author, records his hatred for the guillotine in a letter of the seventeenth of October 1775: “My national imprisonment, with the guillotine before my eyes, hurt me a hundred times more than all the imaginable Bastilles ever did” (qtd. in Plessix Gray 347). Sade’s hatred for the guillotine was likely fuelled by speculations that his own neck was at risk by virtue of his aristocratic lineage. The guillotine was invented out of a need for a machine that ended life, quickly, efficiently, and without pain. It was the ultimate rational machine, which was hailed by many as a saviour and instrument of social change. An enforcer of social revolution, the machine was also classless, used for common criminals as well as royals during the Revolution. Peter Weiss picks up on Sade’s distaste for the guillotine in *Marat/Sade*. Sade, comparing the prolonged, torturous public executions of the past, exemplified by the execution of Robert-François Damiens, the would-be assassin of Louis XV, with the executions of the Revolution, believes that the guillotine deprives the condemned of a personal death:

Although we have just started  
there’s no passion in our post-revolutionary murders  
Now they are all official

We condemn to death without emotion  
 and there's no singular personal death to be had  
 only an anonymous cheapened death  
 which we could dole out to entire nations  
 on a mathematical basis  
 until the time comes  
 for all life  
 to be extinguished. (34)

In the play's most powerful scene, Sade has himself whipped, while expounding his political philosophy: "when I sat in the courtroom myself ... not as I had been before the accused / but as judge / I couldn't bring myself to deliver the prisoner to the hangman" (56). Michel Foucault makes this same comparison in *Discipline and Punish*, which opens with a horrifically detailed description of Damiens' execution. The rationality that led to the invention of the guillotine, and its use across classes, aristocrat and common criminal alike, is indeed a notion that is against the Sadean sensibility. Sade mocks this kind of blind rationality – he takes the underlying principles of rationality and carries them to the extreme, an end that is inevitably monstrous, personified in the libertine archetype.

Satirically, the pamphlet's author suggests a way to reconcile the violence of the Revolution to a free and equal republic: rejecting the ethical injunctions that were observed under monarchical and religious rule, and instituting those that he feels are more in line with both atheistic and republican principles. It is interesting to the mission of this thesis that Sade should write parodic political pamphlet concerned mostly with morals. Of course, the "virtues" the pamphlet prescribes are not conventional, and are designed rather to lampoon the revolutionary cause, and, perhaps, the humanistic banner it often rallied behind, even while massacring and torturing in the name of liberty. The second half of the pamphlet will be picked up again for examination in the seventh chapter, but it is worth briefly analysing the ethical statements made there for the sake of drawing the connection between the ethical and the religious in Sade's thought. He says:

In a republican state, under a government without kings or religion, other offenses, known as regicide or sacrilege, must likewise be wiped out. Citizens, remember: in granting freedom of conscience and freedom of the press, you must also allow freedom of action, with few exceptions. And aside



from what directly shakes the foundations of government, you will have fewer crimes to punish; for in a society based on liberty and equality, there are, at bottom, very few criminal acts. (116).

He goes on to justify theft, on the grounds that it contributes to equality of all by redistributing wealth, slander, since it cannot harm the truly virtuous man, immodesty, since it is in line with nature, rape, since it crushes liberty to deny the passions, even murder, on the grounds that it can neither outrage nature nor damage society. This is where Sade's satirical proclivities are most evident and most effective. He finishes his justification of murder by stating: "an old and corrupt nation, which will, courageously, shake off its monarchic yoke and adopt a republican government, must sustain itself purely through numerous crimes, for it is already steeped in crime" (142). Here he is likely alluding facetiously to the violent means by which the revolutionary government obtained its power. Sade had revolutionary principles, but it is clear from this devastating satire that he had ethical problems with revolutionary methods, and was sceptical that revolutionary change would result in a truly free or equal society. Despite the text's satirical nature, it appears that Sade sincerely felt that religion, if allowed to remain aligned in any way with the state, would inevitably erode from within even the most progressive government.

### **Whores, Knaves and Charlatans: On the Origins of Christianity**

Sade attacks the founding story of Christianity in "Frenchmen..." denouncing Christ as a false prophet along with other religious prophets as part of a larger goal of denouncing Christianity as a cult, and incompatible with republicanism:

Lycurgus, Numa, Moses, Jesus Christ, Mohammed – all these big scoundrels, all these big despots of our ideas knew how to bond their concocted divinities with their immense ambitions. Certain of captivating nations with the sanction of their gods, these villains, as we know, took care either to question their deities at an appropriate moment or to have them answer only whatever they believed could serve their purpose. (*Philosophy in the Boudoir* 108)

In the same book, the libertine Dolomance expresses his view that Christianity was founded by a group of opportunistic cultists upon the death of Jesus who was a "scoundrel" who "promises the heavens to all the morons who will listen to him" (27). Not only does this interpretation hold that Christianity is founded upon a lie,

but it says that this lie was intentional, contrived in order to exploit the power that comes from the creation of a new religion. Sade is drawing from the legend or theory, popular in the Enlightenment but originating in the Middle Ages, of the “three imposters.” Georges Minois writes in his book *The Atheist’s Bible* that this theory was thought to be a treatise or manuscript, clandestinely circulated among atheists and freethinkers, despite the fact that it was almost certainly “a virtual work” (xi). The idea of the fictional *Treatise of the Three Imposters* is there in the title, so inflammatory and also so self-explanatory, that “you don’t need to read it to guess the contents, which is precisely why the book was able to circulate for such a long time without ever existing” (xi). The work was attributed to any author whose works were as inflammatory as the fictional thesis, including the unfortunate Spinoza. It is absolutely in the character of Sade to borrow from the controversy of the *Treatise*, but it is also quite likely that Sade, like other Enlightenment thinkers, wholeheartedly believed in its existence.

Dolomance describes Christ as a “weak,” “stupid,” and “illiterate,” “rascal” (27). In Dolomance’s retelling, after Christ’s death the followers steal his body and “bruit it abroad he is risen” (213) and the world, in need of a revolution, overthrows the old religions in favour of the new one: “the altars of Venus and Mars are changed to those of Jesus and Mary” (214). The accusation that Christianity is a religion founded upon lies and a syncretic blending of cults was not uncommon in early Christian times. Just as the syncretic theory of the emergence of Christianity was common, the idea that Jesus’ body was stolen so that his followers could claim that he was resurrected goes back to early Christian times. For instance, Tertullian references the theory in his *The Shows (De Spectaculis)* order to dispense with it, sarcastically suggesting that perhaps a gardener perpetrated the crime in order to protect his lettuces: “This is He whom His disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said He had risen again, or the gardener abstracted, that his lettuces might come to no harm from the crowds of visitants!” (par. 30).

In *Justine*, the pious but unlucky heroine frequently encounters atheist libertines who try to tempt her to apostasy using similar lines of argument. The Comte de Bressac, one such, sees religion as a tool whereby “the tyranny of the mightier sought to enslave the weaker” (513). Foremost among religions in this regard, reasons Bressac, is Christianity, which makes its followers “subject to none but a metaphysical tyranny” (514). He attempts to discredit Jesus to Justine, not only

in a blasphemous but also anti-Semitic manner: “Has there ever existed a rowdy scoundrel more worthy of public indignation! What is he but a leprous Jew who, born of a slut and a soldier in the world’s meanest stews, dared fob himself off for the spokesman of him who, they say, created the universe!” (514). The idea that Jesus is the son of a Roman soldier is particularly old, and was the charge of Celsus, a second-century (CE) philosopher whose work *A True Discourse* attempted to debunk and refute the claims of early Christianity. It survives only as fragments in book one of Origen’s *Against Celsus*, written as a rebuttal to the original work. Celsus, as quoted by Origen, alleges that Mary “bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera” and was turned out by Joseph for adultery (par. 32). This story was a common Rabbinic claim and used as an insult to deny Christ’s virgin birth, for, Robert E. Van Voorst explains in *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, denying the virgin birth was meant to signify that Christ “should have no religious authority” (117).

The spectre of the problem of evil is invoked; Bressac claims that, with the saviour, God’s emissary, come to earth, one could expect grand miracles: “Is the earth’s face going to be changed? Are the plagues which beset it going to be annihilated? ... vices will soil it no more? Are we going to see happiness reign at last?” (514). Instead, Christ gives the world “hocus pocus, antic capers” and “drunken carousing” (514). His death, which was “doubtless much too merciful for his species of crime,” Bressac opines, leads to “fanaticism” as “all his epigrams become dogmas” and “all his blunders mysteries” (515). Bressac’s impassioned argument never stands a chance of convincing the pious Justine, who regards them as “sophistries” (517).

In a scene parallel to this exchange between Justine and Bressac, in *Juliette* Madame Delbène recounts a similar tale as a part of inducting Juliette into libertinage. She first roundly mocks the laws of Judaism, and then pronounces Christian holy texts to be no better: “it’s no longer a mountain-climbing madman’s tablets that rattle out the rules to me; this time the God in question proclaims himself through a much nobler envoy: Mary’s meeching bastard” (32). This “sinister little cheat” proves God’s truth to his followers through “[c]apers and droll antics, suppers with sluts, fraudulent cures, puns, jests and duperies. ... By abjectness, poverty, imposture, he has no other means to win me over. And if I waver, if I fail of belief? Woe unto me! Eternal tortures are my destiny” (32-3). Unlike her pious and naive

sister Justine, Juliette's response is enthusiastic: "electrified by these discourses, I fling myself into my friend's arms," she exclaims: "What is an existence without philosophy? Is life worth living when one lies crushed under the yoke of lies and stupidity?" (52). Later in the same book, Noirceuil says: "the religion of that wily little sneak Jesus – feeble, sickly, persecuted, singularly desirous to outmanoeuvre the tyrants of the day, to bully them into acknowledging a brotherhood doctrine from whose acceptance he calculated to gain some respite" and this because, the libertine claims, pre-empting Nietzsche: "Christianity represents the weak and must speak and sound like them" (178).

It is interesting to note that for all that Sade is obsessed with Christianity and Catholicism, Sade does not seem to be very interested in Christology, the doctrine of the Trinity, nor the crucifixion (despite Sade's fascination with suffering), as he is in the theological arguments for the existence of God, and the metaphysical category of God itself. It is the father, not the son, who invokes Sade's blasphemous rage. By contrast, Bataille, though many of his theories are shaped by his reading of Sade, is obsessed with the sacrifice at the centre of Christianity. Any mention of Christ in Sade's works is either intended to insult or debunk the Christian religion, and is accompanied by a deep suspicion of religious conspiracy. It is clear that Sade is using the figure of Christ as another way to injure Christianity, particularly its institutional power, which is founded upon the central idea of Christ as saviour and teacher, who sanctioned the founding of the Church. In Sade's work, the figure of Christ has little to do with the powerful, omnipresent figure of God, which is the aspect of religion to which Sade is most attracted.

As explained in Chapter Two, suspicion of revelations and miracles was at a peak during the Enlightenment, and Sade's work reflects this. In many places, a rhetorical trick many of the libertines use is to paint Jesus as a trickster, and his disciples as dupes:

At a feast of drunkards, the scalawag is indeed said to change water into wine; in a desert, he feeds a couple of ne'er-do-wells with hidden provisions that his followers have prepared; one of his comrades pretends to die, and our impostor resuscitates him; he climbs a mountain and, in front of only two or three friends, he carries out a hocus pocus that the worst trickster would be ashamed of today. (*Philosophy in the Boudoir* 27)

In *Philosophy*, Dolomance also mocks the doctrine of transubstantiation: “a crime-ridden priest enjoys the virtue of several magical words that enable him to make God arrive in a piece of bread” (28). This miracle is mocked again, in a more overtly Sadean fashion, by the Comte de Bressac in *Justine*:

At the beck and call of a priest ... the great God, creator of all we behold, is going to abase himself to the point of descending ten or twelve million times every morning in a morsel of wheat paste; this the faithful devour and assimilate, and God Almighty is lugged to the bottom of their intestines where he is speedily transmuted into the vilest excrements. (*Justine* 515)

The link between God and excrement is one that few philosophers would have been game to make although the idea is analysed by Žižek in his reflections on the “monstrosity” of Christ (*The Parallax View*). Quite aside from this blasphemy, the claim that the miracle of transubstantiation is a trick or a lie serves to deny the priestly caste special status.

In authoring his libertines’ opinions on the clergy, Sade is once again consummately of his time, but it is also possible to see in these comments a deep sense of disturbance with the motives and nature of men who hold so much power over society. Take this quote from *Juliette*, spoken by the illustrious heroine to Pope Pius VI:

What do I behold at the beginning of your Christian era? Battles, strife, tumults, seditions, massacres, the fruit solely of the greed and the ambition of the rogues who pretended to your throne; the proud pontiffs of your disgusting Church were already going in triumphal cars through Rome; lust and lewdness were already defiling them; the purple enwrapped them already. (*Juliette* 751)

Her anti-clericalism echoes the Christian origin stories taught to her by Madame Delbène, and also suggests that this religion is actively defiling, promoting “lust and lewdness,” and providing little else to society but a way for ambitious clergymen to obtain power.

### **Odious Chimeras: On the Non-Existence of God**

Although Sade’s debunking of the divinity of Jesus and the story of Christian origins does much in his libertines’ minds to discredit that religion, ultimately they must go to what Sade clearly considers the source of all religions: God. A conception of

divinity is not necessary to religious belief, but the God of classical theism and Christianity is necessary to the religion Sade resists. His efforts to disprove the existence of God, are, therefore, efforts to disprove specifically Western, Christian conceptions of God. Libertine arguments (which are borrowed from philosophers Sade admired) against the existence of God target ideas of creationism, the idea of a prime mover, cosmological arguments, and ontological arguments.

Coeur-de-fer explains how religion came about by expounding the view that the concept of God was created by “primitive man” who was “terrified by the phenomena which harried him” and possessing a mind “too much in its infancy to explore, to discover in Nature’s depths the laws of motion” (*Justine* 496). Thus, according to his anthropological reasoning, primitive humans “found it simpler to fancy a motor in this Nature” to account for nature’s operations (496). They “elaborated rituals” to worship this being, and soon “there were as many religions on earth as races and peoples and not long after, as many Gods as families,” but they shared in common the same “absurd illusion, first fruit of human blindness” (496). He concludes this line of reasoning by stating that “Nature sufficeth unto herself” (496). The logical argument done, some blasphemies are in order: he describes this “deific phantom” as a “loathsome platitude,” a “pitiable extravagance” and “disgusting to the mind, revolting to the heart,” something which “ought never to have issued from the darkness save to plunge back into it, forever to be drowned” (497). Ironically, he also declares that the concept of God “merits from us neither an instant of faith nor a minute’s examination,” belied by the extensive examination undertaken by libertines, and also the faith exuded by the exemplary Justine herself. Bressac later tries to corrupt Justine with his atheism. “All religions start from a false premise, ... each supposes as necessary the worship of a Creator, but that creator never existed” (513).

In *Juliette*, Delbène undertakes a far more extensive and thorough debunking of religion and of the Christian God. She begins by positing her own explanation of his existence, similar to the arguments advanced in *Justine*: “wherever you find human frailty you also come upon gods whelped by the same men’s terror, and homages rendered unto these gods, the inevitable result of the folly that erects them” (30). Interestingly, this charge was once directed by Christians at other religions, who felt that the beliefs of the Romans and Greeks were superstitions and follies invented by those ignorant of the one true God. Clement of Alexandria addresses the

so-called “heathens,” attempting to convert them to Christianity by debunking their beliefs, and concludes, in his *Exhortation to the Heathen*:

Superstition, then, as was to be expected, having taken its rise thus, became the fountain of insensate wickedness; and not being subsequently checked, but having gone on augmenting and rushing along in full flood, it became the originator of many demons, and was displayed in sacrificing hecatombs, appointing solemn assemblies, setting up images, and building temples. (ch. 3).

Lactantius, in a similar vein, criticises the worship of deities as elements of the world (or indeed, elements of the world as deities): “Now let us refute those who regard elements of the world as gods, that is, the heaven, the sun, and the moon; for being ignorant of the maker of these things, they admire and adore the works themselves” (*Epitome of the Divine Institutes* ch. 26). Although the charge was turned against Christianity in atheistic arguments, it is ironic that Sade should employ the same argumentative technique once used to establish the legitimacy of Christianity.

Delbène later examines scriptural evidence for the existence of God. She notes the lack of a clear account of the attributes and features of God in books which supposedly speak his word, and comments that what evidence exists in these books “can only excite a man to despise him” (30). She concludes that these books “could never have been dictated by the mind or spirit of a God” and furthermore “were written down long after the death of the personage who dares affirm he transmitted verbatim God’s own phrases” (30-1), pronouncing them the “confections of some knavish charlatans” (31). Delbène is repeating what had by then become a standard view for sceptics. Hobbes dedicates part of *Leviathan* to discussing the authorship and antiquity of holy books and he concludes that “the five books of Moses were written after his time,” and that certain other texts could not possibly have been written contemporary to the events they describe (329; bk. 3, ch. 33). In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza, too, casts a sceptical gaze over the Pentateuch, also questioning whether Moses was the true and contemporary author of those works attributed to him (see ch. 7). Biblical hermeneutics itself could be controversial, and Spinoza’s historical and critical approach was, as Jonathan Israel makes clear, deeply threatening to “the very foundations of theology and religion” because it approached scripture as “a collection of historical narratives devoid of any special status or miraculous content” (*Radical Enlightenment* 448). By Sade’s time, such an approach

to scripture could not have lost its blasphemous power, but had become a common method for reading holy texts.

As evidence to support her claim that the scriptures are fakes, she takes not only the lack of coherent or logical explanation of God and doctrine in scripture, but also what she considers to be the unlikely story they tell of a God who speaks only to “squatters in a desert,” an “impoverished, unknown people” for whose sake alone the Almighty “tampers with the motions of the stars, splits the seas, showers down manna from the skies” (31). She bids Juliette to note also “the unanimous silence of all the adjoining countries’ historians, who ought surely to have taken note of the extraordinary events that crowd scripture” (31). Again, this view can be found in Sade’s forerunners and contemporaries. For instance, it can be found in Diderot, who says in *Philosophical Thoughts* that “the divinity of the Scriptures is not so clearly imprinted in them, that the authority of the sacred historians can stand absolutely independently of the witness of profane historians” (par. 45). He criticises their composition, and compares them to paintings which have supposedly been divinely inspired, but in which “accuracy and artfulness [is] abandoned everywhere,” so that he would have to “cling to the tradition of their being fabrications” (par. 45). He concedes that it is truth, not artfulness which must have motivated the authors of these texts, but, then, snidely wonders why the works of profane historians contained nothing of “the existence and miracles of Jesus Christ” which were apparently witnessed by a whole people (par. 45).

Sade borrows still more arguments to refute some common proofs for the existence of God. Having thoroughly debunked scriptural evidence, Delbène moves on to testing whether God’s existence can be proved by reason alone, saying, “as reason is the only touchstone we possess, it must be the test” of faith (*Juliette* 34). Some of her comments could be used to counter the ontological argument: “nothing is commoner than to make the grave mistake of identifying the real existence of bodies that are external to us with the objective existence of perceptions that are inside our minds” and she warns against “ascribing an independent existence to the objects of these inner perceptions and more, in our supposing that they exist outside of ourselves and separately” (34). Her main target is the cosmological argument; after briefly describing the nature of cause and effect, she reflects that the task of extrapolating cause from effect backwards by millennia to the beginning of the universe “weared the minds” of those men disposed to “find a cause in very effect”



(36). Thus, she says, “they hit upon the short cut of skipping in a single great leap back to a primary cause; they fancied it the universal cause in regard to which all particular causes are effects and which, itself is the effect of no cause at all” (36). She cautions Juliette to remember that this “grandiose phantom” only exists in the mind’s inner perception and therefore cannot be shown to have an objective existence. She says that, while humans do not yet understand the progression of all causes, “ignorance of one fact is never adequate grounds for establishing and then accrediting another fact” (37). The question of whether these arguments are effective or not, the main aim of these diatribes, expounded by a nun, is doubtless to blaspheme. The use of such arguments as sexual foreplay privileges their transgressive meanings over their pedagogical usefulness, and, in any case, pedagogy is itself an erotic practice in Sade.

### **The Libertine and the Virgin: Two Sisters Explore Vice and Virtue**

The twin novels *Justine* and *Juliette*, which need to be read against each other, are implicated in a number of binaries which relate fundamentally to Christian concepts. The most obvious binary they explore is that of virtue and vice, concepts which have overtly ethical meaning, but are populated in Sade’s novels not solely by secular ideas but by religious ones. Sade’s use of Christian theological and metaphysical categories is a more subtle and powerful manifestation of Sade’s atheism and his relationship to the religious than the anti-religious speeches often recited by libertines. Yet it also gives a better insight into Sade’s philosophy and ethics, because those categories are the scaffolding upon which the Sadean ethical project is built.

Taking *Justine* as the example for virtue, the reader encounters a girl whose virtues are motivated nearly exclusively by her faith. When *Justine* is tried and sentenced to execution for a crime of which she was innocent, she is rescued by the libertine *Dubois*, who wishes to “make a proselyte” out of her (480). *Dubois* warns her that her adherence to virtue is likely to be her ruin, but *Justine* replies: “There are religious principles within me which, may it please Heaven, will never desert me; if Providence renders difficult my career in life, ‘tis in order to compensate me in a better world” (481). Later, *Coeur-de-fer* attempts to convince her of the benefits of a life of crime where *Dubois* failed, and *Justine* agrees that vice may indeed triumph “in this world” but “God’s justice” awaits the “dishonest man” and that “it is the misfortunate one’s sole consolation ... who will avenge us if not God?” (495). She

furthermore calls Coeur-de-fer's arguments "blasphemies" (498). Clearly, to Justine, vice is not just law-breaking, it is sin, and will be punished accordingly. She later attempts to reform the libertine Bressac by employing "the means Religion provides," in a scene which parodies the libertine conversion stories of the kind found in sentimental novels. In this scene, the convention is subverted as Bressac is too much the atheist to be swayed and instead turns her arguments into atheistic dissertations of his own (513). Justine frequently prays for courage and fortitude after an unfortunate incident: "prayer is the misfortunate's sweetest comfort" (503), but in every instance of her praying, she is plunged immediately into some dark abyss by the providence she so piously accepts as her lot. It is this religious virtue which is constantly punished, the motivation to do good which is subverted and turned to the machinations of vice.

Juliette is Justine's mirror, since she stands for vice. This is based on her lack of faith, her materialism, and her atheistic education. She and her fellow libertines (who espouse nearly identical opinions on evil and vice) frequently note that crime and evil is rewarding, not only materially, but in itself: "is not crime in itself delicious enough to be committed for no practical purpose? (665). It is a sentiment shared by many other libertines in Sade's works. After hanging an innocent girl to both his own and Juliette's pleasure, Noirceuil observes: "had she been guilty, our deed would have been in the service of the law: and we would have been cheated of all that is delicious in evil" (175). Again, Sade's anti-universalising principles manifest themselves as anti-legislative altogether. The crime and evil that Juliette revels in are not empty, or otherwise secular categories. They respond not only to the earthly law. Juliette responds ecstatically to any discourse debunking religious principles, and they always lead to her being sensually inflamed. Vice, sin, and evil are attractive to libertines and could never remain so if the libertine truly gave up God.

Simone de Beauvoir suggests that these categories in Sade's writing stem directly from his own life experiences: "since society united with Nature in regarding his pleasures as criminal, he made crime itself a pleasure" (28). She says, "it was not by chance that he chose Easter as the day to whip Rose Keller, and it was at the moment that he sardonically suggested that he confess her that his sexual excitement reached its climax. No aphrodisiac is so potent as the defiance of God" (28).

### **The Challenge: Sin**

Sade does not set out to debunk the idea that ethics can only be founded in religion in order to construct an ethics which can govern social life according to a rational and reasoned system, in the manner of other Enlightenment philosophers. A life governed by rational, secular ethics would seem colourless to the libertine. By co-opting the language of the religious and the language of the Enlightenment, Sade's writing transgresses both religious and Enlightenment understandings of nature and sexuality, ethics, virtue and vice. However, this co-option is not straightforward, and he does not totally erase the common conceptions of the terms he uses, and the categories he invokes. Indeed, Sade's writing depends on the prior meanings of terms like "sin," "law," "virtue" and "vice" staying intact, in order to maintain the blasphemous quality of his use of them.

Kenneth Reinhard observes: "The Sadian fantasy remains locked in the Pauline dialectic of law and sin, with no place for a subject separated out of it" (797). Sade must operate inside religious categories, even as he attempts to destroy them. He does this through transgression. It is impossible to talk about Sade's religion without a comprehension of the relationship between transgression and religion, a relationship that is best explained through Bataille's writings. It is useful to call upon Bataille to elucidate the topic; first, because he is a philosopher who has been central to defining the concept of transgression; second, because he is influential to postmodernist theories; and third, because he was an ardent student of Sade. Bataille states that "misunderstanding the sanctity of transgression is one of the foundations of Christianity," and that this misunderstanding is at the heart of Christian views of the sacred, which has become paradoxical (90). Christianity rejects the impure, but cannot abolish it entirely, and so it "defined the boundaries of the sacred world after its own fashion" and cast "impure sacredness" as profane (121). To Bataille, this comes down to Christianity's misapprehension of transgression: "in the sacred world of Christianity nothing was allowed to survive which clearly confessed to the fundamental nature of sin or transgression" (121).

Despite Christianity's rejection of all things deemed unclean, such as the erotic, the violent, and death, Bataille calls attention to the enshrinement of these same things in Christian theology. For example, the sacredness of the sacrifice of Christ, as violent as it is, cannot be denied. Bataille argues that it is not only the symbol of this sacrifice that is sacred, but the transgressive nature of the violence

itself which provides access to the divine, in this case the divine pardon, only possible through the intense bodily suffering of Christ. Taboos are in place to protect the world of the sacred from coming into contact with the world of the profane; they are a barrier. Transgression is therefore the one thing capable of breaking the barrier, the only thing capable of opening up the sacred world. The sacred is a transgressive force since a transgression is required to break the taboos which keep the mundane, profane world of the everyday separate from the divine, sacred realm. Only the most perverse act of debauchery can break through into the sacred world. Bataille sees violence, death, sacrifice and the erotic as sacred things *because* they are transgressive. Curiously, it is entirely consistent with Bataille's thought that Sade's world is more "sacred," that it opens up or gives way more directly to the sacred, than the Christian world of taboos which it opposes but in which it is inevitably steeped.

The concept of sin is indispensable to Sade, since it is the most direct way to injure God. In Christianity there are two main types of sin: sins against God, such as blasphemy and idolatry, and sins against the neighbour, which includes theft, murder, and adultery. All sins are sins against God, since they not only break God's law, but they alienate the individual from God. Redemption is reconciliation with God, which God desires. The death of Christ is seen by some influential theologians, including Anselm of Canterbury, Martin Luther and John Calvin, as God's sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity so that humanity can be reconciled to him. Sade seems to take this idea of hurting God through sinning very seriously. Libertines often state that there can be no pleasure without crime and transgression, and often this transgression is sufficient pleasure unto itself: In *Justine*, Saint-Florent observes: "only crime awakens and stiffens lust" (657) and in *The 120 Days*: Durcet says, "my prick positively jumps when I do evil" (363).

Thus the religion Sade rejects is absolutely integral to his philosophy. Pierre Klossowski points out that, although Sade's atheism seems "destined to establish the reign of the total absence of norms," it cannot fulfil this destiny because the transgression which the libertines frequently affirm to be the source of their pleasure would lose all meaning if social norms and moral categories were to be abolished (*Sade My Neighbor* 15). In Sade's works, Klossowski says, "the relationship with God is negative because the libertine's conscience, as we find it in Sade, is not atheistic in a cold-blooded way; rather its atheism is the result of effervescence and

therefore of resentment; his atheism is only[!] a form of sacrilege” (“Nature as a Destructive Principle” 65). Sade’s sacrilegious atheism could never succeed in abolishing religion because it is entirely dependent on it. Instead, Sade institutes a system which Klossowski calls “integral monstrosity” (*Sade My Neighbor* 5) because, as Klossowski explains, “it is not atheism that conditions or liberates Sadean monstrosity, rather, this monstrosity leads Sade to derationalise atheism as soon as he tries to rationalise his own monstrosity by way of atheism” (*Sade My Neighbor* 6).

Simone de Beauvoir disagrees with the foundations of Klossowski’s argument, stating that he “is misinterpreting Sade in taking his passionate rejection of God for an avowal of need” (“Must We Burn Sade?” 41). Beauvoir sees Sade’s striking out at God as just another manifestation of his rebellion against society and justice, and more specifically to Beauvoir’s own interests, a rebellion against the universalising forces behind society. Beauvoir sees Klossowski’s argument as a Christian apologetics for Sade. On the one hand, Klossowski may be discounting Sade’s own beliefs (as expressed separately from his writing) on the basis that the views expressed often in his books contradict or muddy them. They do, after all, but accepting the words of a character as the mouthpiece of a writer does not provide strong evidence. Nonetheless, Klossowski did not state that he believed Sade to have been lying about his atheism, but rather shows how the religious elements of his works may serve to undermine the atheistic views that Sade himself held or wished to promote. After all, only what is written on paper remains to speak for these views. Although Beauvoir is right in pointing out that he has an agenda, Klossowski’s arguments remain useful in determining what the meaning of the philosophy expressed in Sade’s works has for Sade’s relationship to the religious. They cannot be so lightly dismissed. As much as she is against the idea of Sade’s atheism constituting a relationship with the religious, her theory about Sade’s rebellion against universalising forces remains useful in examining that relationship.

That Sade rebels against universalising laws has a deeply ethical meaning which will be explored in a later chapter, but it also has a religious meaning, in that the Christian God is meant to be a universalising God. Beauvoir applauds Sade’s questioning of the moral value of the universal, since it undermines the autonomy of the subject. According to Beauvoir, Sade’s works are his attempt to think through a central question in ethics and philosophy: “Can we, without renouncing our

individuality, satisfy our aspirations to universality?” (“Must We Burn Sade?” 4). Sade’s impulse when confronted with the universal is to favour the particular. To name just a few examples; the libertine led hierarchy in his erotic works; his isolation from society, in many ways self-imposed in that it was his philosophy and actions which set him apart before his imprisonment ever did; the symbolic way that the debauches of his libertines always take place in highly secluded and often fortified places such as castles and convents; and the way that transgression sets apart the rule-breaker from the law, and his or her lack of repentance. Sade eventually imposes his own totality; his version of freedom is just as universalising: by allowing everything, accounting for all possibilities, he wishes to include everything but thereby precludes difference. Allen S. Weiss states that “for Sade, totality achieves the extrapolation of multiplicity to closure, eliminating difference by including all possibilities” (202). The effect is that “intersubjectivity is suppressed by pure domination, and this suppression of intersubjectivity, at its limit, inaugurates the possibility of the suppression of subjectivity itself” (203). In including everything, Sade precludes the possibility, the inevitability, of finitude, of the definition of the individual. But Sade’s totality is responsive to something outside of itself, because, by rejecting a universalising God, Sade makes God the one thing outside of his totality.

If Sadean atheism is a part of a process of individuation, it is predicated upon the act of establishing a negative relationship with God. This is twofold: God is always included in the debauches of the Sadean libertines, which affirms God as a part of the universalising system of libertinage even as this system calls out to God as an antagonist, as an “other.” Second, God is the embodiment of the universal which Sade detests, and yet, Sade, too, is complicit in reaffirming the universal and renouncing the subject. Sade’s atheism is in this way an affirmation of the necessity of God as a metaphysical category.

The paradoxical nature of Sade’s atheism can be better understood when it is seen as sharing in common with the “turn to religion” in postmodernist philosophy. There are a number of implications this carries. First, philosophical atheism is faced again and again with the religious, a force which it cannot destroy, since it loses meaning without the religious. The “turn to religion” is essentially about the recognition that the religious is inescapable. This long-burning desire to destroy the religious is also seen in Sade’s work, the tension between the urge to blaspheme, as a

sin against God (which fulfils the desire to harm God) and the knowledge that blasphemy is an empty expression, is constantly played out. The blasphemy of the Sadean text can never touch the religious because the religious is at once disavowed, so the blasphemy can have no meaning, and it is seen as outside, as the ineffable “other,” so that blasphemy becomes a provocation with no answer. Yet the self-indulgent urge to blaspheme, and the rage that drives it, never goes away. Sade becomes a kind of negative theologian, seeing God as outside and untouchable in ontological terms, and yet, God is not just an abstract concept for Sade, but an opposing force, something in which he is actively invested. Sade proves his investment in this psychological drama of his novels and the characters within them again and again by constantly talking about it. The only response to such a being for an atheist would usually be silence, as God has no meaning for an atheist, not even as a metaphysical category. Yet Sade, like the negative theologian, goes on talking, to the point that his texts are known for their verbosity, repetition, and rhapsodic narrative structure.

## Chapter 6

### Prelude to Sadean Ethics: Ethics, Religion, Philosophy

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying, as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again? Don't lanterns need to be lit in the morning?

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

As has been explained in Chapters Two and Three, philosophical and theological systems entail ethical systems. The basis of ethical systems and their structure will be the focus of examination in this chapter. This chapter may seem to backtrack, but it is necessary to pause the argument for a moment in order to take stock of the complex ethical developments and debates which inform Sade's writing and how it might be possible to read that writing. This chapter will provide crucial context for the chapters which follow it, which focus on Sadean ethics, and it will problematise binaristic understandings of ethics, principally those which see the religious and the secular as necessarily opposed. Sade's works do not offer the only possibility for thinking through ethics after the erosion of religious authority and the "death of God." His contemporaries took different paths, and it is essential to locate him in the context of Enlightenment understandings of ethics, and more specifically metaethics. Reactions and challenges to Enlightenment treatments of ethics, particularly in postmodernism, will also be examined, since postmodernism destabilises binaries established during the Enlightenment which place faith, revelation, and theology on one side of the divide, and reason, rationality and philosophy on the other. Postmodernist treatments of ethics are also interesting because they tend to decenter the self in ethics, putting the "other" first. Since Sade's libertines espouse and try to live the dream of total sovereignty, postmodernist ethics, by demonstrating how the



sovereignty of the self can be rethought, provide new ways of looking at, and deconstructing, Sade's ethics.

This chapter will proceed from a consideration of some of the ethical debates in which thinkers engaged during the Enlightenment over the place of religion and faith in ethics, or indeed, if there was a place for religion in ethics. A discussion of ethics usually begins with the ancient Greek philosophers, and with good reason, since the ethical theories and ideas of the ancient philosophers have informed not only early Christian thought, but ethical thought since then, even up to the present day. Crucially, explains Schneewind, during the Enlightenment, "the ancients were used as aids for considering how to work out a wholly secular morality" (332). This is an interesting development in the light of this chapter's argument, since, up until that point, the philosophy of the ancients had been a major source of inspiration in the construction of Christian ethical views: "a major task of Western theologians was not so much the rejection of pagan thought as its absorption into Christian moral philosophy" (Schneewind 332). This chapter will not cover the entire history of Western ethics, for such an effort is beyond the scope of this thesis and has been done admirably elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> This chapter also will not attempt to provide a debate-ending definition of ethics, since it is precisely the mission of this chapter to show that any definition of ethics is necessarily dependent on cultural context and thus there can be no objective and unassailable definition of ethics. In any case, it is Sade's immediate social and intellectual influences which must be parsed in order to understand his ethical system in context. Moreover, the chapter will not proceed chronologically, because the history of ethics cannot be simplified to a narrative of teleological development. Some post-Enlightenment modernist and postmodernist ideas about ethics will be discussed in order to show the afterlife of Enlightenment theories about ethics, and demonstrate how later theorists challenged and went beyond Enlightenment systems. An examination of Sadean ethics will follow in the next chapter, leaving this one free to examine some important ethical problems essential to understanding ethics in general and Sade's ethics in particular. Crucially, this chapter will introduce the problem of autonomy in ethics, because autonomy is

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<sup>37</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics*, and *After Virtue* and Russ Shafer-Landau's *The Fundamentals of Ethics* all provide a reasonable overview of the history and development of ethical theories.

key to grasping the Sadean libertine goal of sovereignty, and it will show that the Christian concept of God shaped how the self is conceptualised. The concept of God is therefore essential to comprehend ethical responsibility.

The central metaethical question about how it is possible to ground ethics, or indeed whether it is possible to ground ethics, is a contentious and unresolved one. It is historically difficult, if theoretically possible, to separate religion and ethics, because religion is often felt to provide the motivation for acting in an ethical way, even if it is removed as the basis for ethics. In any case, ethics cannot be examined historically apart from theology and philosophy. It is owing to ethical dilemmas that many atheists, including the Marquis de Sade, became so thoroughly disenchanted with religion. Even within the category of the religious, doctrines have often been disputed and altered because of the undesirable ethical implications of certain doctrines. It should be noted, even so, that theological doctrines are not always ethical in nature – only in so far as it is regarded as unethical or wrong not to subscribe to them – but may instead only have ethical implications. For instance, it was numerous grievances with ethical, as well as theological, issues, such as the sale of pardons, which motivated Martin Luther to protest against the Church, leading to the eventual schism between the Catholics and the Protestants (MacCulloch 122). Philosophical systems have been condemned by theologians for their ethical implications, condemnations which have often led to persecution of the authors or proponents of these systems.

### **Heaven-Sent: Divine Command and Natural Ethics**

For most of the history of the West post-Antiquity, it was taken for granted that religion and ethics were inseparable, and the strength of this conviction is such that this is still a point of debate for thinkers in the twenty-first century. Many believe that without God to stand as both source and guarantor for moral values, none can exist. Dostoyevsky famously takes up this dilemma in *The Brothers Karamazov*: the character Miusov relates an anecdote about Ivan Karamazov talking to a group of women in which Ivan says that for every person who does not believe in God “the moral law of nature must instantly be transformed into the complete opposite of the old, religious law” and that “evil-doing must not only be lawful to man, but must even be acknowledged to be necessary” (94). That Ivan himself is an atheist seems to make his statements all the more powerful. Sartre, surprisingly, since he is also an

atheist, finds it impossible to ground ethics with any surety if there is no God: “[t]here can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it,” and, “[e]verything is indeed permitted if God does not exist” (*Existentialism and Humanism* 34). Sartre’s comments cannot be taken as a pessimistic view of the moral possibilities of atheism; instead, they are a lament that there is no firm basis for moral law, and a conviction that people must find their own meaning, choose their morality, and take due responsibility for their actions.

Nicholas Everitt examines claims about atheism in his book *The Non-Existence of God*, examining how God, as omniscient, is regarded as a kind of “moral expert” (131), not only because He knows everything, but also because he is infallible, from which one can logically deduce that he must also be morally infallible (131). David O. Brink explores the same argument in his article “The Autonomy of Ethics”: God is seen to play a metaphysical and an epistemological role in ethics (150). Although both Everitt and Brink argue strongly against the necessity of a religious basis for ethics, they realise that, nevertheless, religion, or the God of classical theism, have been imagined to provide the means by which one might know what is good or bad, virtuous or corrupt.

Even if it is possible to separate religion and morality, in some thinkers’ eyes, it is neither desirable nor practical to do so. One argument in favour of this position is that religion provides the best motivations for acting morally; it includes the belief that God plays a “motivational role” in ethics (Brink 150). These reasons suppose the *a priori* existence of a God who has laid down moral laws. In Christianity, for example, the motivation to be faithful to moral rules is the threat of divine judgement, and a system of rewards and punishments meted out in the afterlife. The threat of punishment for transgressions in an eternal afterlife of the greatest possible suffering and torment is central to the Christian conception of the cosmos and the moral order, and still figures in the behaviour and beliefs of many Christians today.

Regardless of the theoretical validity of religion as a basis for morality, there is a tradition of upholding certain values and behaving in certain ways in all religious traditions. Therefore, religion can still be a source of morality to believers. The Christian community has been an important source of ethical guidance and identity since the earliest days of Christianity, as Robin Gill explains in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*: “Despite areas of considerable disagreement, a shared moral life and worship were important sources of identity for the earliest Christians” (199).

Additionally, churches gain a reputation for doing “good works” and advocating for social justice, building and running hospitals, schools, rehabilitation centres, and other necessary public institutions. In any case, as Peter Brown notes in *Through the Eye of a Needle*, the motivation for doing good works in the past was not a desire to achieve social justice but a form of payment to God for one’s sins. He says, in relation to charity, that “all pious gifts were treated as equally significant. All were offerings made to God from the good things that He had given to humankind” (42) and that charity was motivated by a desire for expiation for one’s sins: “Religious giving was part of daily life because daily life itself was defined by sin” (*Through the Eye of a Needle* 363). But the argument for the necessity of religion in grounding ethics goes beyond the authority of a particular institution or its reputation for goodness, and sees community as something valuable in ethics: “whether or not someone goes to church regularly is a very good indicator of a whole range of beliefs and moral attitudes and behaviour. Churchgoers are more distinctive than is often imagined” (Gill 2). Gill continues:

It is still possible that, although there is a causal relationship here, it works from virtues to churchgoing rather than from churchgoing to virtues. That is to say, individuals who already share a number of Christian virtues are more likely than other people to go regularly to church and then to remain regular churchgoers.” (200)

Simon Blackburn comments that this sense of community allows believers to be assured of ethical reciprocity in relationships: “by seeing our neighbours simply reciting the Ten Commandments or singing the right songs, we can be reassured, as we need to be, that they share enough of our own values, that they too can be relied upon or trusted” (“Ethics, Science, and Religion” 255).

Religious beliefs come to be embedded in culture, and so, too, any values propounded by those belief systems. This thesis does not adopt the view that one needs to repudiate the Christian legacy to have a sensible discussion about human rights and justice, or ethics. Since Christianity has become integral to Western culture, Christian virtues and concepts become the culturally ingrained. Jürgen Habermas states that:

Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the

direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. (150-1)

Derrida and Patočka, as will become clear by the end of this chapter, both acknowledge this heritage in their discussions of ethics and responsibility. Yet it is not just the passive legacy of a religious heritage which alone structures the Sadean world, but an active engagement with Christian understandings and categories through transgression.

### **Blending Faith and Reason: Enlightenment Ethical Arguments for God and Religion in Ethics**

There are many arguments supporting the view that ethics must have religious grounding, and these arguments became a bitter point of contention during the Enlightenment. It is not as though the Enlightenment was the first time in which such debates have been staged, but these debates became gradually more public and were taken up more often during the Enlightenment. Israel sums up the situation nicely, explaining that, although the idea that morality was something to be “grasped exclusively through the power of reason” was only powerful in the radical fringes of the Enlightenment: “Even those most implacably opposed to radical ideas had to ask whether there really is, in fact, some clearly demonstrable, rational test proving revelation, faith, and ecclesiastical authority indispensable or at least incontestably beneficial to society’s wellbeing” (*Enlightenment Contested* 663).

In response to the deep and radical questioning of some Enlightenment thinkers directed at very core of Christian ethics, some philosophers wanted to restore the authority of faith in ethical matters while avoiding or addressing some of the charges levelled at it. To take the radicals’ project of writing a reason-based ethics as the sole project of Enlightenment thinking on ethics is to ignore and invalidate most of the thinkers of that age. Israel makes a good point when he calls out a number of recent scholars, among them Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and John Gray, on their error in claiming that the Enlightenment is characterised by a “failure to establish a viable secular morality independent of theology and traditional metaphysics” (*Enlightenment Contested* 808). They disregard the radicals, while

charging the mainstream with failure in a project that they did not undertake. For many prominent and influential Enlightenment philosophers who wrote on ethics, it was important to retain traditional metaphysics, religious authority, or some notion of God. Even Spinoza, in many ways the champion of reason-based secular ethics, wished to retain and lend a fresh authority to a notion of God.

During the Enlightenment, debates about divine command theory were related to debates about rational ethics and the role of nature. When philosophy began to look to rationalism and the human capacity for reasoning to solve ethical problems, it did not destroy theistic bases for ethics altogether, even if such ethical systems were felt to be dangerously close to atheistic. Natural theology, which attempted to seek bases for religion based on observations of nature rather than revelation and scripture, viewed the human capacity for reason not only as a God-given gift but as proof that humans are created by a benevolent God. Natural theology did not so much seek to overthrow or even to question existing ethical systems, but rather to justify Christian ethical systems by extrapolating ethical maxims backwards from natural causes. They also, more often than not, remained open to the idea of revelation.

Voltaire was perhaps the most well-known proponent of reason and religion in ethics. He argued that a knowledge of God and morality both require reason. Voltaire, like most moderate thinkers, was highly critical of Spinoza and his ethical system, because Spinoza's ethics were felt to reduce the role of God to nature and engender relativism. Nevertheless, Voltaire granted that good and evil were to some degree relative, although "God" or a "supreme being" instilled knowledge of "first laws" in humans, which are the basis for morals (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 682). He also believed that morality was divinely ordained, yet was not discovered through revelation but through natural impulses inherent in human beings (769). Voltaire's reasoning for this is familiar and used by many different philosophers (including Bayle): that basic moral truths can be observed everywhere and in many different societies and systems of belief, and that this is because God decrees moral values and instills them to a degree in nature. Voltaire based his arguments on Newton's explanations of the physical world – and in Newton's idea that God acts through nature.

Voltaire's criticisms of Spinoza did not end with charges of atheism; Voltaire also found Spinoza's ethics to be deterministic. If, as Spinoza claimed, all was one

substance, humanity is determined, and acts in deterministic ways, a view that deprives humanity of freedom of will (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* 768). This was repugnant to Voltaire because, lacking freedom of will, how can people be held responsible for immoral behaviour? Voltaire's solution to this problem was that all people had free will, because the "supreme being" had free will – which was mirrored in humanity: "the Being that is infinitely free, has communicated to his Creature Man, a limited Portion of this Liberty, ... we understand by [this] not only the Faculty of willing, but that of willing freely" (*The Metaphysics of Sir Isaac Newton* 23).

Montesquieu provides an interesting case for the notion that God laid down natural laws, because he also held that appeals to religion have no place in laying down civil laws. Montesquieu took up another major issue of debate and contention during the Enlightenment: the separation of Church and state. Without religion, it was felt, not only would morality crumble, but society along with it, as the divine laws or mandates which informed the running of the state would be undermined. Moderate thinkers wanted morality to have some kind of religious basis, but still be compatible with rationalised political principles necessary for the conduct of the nation-state. Montesquieu is anything but consistent in his position on these debates, however. On the one hand, Montesquieu appears to be a relativist, because he was one of the first thinkers to advance the notion that systems of laws and ethics can and should vary from society to society. He says, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, that "the legislator is to follow the spirit of the nation" when laying down laws, he is not to appeal to universal laws (310). Furthermore, one should not attempt to change manners with laws: "when one wants to change the mores and the manners, one must not change them by the laws ... it would be better to change them by other mores and other manners" (315). What is held to be right, good, and just varies from society to society, and so laws cannot be prescribed independent of knowledge of social context. On the other hand, Montesquieu speaks of divinely ordained natural laws, which are (because divinely ordained) timeless and universal. He says that there are a "different order of laws" and that one should know how those laws relate to one another and not put "confusion into the principles that should govern men" (494). Religious laws are "fixed," and Montesquieu holds that "it is necessary in society for something to be fixed" (495). He argues that there are "natural" laws which civil laws should not overthrow; for instance, he refers to a law which "condemned every

girl who, having had illicit commerce with someone, did not declare this to the king before marrying the man; this violated the natural defense of modesty; it is as unreasonable to require a girl to make this declaration as to ask a man not to seek to defend his life” (496). Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that this problem in Montesquieu’s thought is irresolvable: “Montesquieu just is inconsistent. Sometimes he seems committed to the view that there is no viewpoint outside of or beyond that of a given society. Sometimes – more interestingly still – he seems to make political liberty his criterion for judging a society” (180).

Another Enlightenment argument in favour of the proposition that morality is impracticable without religion is that religious beliefs provide moral integrity. The argument is along these lines: although a person may have noble aspirations to ethical behaviour, and noble beliefs, they may be unable to live up to these standards without divine support. Kant was well-known for supporting this idea. John E. Hare argues in “Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism” that Kant’s position on atheism implies that he thought faith was necessary for a person to live a moral life in a genuine way. Any person attempting to lead a moral life must be aware of the potential for moral failure in humanity (see *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*). Without God to forgive these failures, indeed to forgive the very potential for failure, the individual will either fall into despair over the impossibility of overcoming moral weakness, or will self-deceivingly take themselves as guarantor in all moral matters, which undermines moral earnestness. Hare states the basic tenets of Kant’s “moral criticisms of atheism,” which are as follows: “that it makes moral life harder because it removes the ground for belief in the real possibility of being good, that it rids atheists of incentives to morality, that it leads them to moral despair about the possibility of the highest good, and that it corrupts their moral character both individually and socially” (64). Hare maintains that Kant’s view was that morals are and can only be chosen; that ethics are not laid down by divine command, scripture, or Church dogma, but should be universally accessible, understandable, and practicable.

### **Ethics without Religion**

The instability of the theoretical foundations of religious ethics would eventually contribute to attempts to separate religion and ethics completely. The logical validity or internal consistency of the religious bases for ethics were challenged during the



Enlightenment. Other debates have focused on some of the questions about the nature of religious ethics themselves and the unanswered problems to which those ethics inevitably give rise. Some thinkers decisively rejected the idea that religion is the only source of ethics and is the only thing that can motivate people to adhere to ethical prescriptions. The Enlightenment provided a theatre in which debates over such questions could be staged, but Enlightenment thinkers were by no means the first to entertain such arguments. Although an ethics based on specifically Christian premises is in focus here, issues with religion as a basis for ethics long predate Christianity. These ancient arguments have since been applied to the examination of Christian ethics. The Enlightenment did not bring such arguments to a close; they are as heated today as they ever were.

One argument that resonated powerfully at the time is that it is not logically possible for a person to obey a divine command and remain a moral agent. If commands are obeyed unquestioningly, even if those commands are in line with personal ethics, it constitutes a failure to exercise autonomy. This destroys moral accountability. For Kant, the existence of morality implies free will for these very reasons:

To the Idea of freedom there is inseparably attached the concept of autonomy, and to this in turn the universal principle of morality a principle which in Idea forms the ground for all the actions of rational beings, just as the law of nature does for all appearances. ... in effect we had perhaps assumed the Idea of freedom only because of the moral law in order subsequently to infer the moral law in its turn from freedom; and that consequently we had been able to assign no ground at all for the moral law, but had merely assumed it by begging a principle which well-meaning souls will gladly concede us, but which we could never put forward as a demonstrable proposition. We see now that when we think of ourselves as free, we transfer ourselves into the intelligible world as members and recognise the autonomy of the will together with its consequence – morality; whereas when we think of ourselves as under obligation, we look upon ourselves as belonging to the sensible world and yet to the intelligible world at the same time.

*(Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals 135)*

A lack of responsibility for one's actions, which the loss of free will entails, implies that one cannot act morally, something which implies that Abraham is not a moral

agent, although Derrida's reading of the Genesis story demonstrates that he can be considered a moral agent in other ways.

Divine command tends to operate in scripture as a test of faith, not as a guide to living ethically. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (in the original Danish: *Frygt og Bæven*) attempts to resolve the tension between divine command and ethical behaviour. Kierkegaard investigates the biblical episode, which has become a foundational narrative, of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, an episode outlined in Chapter Two. This story is aetiological – it explains the origin of the ritual sacrifice of animals, couched in the narrative of a test of faith. Nonetheless, it is the unusual nature of this particular test which makes it interesting and revealing in discussions of ethics.

Kierkegaard interprets the story of Abraham and Isaac as an example of divine command *interrupting*, not establishing, ethics. God's injunction that Abraham kill Isaac does not sanction the murder itself, and the murder itself is not something that God desires, since He ultimately stays Abraham's hand. The command is a test, designed to ensure that Abraham has sufficient fear of and love for God to obey unquestioningly, even when it compromises ethical positions and violates prior commands. In Genesis 9, God tells Noah that no man should commit bloodshed, an order Abraham must violate if he is to slit Isaac's throat. The command is for Abraham a temptation, but of an unusual sort: "What we usually call a temptation is something that keeps a person from carrying out a duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself which would keep him from doing God's will" (*Fear and Trembling* 88). Kierkegaard argues that since divine commands cannot logically be ethical; they constitute a "teleological suspension of the ethical," and so by his action, Abraham "overstepped the ethical altogether, and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it" (88). Kierkegaard's ethics have been seen as an endorsement of Kantian ethics, but with one major difference: while Kant's ethics aim to find a universally applicable meta-ethical theory, Kierkegaard's ethics are self-motivated; that is, they are (and can only be) chosen.

In effect, although Kierkegaard believes that living a moral life is a universal imperative for humans, he emphasises the individual above the universal, with the individual, through a process of self-becoming, choosing to become part of the ethical universal. By doing so, the individual makes him/herself into the universal human. In Kierkegaard's view, this individualism is crucial in understanding the

place that faith has in ethics. He states in *Fear and Trembling* that “the ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment” (83).

Therefore, in choosing to obey God’s command, Abraham “exists as the particular opposition to the universal” (90) and has “as the single individual, become higher than the universal” (95). Abraham becomes a “knight of faith” in Kierkegaard’s words (95). He leaves the moral life behind for the sake of faith. It is clear, then, that, even if obeying God were in accordance with the ethical, in the act of obeying unquestioningly, one necessarily leaves the ethical behind. Thus Kierkegaard posits faith as remaining *outside* of and apart from ethics.

Kierkegaard adopted this position not because he was irreligious; he remained a devout Christian despite rigorously criticising the Danish Church and its cosy relationship with the state. He felt that the Church should be separated from the state because the idea of the Church-state, where every citizen is a member of the Church, leads to Church corruption and insincerity of faith, since citizens are members of the Church without knowing the basis of their faith. Alastair Hannay writes in his introduction to *Either/Or* (in Danish: *Enten/eller*) that Kierkegaard saw the state Church as “the real root and bastion of spiritual complacency and compromise,” and refused to associate with members of the Church (18).

*Either/Or* is Kierkegaard’s foremost work on ethics; it explores the dichotomy between the aesthetic life and the ethical life. “A,” who is the narrator of “either” exemplifies the aesthetic. “A” is most concerned with aesthetic pleasures and avoiding ennui – precisely that which inevitably haunts the aesthete. These activities eventually lead “A” to despair and existential angst. Judge Wilhelm, the narrator of “Or,” exemplifies the ethical phase of life, when the individual leaves behind the capricious whims of the aesthetic for the freedom and responsibility of the ethical life. While “A” never reflects upon his way of living, self-examination characterises the life of the ethical subject, and sets that subject apart from the aesthete. Kierkegaard is very clear on the point that such a life can only be chosen. One creates oneself as a certain kind of subject. The ethical life is not overtly religious; although Kierkegaard hints that faith is an important part of life, and that the religious stage of life is actually the highest, beyond even the ethical stage. Kierkegaard, like Kant, demonstrates the importance of the individual making the

decision to be ethical. These thinkers both emphasise the importance of self-reflection in ethics, which is also utterly indispensable to the Sadean libertine.

The idea of the “virtuous atheist” gained currency in the Enlightenment. Pierre Bayle is perhaps the earliest proponent of the concept that atheists can be virtuous, even more virtuous than believers. He writes in *An Historical and Critical Dictionary (Dictionnaire historique et critique)*: “the fear and love of God form[s] not always the most active principle of human actions” and that “some men, without religion, should be more strongly excited to a good moral life by their constitution” (175). Israel explains that Bayle and, after him, Diderot, advanced the “proposition that revealed religion based on miracles, church dogma, and an afterlife, whether Christian or not, is neither requisite nor helpful, in upholding a moral order geared to the well-being of society” (*Enlightenment Contested* 669). Diderot, whose intellectual life saw him transition from Catholic, to deist in the mould of Voltaire, to atheist, also argued that the morality of the virtuous atheist was higher than that of the believer whose morality is motivated by heavenly rewards. He says: “Take away the fear of Hell from a Christian, and you will take away the whole belief system” (“Addition to the *Philosophical Thoughts*” par. 17). He also argues that, within the moral system of Christianity, infants would be better off being killed at birth, owing to the “extreme difficulty in attaining this degree of perfection [that is, the degree of perfection required by following to the letter the teachings of the gospels] that human frailty prevents” (“Addition to the *Philosophical Thoughts*” par. 69). It would be better for the child to be killed at birth and saved from damnation and unhappiness. Israel says that Diderot’s new conception of morality conceptualised an ethics based not on faith, but on “the basis of the individual quest for happiness and society’s needs” (*Enlightenment Contested* 694). Society’s needs would be determined by the “general will” – a relativistic concept which admitted that happiness and virtue were culturally contingent.

For some thinkers, no amount of theorising about natural theology, first laws, and human nature could overcome the theoretical problems they saw in a religious ethics. Even so, to remove the religious base from ethics, even if that base was indefensible from the philosophical and often theological standpoint, was a radical proposition. It was commonly felt that without religion, without God, to stand as guarantor for values, however tenuous the relationship between a notion of God and moral prescriptions, society would rapidly descend into chaos. For many thinkers,

the answer was to try to formulate an ethics that could be based in something other than religion, but that was authoritative and universal. Reason, humanism, nature, and the passions have all served as popular candidates for a secular ethical system. Still other thinkers have attempted to configure metaethical formulae that might be used to manufacture moral positions and recommend moral behaviour. Finally, there have been those relativists, most radical of all, and feared by religious and secular moralist alike, who deny that ethics can be based in anything at all, deny, in fact, that ethics even exists independently of human whims.

Despite earlier challenges to religious morality, the radical Enlightenment is where the most significant battle between the authority of religion and that of rationality in ethical matters was fought. Spinoza, Bayle, and later Diderot are all philosophers that Israel identifies as radicals who argued that morality could not be “cogently anchored in theology or religious authority” (*Enlightenment Contested* 663). Today it is tempting to generalise about Enlightenment positions from a few well-known thinkers or tracts. It must be stressed that the radical Enlightenment cannot stand for the entirety of Enlightenment thought. The radicals were, in their time, marginal, their theories were not widely accepted but on the contrary often rejected and mocked by mainstream Enlightenment figures. Despite this, as Israel points out, such rejection “was insufficient to prevent radical ideas posing an overwhelming challenge to traditional conceptions of morality during the early Enlightenment” (663). Religious authority was by this time undermined from without and unstable within. Nevertheless, challenging the authority of the Church and, in a wider socio-cultural sense, the Christian religion in matters of politics and social values necessitated, Israel says, that this authority be substituted with “a cogent secular ethics independent of religious tradition, anchored in Man’s tangible social and political needs alone” (665). With the benefit of hindsight, the significance of the ethical theories of the radical philosophers is evident. Their theories preceded and became enormously influential to ethical theories and arguments for secular morality throughout the Enlightenment and up until the present day. Spinoza’s thought provides a good example because it exemplifies many of the problems encountered in separating religion and ethics. His ethics reject the notion of revealed ethics, moral absolutes, and religious authority as determining ethical values. They attempt to find a new basis for moral values, a purely rational basis which might prove, while not being “absolute,” relatively unshakeable as it was derived from “natural reason.”

Spinoza believed that morality should be based on reason alone, and that our understanding of morality and of moral values such as good and evil, could only be based upon nature, which was rational. Israel says that Spinoza's beliefs rested upon the idea that "while many different moralities and systems of values exist ... they are by no means equally valid" and yet "they all overlap to an extent and only one, the purely rational, can be absolutely "true" (*Enlightenment Contested* 667). In accordance with his belief, Spinoza challenged the basis of moral absolutes like "good" and "bad," advancing the idea that such values are relative. He says that "with regard to good and evil, these terms indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, nor are they anything else than modes of thought, or notions which we form from the comparison of one thing with another" (*Ethics* 163; part 4). For his perceived relativism, he was widely reviled. Obviously, Spinoza's rejection of traditional moral absolutes offended religious sensibilities. Some of his statements about morality contributed to perceptions of Spinoza as an immoral atheist. Israel describes how Spinoza was considered "the iconoclast of moral absolutes" whose ideas were considered, by a notable opponent Abbé Laurent François to encourage libertinism and result in a "moral chaos" (*Enlightenment Contested* 667).

Despite these accusations, Spinoza's *Ethics* does make definite claims about the nature of good and evil, and thus develops a system of ethics based on what Spinoza perceived to be the model of human nature. This system, according to Israel, is based "exclusively on the basis of reason" (*Enlightenment Contested* 551). Reason is the one criteria which Spinoza thinks can help to distinguish good from evil. He defines good as "that which we certainly know is useful to us" and evil as "that which we certainly know hinders us from possessing anything that is good" (164; part 4, definition 2). Spinoza considers it essential and natural, and hence rational, that humans preserve their own being, which is why he defines virtue as "human power itself ... which is limited by the effort alone by which man endeavours to preserve in his being" (178; part 4, prop. 20). Furthermore, to "act absolutely in conformity with virtue" is "acting, living, and preserving our being as reason directs, from the ground of seeking our own profit" (180; part 4; prop. 24). He holds that "according to the laws of his own nature each person necessarily desires that which he considers to be good, and avoids that which he considers to be evil" (177; part 4, prop. 19). The only way that humans can know what is in accordance with nature and

is therefore good, is through reason: “so far as men live in conformity with the guidance of reason, in so far only do they always necessarily agree in nature” (186; part 4; prop. 35). This follows from the proposition (part 4, prop. 31) that “in so far as an object agrees with our own nature is it necessarily good” (183). Israel says that, for Spinoza (and later Bayle), “their moral philosophies were ‘relativistic’ only in the sense that they accepted what they took to be universal human needs and characteristics, rather than any external or revealed standard, as the measure of good and bad” (*Enlightenment Contested* 688).

In living according to reason, humans may preserve their own beings and further their own desires. To this end, Spinoza claims that “a desire which springs from reason can never be in excess” (208; part 4, prop. 61). This was among the claims which caused Spinozism to be thought an ally to libertinism. Says Israel: “it was the emancipation of desire and gratification which prompted many to deny that there was any moral content here at all” (*Enlightenment Contested* 668). In fact, Spinoza considers desire to be the very essence of humans, so long as it is grounded in reason (208).

In case such maxims still seem to be relativistic or lack practical application, Spinoza makes definite statements about things that are good and things that are evil. For example, part four, proposition forty-five states that “hatred can never be good” and consequently, anything related to hatred: “envy, mockery, contempt, anger, revenge” is necessarily evil (196). That is because they are either forms of, or causes of, sorrow, which is “directly evil” (194; part 4, prop. 41). Meanwhile “cheerfulness can never be excessive, but is always good” since it is a form of joy which is “directly good” (194; part 4, prop. 42). His rehabilitation of measurable moral values did nothing to help his reputation, since these values were to be determined by human reason alone rather than scripture or revelation, and measured against human needs.

Spinoza does not entirely exclude God from his ethics, but God in Spinoza’s ethics becomes the basis for determinism. He states that a knowledge of God was the “highest good of the mind” (182; part 4, prop. 28). This is a God defined according to reason, and Spinoza’s own substance monism. Spinoza redefines certain terms for his own ends. MacIntyre says that he treated the theological vocabulary “as he treated ordinary language, as a set of expressions which needed reinterpretation to be made rational” (*A Short History of Ethics* 141). He calls religion “everything which

we desire and do, of which we are the cause in so far as we possess an idea of God” and piety he calls “the desire of doing well which is born in us, because we live according to the guidance of reason” (189; part 4, prop. 37). Controversially, Spinoza claims that “repentance is not a virtue” since “it does not spring from reason,” and that is because it is an expression of sorrow (202; part 4, prop. 54). This is followed by a scholium which explains that because few humans live according to reason repentance can sometimes be considered necessary, if not good. Spinoza’s injunction that humans have knowledge of God sounds pious. However, desire for this knowledge is not borne of some desire to know a divine being, to be closer to the creator, nor it is because knowledge of God informs knowledge of morality. In essence, Spinoza’s thought holds God as the “highest thing which the mind can understand” and, as the ultimate object of knowledge, it is the highest virtue (182; part 4, prop. 28).

Christian morality was of chief concern to the materialists of the Enlightenment because they felt it to be dangerous in that it took away moral agency or encouraged problematic moral behaviour. Spinoza was seen by many as the harbinger of an atheistic materialism, which reached its peak during the Enlightenment in the work of materialists like Diderot, Holbach, and La Mettrie. Holbach maintained a salon renowned for its radicalism and the materialism of many of its habitués, although Holbach regularly invited thinkers with a diversity of philosophical positions, among them Hume and Rousseau. Holbach’s works, principally his *System of Nature* and *Christianity Unveiled* (*Le christianisme dévoilé*) demonstrate his concern with Christian ethics. Diderot began his philosophical career as an admirer of Voltaire but moved towards atheism and materialism. His *Encyclopaedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts* (*Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*) caused controversy for its atheistic tendencies, since it subordinated theology to philosophy and generally championed reason over religious knowledge. Others, whose theories cannot be discussed in detail here but who nonetheless warrant a mention include Claude Adrien Helvétius, close friend of Holbach’s; Pierre Bayle, often thought a Spinozist and advocate of a (then radical) doctrine of religious toleration; and the Marquis d’Argens, author of *Thérèse philosophe*.



Holbach's attack on Christian morals in *Christianity Unveiled* makes clear his radical position that morality should only be thought about away from the damaging influence of dogma, faith and revelation. He states unequivocally:

A religion, which commands us to imitate the conduct of a despot who delights to ensnare his creatures, who is implacable in his vengeance, and devotes to flaming destruction all who have the misfortune to displease him, is incompatible with all morality. (85)

Holbach's issues with Christian morality clearly extend far beyond disquiet about divine command theories. They have more to do with the moral nature of the Christian God, who Holbach calls "ferocious and sanguinary" (*Christianity Unveiled* 86). Such a God serves as a deeply problematic basis for morality since "the moral character of this God must, of necessity, govern the moral conduct of those who adore him" (85). Holbach takes this logic a step further when he argues that "every Christian who imitates his God, and practises all his commands, must necessarily be an immoral person" (89). At the same time, he provides a counter to the common (even today) ideas that Christianity is indispensable to morality, that society without religion will be chaotic and depraved, and that faith and morality are inseparable. Indeed, the entire chapter of *Christianity Unveiled* which Holbach devotes to these claims is written in the tone of an ironic and witty comeback to the claim that atheists must be immoral creatures. Holbach theorises that one is more likely to encounter an atheist who lacks faith and is morally upright than to encounter a Christian who is both faithful and moral at the same time. Not only are faith and morality separated in Holbach's thought; according to him they were never cogently joined in the first place.

Holbach's morality was grounded in nature, and what he took to be human nature, in line with many atheistic philosophies of the time. For Holbach, humans get their temperament and faculties from nature, which also provides the basis and motivation for morals by making each human being different:

If all men were equal in their bodily powers, in their mental talents, they would not have occasion for each other: it is a variation of his faculties, the inequality which this places him in, with regards to his fellows, that renders morals necessary to man: without these, he would live by himself, he would remain an isolated being. (*The System of Nature* 60)

Holbach's relativism is derived from this observation of nature. Like Spinoza, Holbach contends that: "Nature does not make man either good or wicked," "she" merely combines in humans certain states of being, temperaments and passions (*The System of Nature* 72). All combinations are "legitimate" and "natural," and "can only be called bad or good, relatively, to the influence they have on the beings of his species" (72).

In roughly Spinozistic terms, Holbach says that the "aim of man" is to "preserve himself, to render his existence happy," using whatever means his reason can best direct him (66). Since humans live in societies in which they must rely on the talents of others to preserve themselves comfortably, he redefines virtue as "every thing that is truly and constantly useful to the individuals of the human race living together in society" and the virtuous man as one whose "actions tend uniformly to the welfare ... of his fellow creatures" (66). Holbach is at pains to show that his views are not merely a reformulation of a Christian ideal of neighbourly love, charity and self-sacrifice, since he finds self-sacrifice to be "imprudent" and unreasonable (66). Holbach advocates what we would now call enlightened self-interest. Indeed, he defines moral obligation as the necessity of man's "employing the natural means to render the beings with whom he lives happy" but only because this will "determine them in turn to contribute to his own individual happiness" (67).

In contrast to Holbach's vehemently materialistic atheistic position, Kant's ethical beliefs are difficult to categorise. Some regard Kant's ethics as Christian; others feel that his ethics have fatally atheistic implications. Based in reason and the idea of an autonomous rational agent, they seem to reject dogmatic or religious authority as a basis for moral principles. Yet Kant himself was Christian, and held that God as a concept was desirable in upholding moral behaviour in the practical sense. He defended Christianity, even though he extensively criticised many Christian practices and institutions.

Kant did not set out to make definitive statements about moral principles; rather, he wanted to elucidate a system by which those principles might reasonably be founded. In this way, moral principles derived from this system would be both universal and inherently valuable. Stephen Darwall explains in his book *Philosophical Ethics* that, while the utilitarians saw the value of moral actions and practices as derived from their consequences, and justifiable only from consideration of those consequences, Kant thought that morality had intrinsic value "uniquely

exemplified in the will of a free moral agent” (140). Moral agents make decisions according to their own free will, based upon rational consideration. Kant theorised that, when a rational moral agent acts, that agent has made a decision to act in such a way because they believe it is the best course of action to take. They acted “for reasons that the agent believed to favor or recommend the action” (143). In doing so the agent is committed to a practical law or “universal moral imperative” (143). This is because agents consider the situation in a practical sense. Having taken into account all variables, and having decided upon the optimal course of action, they automatically recommend that this is the best course of action to take in all relevantly similar situations. They act as though it is implicit that anyone should act as they did. This reasoning is behind the first iteration of Kant’s famous categorical imperative: “Act on that maxim which can at the same time have for its object itself as a universal law of nature” (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* 116). In acting in a certain manner of their own free wills according to rational deliberation moral agents act under a moral obligation: they have to believe that there are overriding reasons for following the maxim that caused them to act in a particular manner. Furthermore, these reasons must apply to all moral agents in relevantly similar situations. If there were an exception that caused the reasoning behind an action to be disregarded, it would no longer be an overriding reason and the validity of the maxim behind the action would be called into question. There would no longer be a rational reason for acting in such a manner. Hence the categorical imperative also enables us to distinguish which maxims are truly moral.

### **Against the Rationalists: Hume and the Passions**

However, to focus on religion and reason as a basis for ethics is to oversimplify a complex debate and also to perpetuate a problematic dichotomy. During the Enlightenment, at a time when rationality was considered by many to be, in the Aristotelian sense, the “highest good,” Hume denied that it could constitute a basis for ethics. By the same token, Hume did not see in nature anything inherently rational, even in human nature, as had many other Enlightenment philosophers including Holbach and Spinoza. Hume still looked to nature as a basis for morality, but he saw the passions, not reason or logic, both as the guide to and motivation of ethical behaviour. Alasdair MacIntyre explains that, for Hume, “moral judgement cannot be founded upon rational apprehension” (*A Short History of Ethics* 170). In

Hume, vice and virtue are not to be found in actual actions or objects, only in the judgements of people who observe them (170). Reason was not equal to the passions as a motivating force for ethical actions. Hume's theory of the passions was not just a judgement on some kind of "human nature" or even the privileging of the emotions over reason, but rather an acknowledgement that ethics are relative. For ethics to work, people must choose and adhere to them. Hume says in his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. (399; book 3, part 1, sec. 1)

Hume famously recognised and questioned what he felt to be a disturbing intellectual move: the tendency to transition from statements about what is (factual statements) to statements about what one ought to do (prescriptive statements):

I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not* ... as this *ought* or *ought not* expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (409; book 3, part 1, sec. 2).

This is colloquially known as the "is/ought" problem – it refers to the problematic nature of making prescriptive statements on the basis of factual or descriptive statements. MacIntyre says that Hume has "almost universally been read as asserting that there are two classes of assertion, factual and moral, whose relationship is such that no set of factual premises can entail a moral conclusion" (172).

It is commonly thought that Hume is declaring that you can never move from "is" to "ought." Nevertheless, MacIntyre cautions that one should not to read Hume's work without fully understanding its context. The idea that people are individuals with unique qualities which set them apart from others implies that morality cannot universally be applied to groups without raising serious ethical problems. People have not always considered themselves to be individuals. In the pre-individualistic,

pre-modern age, it was common for ethical expectations and prescriptions to be group or class specific, such that ethical prescriptions could apply to everyone in a group equally, even if they were addressed to one member of the group. For instance, knights had particular qualities and virtues which were felt to belong to knights only; peasants could indeed possess virtue, but they were not held to the same standards or judged by the same moral criteria as knights. If one *is* a knight, then one *ought* to behave accordingly. Although moral prescriptions to one individual in a group were felt to apply equally to all members of that group, they would not necessarily apply to members of other social groups. Hume wrote, MacIntyre says, in the beginning of the individualistic period (173). If Hume's statements are assessed according to pre-individualistic understandings, then the phrase "you ought" implies that a prescriptive statement can be applied to the entire class of people beyond whom the speaker was addressing: "within the relevant class of reason there were always various species; "You ought to do this if you want to live up to this ideal" (to be a magnanimous man, a perfect knight, one of the saints) and 'You ought to do this if you want to discharge your function as a...' are samples" (173). Individualism interrupted the meaning of these formerly "shared ideals and accepted functions," (173) resulting in a moral imperative which seemingly has no basis in reason. For these reasons, it is difficult to tell whether Hume argues that "the transition from is to ought needs great care, or that it is in fact logically impossible; whether he is deducing that most transitions from is to ought have been of a fallacious kind, or that any such transition must be necessarily fallacious" (174).

Hume has moral objections to religion and Christianity in particular, and feels that it makes slaves of humankind.<sup>38</sup> Hume states in the *Natural History of Religion* that "where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, [religious] belief, though altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terrors, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement..." (sect. 10). For Hume, to abase oneself before God is contrary to an ideal and virtuous state of pride in oneself. Sadean libertines sympathise with this view, though their aim in refusing to

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<sup>38</sup> Christianity has commonly been associated with slavery owing to its founding narratives, a point which Nietzsche does not fail to make. However, Hume's and Nietzsche's criticisms here have less to do with dubious historical or scriptural narratives and more to do with what they felt to be the reversal of natural or noble ethics, creating a debasement of humankind before a deity.

bow to God is not virtue. Hume defends his position as a champion of pride against traditional views of pride in his *Treatise*:

There may, perhaps, be some, who being accustomed to the style of the schools and pulpit and having never considered human nature in any other light, than that in which they place it, may here be surprized to hear me talk of virtue as exciting pride, which they look upon as a vice; and of vice as producing humility, which they have been taught to consider as a virtue. But not to dispute about words, I observe, that by pride I understand that agreeable impression, which arises in the mind, when the view either of our virtue, beauty, riches or power makes us satisfyed with ourselves: and that by humility I mean the opposite impression. (260; book 2, part 1, sect. 7).

### **Prelude to Post-modernism: Nietzsche's challenge to Christian and Enlightenment Ethics**

Surprisingly, Hume's moral sentiments are echoed by Nietzsche, and form the crux of Nietzsche's problem with Kant's categorical imperative. Craig Beam draws parallels between the two in his article "Hume and Nietzsche: Naturalists, Ethicists, Anti-Christians," arguing that they share a common ground in that they are both "naturalistic, sceptical and anti-metaphysical" "philosophers of human nature," and both mount "*radical moral critiques* of the Christian religious tradition" (299). This moral tradition includes classical theism, so Nietzsche critiques not only the Christian tradition, but also the ancients. Useful here is Beam's insight that Hume and Nietzsche "reject the traditional view of the relation between reason and passion" (301). Nietzsche with his perspectivism and more infamously with nihilism (although that is a misreading of Nietzsche, who identifies nihilism in philosophical discourse only to dispense with it), presents a strong argument against a rational ethics that contributes directly to a variety of contemporary views. With this in mind, Nietzsche critiques both religious and Enlightenment mainstream (and radical) ethics, whether they are founded on natural religion or rationalism. Since Sade's work contains critical arguments against both religious and rationalistic ethics which seem to prefigure Nietzsche, it is interesting to look at some of Nietzsche's ideas for the sake of comparison, even if Sade's methods are worlds away from Nietzsche's. Nietzsche's work had a profound influence on theology, philosophy and ethics from that point on, even if those who reacted to Nietzsche's work did not agree with his

ideas. Caputo comments on the significance of Nietzsche (along with Kierkegaard): “Nietzsche and Kierkegaard sketch the lines of a world after Enlightenment, after Hegel, after philosophy, writ large” (*On Religion* 55).

“God is dead;” Nietzsche’s most famous phrase at once express his sentiments about the idea of objective truth, value, and morality, while also identifying him as an opponent to Christian morality (*The Gay Science* 120; sect. 125; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 11; part 1, par. 2). Nietzsche sees the moral state of society as symptomatic of a low morality, a morality where the strong or superior are ruled from below. He states in *On the Genealogy of Morality*: “The pathos of nobility and distance, as I said, the continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those ‘below’ – that is the origin of the antithesis ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (12; essay 1, par. 2). He goes on to say that the birth of “slave morality,” that is, Christian morals, is driven by a corrupt priestly caste, corrupt not because they are “bad” but rather because they have no goals but the accumulation of ideological power (15-17; essay 1, par. 6-7). According to Nietzsche, “slave ethics” begins by saying “‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside,’ ‘other,’ ‘non-self:’ and this ‘no’ is its creative deed” (20; essay 1, par. 10). The concept of evil emanates from hatred, the hatred and resentment that the lower, oppressed classes feel towards the higher, noble classes. Though this evil is in context a result of historical forces, in Nietzsche it takes on a religious meaning as distinct from the idea of the merely “bad.” Daniel Conway sums up this distinction: “whereas the noble morality originates in an individual’s spontaneous, pre-reflective assessment of himself as *good*, the slave morality originates in an other-directed, other-negating assessment of the inherent *evil* of the slave’s alleged oppressors” (*Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals* 40). Slave morality is dependent on a “hostile external world” for its identity, and thus can never “credibly work for a cessation of the hostility directed against it” (Conway 40). Thus the heart of the slave’s morality lies in a “will to nothingness,” since by destroying that which it holds to be morally evil, it destroys that which gives it identity, and therefore works towards its own self-destruction (Conway 41). Nietzsche speculates that “slave morality” is what is holding humankind back from positive development:

What if a regressive trait lurked in ‘the good man,’ likewise a danger, an enticement, a poison, a narcotic, so that the present lived at the expense of the

future? Perhaps in more comfort and less danger, but also in a smaller-minded, meaner manner? . . . So that morality itself were to blame if man, as species, never reached his highest potential power and splendour? So that morality itself was the danger of dangers? (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 8; Preface, par. 8)

With the devaluation of all values, and its attendant loss of a value-scale on which to place ethics, the worst fears of the Christian theologians, natural theologians, and idealists were realised. Nietzsche was vehemently against the idea of a “natural law” governing morals and actions, which makes him especially interesting when returning to Sade’s obsession with nature. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*) Nietzsche unleashes a tirade or *psogos* (much of his work takes the form of tirade, generally acknowledged to be part of what makes it so compelling) against the Stoics, whose goal to live according to nature Nietzsche saw as ignorant and self-deluding:

Granted that your imperative, ‘living according to Nature,’ means actually the same as ‘living according to life’ – how could you do *differently*? Why should you make a principle out of what you yourselves are, and must be? In reality, however, it is quite otherwise with you: while you pretend to read with rapture the canon of your law in Nature, you want something quite the contrary, you extraordinary stage-players and self-deluders! In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature, to Nature herself, and incorporate them therein; you insist that it shall be Nature ‘according to the Stoa,’ and would like everything to be made after your own image, as a vast, eternal glorification and generalisation of Stoicism! (520-21; ch. 1, par. 9).

Yet Nietzsche’s tirades against certain systems of ethics are really an objection to philosophising ethics in the first place: “[philosophy] always creates the world in its own image” (520; ch. 1, par. 9). He sees the ethical as constructed, saying that “there is no *a priori* necessity with associating the word good with altruistic deeds” (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 12; essay 1, par. 2). To this end, Nietzsche criticises a number of philosophers on the basis of their ethical suppositions. He is particularly scathing about Kant because he believes that Kant’s categorical imperative reduces morals, which he feels ought to be self-chosen and self-motivating, to duty:



An action compelled by the instinct of life has in the joy of performing it the proof that it is a *right* action: and that nihilist with Christian dogmatic bowels understands joy as an *objection*. ... What destroys more quickly than to work, to think, to feel without inner necessity, without a deep personal choice, without *joy?* as an automaton of ‘duty’? It is virtually a *recipe* for *décadence*, even for idiocy. ... Kant became an idiot. (*The Anti-Christ* 134; par. 11)

### **Relational ethics in Postmodernism: Alterity, God and Responsibility**

The a-historicalisation of philosophy that Nietzsche identified and critiqued in the Western philosophical tradition had major implications for the ethical realm. As Nietzsche argued, it led to the assumption that “current man” was always assumed to be universally and historically constant (which, as MacIntyre demonstrates in his discussion of Hume, is not the case), an attitude which ignored cultural and social contexts, and shifts in values over time, thereby resulting in the assumption that ethics are universal and constant. Nietzsche believes that Kant is guilty of this error of judgement when he formulates an ethics based on rationality alone. Since Nietzsche’s time, however, there has been a significant move to insert philosophy into a historical context. Foucault, as much a historian as he was a philosopher, borrowed the idea and the critical method of genealogy from Nietzsche. Derrida’s reading of Marx made his thought inevitably preoccupied with history, and Levinas’ concerns about the ethical implications of the Holocaust also prove that there is a historical dimension to his thought. It is not, then, too difficult to see sympathies between Nietzsche’s thought and the work of people like Derrida and Levinas.

Levinas is interesting because he inverts the usual relationship between ethics and ontology: he declares ethics to be “first philosophy,” prior to ontology. Levinas argues that ontology, or questions of being, fundamental to Western philosophy since Antiquity, is totalizing with respect to the other. Levinas’ concept of the other is a reaction to the tendency he sees in Western metaphysics to reduce all alterity to the totality of the same, to subjugate everything to rationality and the limits of understanding. Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity* that “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (43). That is, the existent is understood as Being – as an iteration of a general concept, grasped by the same and thereby reduced to the same: “the other is deadened” (*Totality and Infinity*

42). In his essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas outlines the process by which one might relate to other being beyond the “horizon of Being” – according to Levinas, ontology understands beings in terms of their generality, to the extent that it characterises beings as “open” to being in general. This understanding is violent and a “partial negation” of a being since it does not grasp the being itself; it only understands the being in terms of “history,” “environment” and “habits” (*Entre Nous* 8). Accordingly, instead of invoking the being, this type of understanding only names the being. But the negation is only ever partial since total negation is a murder: “the other is the only being I can want to kill” (8). Yet this is a self-defeating statement: “when my power to kill is realised, the other has escaped” since one has again relegated the other to the general realm of being and not invoked the other as individual (8-9). In a sense, even murder cannot totally negate the other. In positing being first, philosophy institutes the tyranny of the same over the other. One of the ways in which Levinas characterises the split between unity and alterity is in his idea of the saying and the said. Saying is: “ethical sincerity” in that it “is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself” (qtd. in Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* 64). Ontology, he says, “reduces the pure exposure of saying to the totalizing enclosure of the said” (qtd. in Kearney 64).

Every being occupies an interior world which encompasses for that being a totality. Levinas says that to be an individual the being must have consciousness of its particularity against the totality, that is, consciousness of exteriority: “thought begins the very moment consciousness becomes consciousness of its particularity, that is to say, when it conceives of the exteriority, beyond its nature as a living being, that encloses it” (*Entre Nous* 12). Levinas clarifies: “In thinking, the being situated within the totality is not absorbed by it. It exists in relation to the totality, but remains here, separated from the totality: me” (13). Levinas deduces from this the structure of human society. The thinking individual sees itself as constituted not only from “its place in the whole” that is, its membership of certain groups, its career, its habits, and so on, but from its self-ness: “The individuality of the I is distinct from any given individuality in that its identity is not constituted by what distinguished it from others, but by its reference to itself” (14). Levinasian ethics critique at once the pre-modern, pre-individualist understandings of ethics, and Enlightenment ethics which often took the form of universalising principles.

The relation to the other brings one out of moral isolation, the kind of isolation which is imposed in the ethical theories of thinkers like Kant, Hume, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, although each thinker's rationale for this isolation is different. Hume and Kierkegaard both emphasise that one must choose the ethical life, which takes different forms in each thinker's conception, and Nietzsche advocates for the importance of the will and desire to perfect oneself in ethics. In Levinas' thought, the relation to the other renders moral isolation impossible. It is impossible to be the sole judge of one's own moral turpitude. While moral consciousness is commonly conceptualised as something entirely interior and unique to the individual, Levinas argues that it is only in the presence of the other that moral consciousness (and forgiveness, guilt, innocence or damnation) is even possible. Living beings have an interior world that they are the centre of; they do not conceive of exteriority, but see things as extensions of this interior world. A recognition of exteriority enables beings to think, and is also the beginning of experience. It is the condition of moral consciousness because it requires recognition of a face, a freedom outside of themselves; the face of the other. A being is guilty or innocent in its relation to the other, a free being. Because one's actions have repercussions beyond one's intentions, one is not accurately able to judge one's own guilt or innocence, nor can one be free to ask the forgiveness of the neighbour on the basis of self-examination alone. Judgement must come from outside oneself – social justice requires that it come from outside – in this sense, one's moral consciousness is exterior to oneself.

Levinas terms the Heideggerian affirmation of "Being over existents" (*Totality and Infinity* 45) "ontological imperialism" (44) and proposes that it is, conversely, the other who precedes and makes an ethical claim on the self. That is not to say that the self is constituted in its identity merely against the other: Levinas observes that "if the same would establish itself by simple opposition to the other, it would already be part of a totality encompassing the same and the other" (*Totality and Infinity* 38). The "otherness" of the other is not something which can be totalised or reduced to the same. Instead, the presence of the Other in the face of the other, that is, the exterior being in which the other appears as a singular existent which exceeds all knowledge of the other in the self, *puts the self into question*. Levinas explains:

A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (*Totality and Infinity* 43)

To understand this, Simon Critchley elucidates Levinas' de-theologised account of creation in his book *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*. The concept that God created humans and the universe *ex nihilo* implies the creation of a “temporal order from an eternal and uncreated God,” is a concept which is usually understood in ontological terms as a “totality of being” (68):

Creation should not be thematised ontologically in terms of totality but approached ethically in terms of alterity; that is, the absolute separation of the creator and the creature implies a complete dependence of the latter on the former. The relation of the creature to the creator, of the temporal to the eternal, is a relation between separated terms which cannot be closed over into a totality. (68)

The face of the other demands response, which becomes the basis of the ethical interaction between self and other. Levinas explains:

For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. (*Totality and Infinity* 50)

Levinas says: “What we call lay morality, that is, humanistic concern for our fellow beings, already speaks the voice of God. But the moral priority of the other over myself could not come to be if it were not motivated by something beyond nature. ... God does indeed go against nature for He is not of this world. God is other than being” (qtd. in Kearney 60-61).

Levinas' ethics can be thought of as postmodernist because they decenter the subject. Zygmunt Bauman says in *Postmodernist Ethics* that a postmodernist ethics “recasts the Other as the crucial character in the process through which the moral self

comes into its own” (84). Levinas’ ethics question binaristic thought and yet they operate according to an irreducible self/other binary, one which Levinas argues, must be preserved. This binary must be maintained to preserve the “otherness” of the other, its alterity. To reduce the other to the same is to perpetrate an act of metaphysical violence which reduces the other to the known, and denies both their objective existence and subjectivity at once. It is a form of oppression.

### **Inner Experience and Putting the Self into Question**

When speaking of the notion of the decentered self, it is perhaps unusual and yet surprisingly insightful to turn to the work of Georges Bataille. Bataille’s mystical and philosophically dense work, *Inner Experience (L’expérience intérieure)*, also speaks of the “horror of a reduction of Being to totality” (36). Bataille describes one of the preconditions of existential despair to be the realisation that “we are not everything” (xxxii). The self is excluded from infinity, from totality; it is put into question, as Levinas would later argue, by the presence of the other. Bataille’s answer to this is typically mystical. He does not propose an ethical solution as Levinas does, but rather offers the idea of a journey to inner experience, which in essence is the realisation and acceptance, even embracing, of despair. Bataille wishes to question being itself, not just Levinas’ self. Bataille says: “Experience is, in fever and anguish, the putting into question of that which man knows of being,” and he links this experience to an idea of the God of negative theology (*Inner Experience* 4). He says:

If I said decisively: “I have seen God,” that which I would see would change. Instead of the inconceivable unknown – wildly free before me, leaving me wild and free before it - there would be the dead object and the thing of the theologian – to which the unknown would be subjugated, for, in the form of God, the obscure unknown which ecstasy reveals *is obliged to subjugate me.*

(4)

Bataille’s thoughts about facing the unknown, choosing that which is ineffable and incomprehensible, outside of knowing, are similar in principle to Levinas’ ethics. Levinas’ unknown, the “other,” must not be subjugated to understanding, lest it be reduced to that which it is not – the same. God is a call, an absent, unknown other which puts the self, and all being, into question. Seeing Bataille in this way serves another useful purpose: it reintroduces the role of death, suffering, and the erotic to the realm of the ethical, from whence these categories have typically been excluded.

Bataille believes that there are only two certainties that we, as individual subjects, can have, namely, “that we are not everything and that we will die” (xxxii). These certainties are the conditions for our existential despair. Bataille says that, in this state of despair “we sense only death coming,” but this is tied up in “an anguished desire,” part of our desire for the transgression of the limit of subjectivity, a limit normally preserved by taboos designed to keep violence and death out (xxxii). This is evident in the relationship between death and the erotic. Bataille asserts that “death means continuity of being” because in the total annihilation of the subject the self is overcome, and so ceases to be a discontinuous entity (*Erotism* 13). Eroticism, in part through its connection to reproduction, leads to a “feeling of profound continuity” (*Erotism* 15) even though it implies the existence of discontinuous beings. Bataille says: “the transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity. . . . bodies open out into a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity” (*Erotism* 17). This is why transgression is fundamental to eroticism: “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (18). For that reason, “in essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (16), Bataille explains: “what does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?” (17). Here Bataille’s discussion can be related to the ethics of the other. Bataille suggests that a relationship to the other – continuity – can be opened up through transgression.

To speak of the erotic is to speak of humanity, which Bataille recognises when he writes: “eroticism cannot be discussed unless man too is discussed in the process” (*Erotism* 8). Eroticism goes much further towards exploring human subjectivity and inner existence than does simply describing the sexual activity of humans. It is a valuable distinction, and one that Bataille points out when he says that sexuality prevents humanity from being reduced “to the level of thing” (*Erotism* 158). To Bataille, the erotic guarantees the inner life of humans because it is an aspect of that inner experience. He argues that, because of the interiority and subjectivity of the experience of eroticism, it is identical to, even a consequence of, first and foremost, a transgression. Transgression is the infringement of a taboo. Taboos are imposed from outside of the subject, by social, religious and/or moral

norms, often enforced by various naturalised power structures. However, they are internalised and so imposed within the self such that feelings of desire leading to transgression directed at laws or limits experienced within the self, are constantly at war with the anguish which results from the transgression. So we see Bataille advocating that the path to an overcoming of limits can only be followed through inner experience, a journey taken within. Bataille describes the erotic as leading to a loss of the self, but says that in that loss “the subject is identified with the object losing his identity” (*Erotism* 31). The subject becomes aware of, but also questions, the self. Putting the self into question is fundamentally in line with a decentring of the self that characterises the relationship to the other, and the concept of God is common to both.

### **Aporia and Undecidability in Ethics**

Much of Derrida’s writing about the other involves a reaction to and dialogue with Levinas’ work. A full account of Derrida’s ideas about Levinas, even of Derrida’s ideas about messianism, the other, and religion, is so intricate and expansive that presenting it here is cumbersome, and so instead this section will limit itself to a brief explanation of Derrida’s reaction to the idea of the other, the notion of hauntology, and what this means for religion and ethics. Derrida explores the idea of a singular, and singularising, ethics, and the Levinasian notions of alterity and responsibility. An ethics of the other necessarily privileges the singular over the universal. Derrida agrees with Levinas’ critique of the idea of an ethics based in the universal, and sees this universalising tendency in Western thought as violent and oppressive to the singular other. Jonathon Roffe explains in *Understanding Derrida* that, indeed, the other is always lost in this movement: “the moment that we make a general claim, we lose the very thing we wished to preserve” (38).

Derrida, thinking through and critiquing Levinas’ ideas that the other is “not only ego,” states that, in order to be other, the other must be ego and mortal. He maintains that “the other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to my ego, precisely because it is an ego, because it has the form of the ego” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 157). Therefore the “I” who speaks is the other of the other; the other recognises the “I” as other from itself. Essentially, Derrida argues that, in order to be subject to the claim of the other, one must first be able to experience recognition of the other as an ego, as similar; to recognise that the other has a similar

first-person experience of the world, and of time, as the self does. In the face or body of the other lies the other's difference – their “alter” ego: “The other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine and its)” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 143). In mortality, the one and the other share a common horizon of death. He goes on to say that “infinite alterity as death cannot be reconciled with infinite alterity as positivity and presence,” that is, unless God is death, which “has never been excluded by the entirety of the classical philosophy within which we understand God both as life and as the Truth of Infinity, of positive presence” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 144). Death is the reason that, for Derrida, drawing on Heidegger's notion of the “being-toward-death,” “only a mortal can be responsible” (*The Gift of Death* 42). That is because death is the guarantor of one's singularity, one's “irreplaceability.” Death is the one experience which must be confronted alone. As Derrida points out, death is “that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place” (*The Gift of Death* 42). It is impossible, by this logic, to die in place of another; it is only possible to sacrifice oneself to save “something partial in a particular situation” (*The Gift of Death* 43) since the other must necessarily face death alone also.

In the *Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*), Derrida posits an opposition found in the passage from Platonism to Christianity in the conceptualisation of responsibility, which comes into this notion of the undecidability of the decision. This idea is founded on a reading of twentieth-century Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* (in Czech: *Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin*), and so a brief digression to explain Patočka's ideas about the Platonic and the Christian conceptions of the self is in order before an exploration of the notion of responsibility in Derrida is undertaken.

In both Bataille's and Patočka's view of the sacred (what Patočka calls the orgiastic sacred), there is no responsibility because responsibility involves a call to respond, to recognise the need to take responsibility for oneself (which involves an understanding of the self). Responsibility depends upon a repression of the sacred, on recognition of external circumstances and beings which call upon one to respond: in this sense, responsibility is a historical phenomenon which comes out of particular historical circumstances and ways of thinking. Patočka argues that understandings of responsibility come out of ways of thinking about the self. In particular, Patočka



identifies two epochs in the ways of thinking about the self: the Platonic, and the Christian (which incorporates some elements of the Platonic but to different ends).

Patočka argues that the advent of Christianity involved a fundamental shift in the way in which humans relate to or understand themselves; it made possible the notion of individuality understood as an unchangeable, secret part of the inner self, individuality understood as inner experience. It seems common sense, today, to regard oneself as an irreplaceable and autonomous individual subject, but Patočka's narrative of the development of individuality illustrates that such a conception is not natural and timeless. In Platonic idealism, the Good is the ultimate governing principle in the world of unchanging and perfect forms and ideas. The goal of the individual in seeking wisdom is to acquire knowledge of this realm, and through it, the structure of the universe. Life is raised up from being motivated by mere sustenance, mere mortality. In a sense, it rises out of a pre-historical state of nature where humans do not understand themselves in relation to the world but as part of it. Responsibility, for Patočka, involves an overcoming of the "orgiastic" or "demonic" in which humans "estrangle themselves by becoming bound to life and its objects, losing themselves among them" (*Heretical Essays* 101). Patočka explains that "Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul is the result of the confrontation of the orgiastic with responsibility. Responsibility ... incorporates it as a subordinate moment, ... it is only a means for the ascent to the good with its absolute claim and its hard discipline" (105). Insofar as the individual seeks the Good, that eternal principle which governs all things, the individual becomes aware of immortality, the infinite, knowledge of which is thought to be achievable entirely within the individual, and though that individual's reason itself: "for the first time in history it is individual immortality, individual because inner, inseparably bound up with its own achievement" (105). Despite this inner dimension of ethical achievement, the Platonic individual's relation to the Good is external, the individual relates to the Good, seeks it, as outside of itself: "Freedom is no longer defined in terms of a relationship to equals (other citizens) but to a transcendent Good" (106).

The Christian individual relates to God, despite the fact that He is infinite, transcendent, and cannot be comprehended by human knowledge, in the same way that the individual related to something interior and personal. Patočka says: "responsible life was itself presented as a gift from something which ultimately, though it has the character of the Good, has also the traits of the inaccessible and

forever superior to humans – the traits of the *mysterium* which always has the final word” (106). The relationship between God and the individual is thus asymmetrical: the individual cannot know God, but God sees into the individual, knows its thoughts, its innermost self better even than that individual does: “responsibility is now vested not in a humanly comprehensible essence of goodness and unity but, rather, in an inscrutable relation to the absolute highest being in whose hands we are not externally, but internally” (107). Even if a person does not act upon a sinful thought, the fact that they had a sinful thought is enough for them to have sinned; for instance, Matthew 5:28 says that “if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Although at times the Bible has God test his followers, as he does Abraham, and in 2 Chronicles 32, as he does Hezekiah, to “discover what lay in his [Hezekiah’s] heart” (2 Chronicles 32:31), it is generally understood that God sees and knows all, including what is in one’s heart. Psalm 44:21 says that He “knows the secrets of the heart” and Acts 1:24, claims that God “can read everyone’s heart.” Accordingly, God is able to look into the individual, to know the individual utterly. The individual comes to relate not only with itself, but to see itself as in relation to God, in whose hands resides the individual’s eternal destiny. The innermost self becomes responsible to God: becomes an individual and becomes singular only in the view of God. Patočka’s notion of the *mysterium tremendum* is the idea that we have responsibility, in fear and trembling, to an infinite God who we cannot know but who knows us absolutely, guarantees our singularity, which makes God absolutely central to self-knowledge and ethics. Interestingly, Patočka observes that it is because humans are fallen that they become individuals: “individuality is vested in relation to an infinite love and humans are individuals because they are guilty, and always guilty, with respect to it” (107).

Levinas’ thinking conceptualises this God as other. Yet Derrida problematises responsibility to the other by pointing out the aporia of responsibility. Derrida posits an ethics in which responsibility to the other necessarily entails irresponsibility to any and all “other-others:” “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others” (*The Gift of Death* 69). There is always more than one other who is necessarily ignored in the face-to-face ethical relationship involving self and other. In choosing one other, the self is haunted by all other-others, is even haunted by the other-in-itself, what is excluded from its individual identity. The idea of

haunting or spectrality in Derrida's primarily comes from his *Specters of Marx* (*Spectres de Marx*). One of the main ideas in *Specters of Marx* is that Europe, and the greater Western, democratic, capitalist world, is "haunted" by "specters" of Marx and Marxism (just as it is haunted by its Christian inheritance, even as it is increasingly secularised). Derrida claims that Europe still bears "the mark of this [Marxist] inheritance" (*Specters of Marx* 15) despite history having been declared to be at its end in the triumph of capitalism, a sentiment most famously expressed in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. These specters are the mark of the instability of the present and an inherent openness to the future. Tom Lewis says in his essay "The Politics of "Hauntology" in Specters of Marx" that this spectre "figurally represents the inherent instability of reality" and also "the ghostly embodiment of a fear and panic provoked by intimations of an impossible state of being" (140). It is the "figure of undecidability" that is "exorcised as other" (141). Deconstruction, James Smith suggests in *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* is "ghoulish" in this way: it threatens to expose as false the perception that "given configurations of law or given institutions" are just; it opens everything up to contestation (67). This haunting is "always undertaken with a view to a future "to-come;" in a sense, it "remembers the future," by remembering that the current iteration of the just in the form of institutions is not the end, it waits for a justice to come (68).

The many spectres which haunt the newly defined postmodernist ethical subject are the result of the undecidability of the decision. Undecidability in Derrida is too broad to be confined to ethics, although it has ethical ramifications. Derrida posits that no decision is assured: the future in reference to which a decision is made is never fixed and predictable but always open to alterity. No decision is inevitable, and if it were it would not have constituted a decision. For that reason, every decision contains the possibility of other possible decisions. Niall Lucy explains in *A Derrida Dictionary* that "once made, every decision could always have been otherwise" and consequently that decisions "are structured by the law of undecidability" (147). In ethical relationships, decision-making is particularly fraught, since, by this law of undecidability, there can never be any assurance of a decision being the ethical decision to make. Furthermore, the self alone, as a singular entity, must take singular responsibility for the decision, which can itself only be made alone. Derrida says that one "assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, retrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision" (*The Gift of Death* 60). Here,

Derrida seems to reimpose the moral isolation which Levinas rejects, although there is also a sense that Derrida is pointing out the inevitability of such isolation, even in the presence of the other. Owing to the undecidability of the decision, every decision is the final act in a drama in which the ethical subject becomes the knight of faith. The undecidability of the decision has special ramifications for the relationship to the other.

Derrida draws from Kierkegaard's reading of the Abraham and Isaac parable when he holds that every decision made out of responsibility to the other is ethically responsible and irresponsible at the same time. When Abraham is called upon by God to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, Abraham must decide between his obligations to his family (not only Isaac, but his wife Sarah) and his obligation to God. Being a pious man, Abraham's only real option is to respond to God's call and offer the sacrifice, forsaking the ethical realm, and choosing the option which leaves him absolutely alone before God. Abraham's relationship to God is a relationship to the totally other, who comes from on high to make a claim on him. In this relationship with God, Abraham must forsake all others (all other others). He sacrifices generality for singularity. Paradoxically, if Abraham were to refuse God, acting in what appears to common sense in an ethical manner by preserving his family and his responsibility to them, he would thereby act irresponsibly with regard to his relationship with the totally other. Derrida uses the idea of the secret to elucidate this idea. A crucial element of Abraham's story is that he does not disclose this order from God to his family or even to Isaac himself. Abraham keeps the secret that God has entrusted to him, because, in this call, Abraham is absolutely singular. If Abraham were to speak, he would lose "that very singularity" (*The Gift of Death* 60) that he maintains in his responsibility to God. Derrida says, "[t]hus every decision would, fundamentally, remain at the same time solitary, secret, and Silent" for speaking betrays one into the realm of the general: "The first effect or first destination of language therefore deprives me of, or delivers me from, my singularity" (61). This goes against common reasoning, as Derrida points out; the usual understanding of being responsible for one's decision is being able to "account for one's words and actions in front of others, of justifying and opening up to them" (61).

Abraham's lesson for philosophy, according to Derrida, is that "far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels

me to speak, to reply, to account for, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept” (*The Gift of Death* 61). Seen according to this interpretation of responsibility, Abraham’s silence is a sign of his absolute responsibility to God. Ethics for Abraham is a “paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility” (62). Abraham’s paradoxical decision, like all decisions, is mad: “the paradox cannot be grasped in time and through mediation, that is to say in language and through reason” (66): Derrida says that it resists all comprehension. A decision is always, in that case, unjustifiable: “it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, its conclusion or explication” (78). Because, again, it is necessarily secret (recall that the decision cannot be made for or by anyone but the self; the self is alone in making the decision for oneself and, in speaking, would betray that singularity) a secret cannot be submitted to the court of public opinion for justification.

The radical questioning of the place and authority of religion in ethics which is held to be the legacy of the Enlightenment is often told as a simplified narrative with, as its conclusion, modern secular or rationalist ethics, like utilitarianism. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the development of understandings of ethics is far from teleological, and has followed not one simple path from religion to secularism and rationality, but rather involves a questioning of the most basic assumptions about nature and human nature (including understanding the self as an ethical agent), and the place of the divine. In twentieth-century and postmodernist thought, ethics has been conceived of not as an independent sphere (either in the realm of the divine, or of reason), but as something historically determined and contingent, and politically important. This is not surprising, since many of these thinkers have been reacting to world-altering historical events (like Levinas to the Holocaust) and oppressive political situations (like Patočka to the communist regime in what was then Czechoslovakia). The theme which emerges from recent thought on ethics is responsibility, and how to conceptualise the ethical relationship between the self and the other. This involves a thinking-through of how the self is to be understood as an individual and as an ethical subject, and who the other is and how one should relate to the other. It is Christianity, by virtue of its shaping influence on Western thought and history, which for thinkers like Bataille, Derrida, Patočka and Levinas, holds the key to approaching these questions. Although religion has been

recast in some of these thinkers' philosophies, it is not something not to be cast aside or overcome, it is integral, and is central to discussing Sadean ethics.

## Chapter 7

### The Sadean Ethical System: Praxis and Pedagogy

“Evil must be done, bad one must be, this is the great and indispensable thing ...”

- The Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*

There is an ethical system constructed in Sade’s works which inspires libertine conduct as a form of ethical praxis: libertines *live* their ethics. This ethical system, while unique, cannot be considered apart from the context out of which it developed, as it engages with the philosophical culture and ethical theories of Sade’s time. As discussed in the previous chapters, Enlightenment theories of ethics were characterised by a tendency to seek a rational and/or natural base for ethics, rather than a religious one, and, importantly, were preoccupied with redefining “human nature.” Yet Sade’s ethics are hardly typical of Enlightenment thinking, however much they subscribe to Enlightenment arguments. It is hardly surprising that they do not fit in neatly with either established or emerging systems: they are too subversive. This subversiveness is often itself mistaken as a motivation of Sade’s writing and therefore as characteristic of his ethics when Sade is painted as a proponent of sexual (and perhaps literary) liberation. Freedom was an ideal that Sade, much like any prisoner, seems to have held dear, but he does not promote freedom in the expected way; Sade was no radical reformer. As will be demonstrated, theories of desire, the passions, and transgression in his work go beyond a simple longing for sexual freedom.

This chapter undertakes three major tasks. The first half of the chapter will work through two of these: it will first establish that there is an ethical system in Sade’s works. Second, it will delineate the motivation for this ethical system and will establish that Sadean ethics are motivated by transgression, but not, as would normally be assumed, by a desire for freedom. Commitment to transgression, as this chapter and the next will argue, necessarily limits freedom. The second half of this chapter will undertake the final and major task of determining the basis for Sade’s ethics. It will consider the way that Sade’s ethics reflect on, critique, co-opt, satirise and subvert Enlightenment theories of ethics, and will refer to Sade’s libertine novels

to demonstrate that Sadean ethics are not based in any secular conception of ethics. A thorough examination will show that Sade's ethics maintain, through transgression, religious ethical categories (like vice and virtue) and as "lived" ethics, they provide an example of ethical praxis.

### **Sade's System and Ethical Praxis**

Sade's entire system is built upon codes of transgression, which is a recent philosophical theory prominent in the works of Bataille and Foucault, many of the principles of which are drawn from the work of Sade. This has mistakenly led to Sade being categorised as amoral, since an oversimplified understanding of transgression is an idea of "going beyond," or a rejection of, in this case, moral and religious norms. Sade's works contain ethical codes, and his writing, or even living of them seems to be motivated by a desire on Sade's part to take up and take issue with Enlightenment ethical theories. In Chapter Five, it was established that his atheist polemics are motivated by ethical objections to religion. Such strong moral outrage could not be expressed by an individual who supposedly does not care about morality. In addition, transgression is not and cannot be a simple rejection, because transgression reinstates the very same law that it breaks. Benjamin Noys says that "if unlimited transgression swept away all rules and taboos it would be left with nothing to transgress and so cancel itself out" ("Transgressing Transgression" 312) so that in effect "transgression finds its destination in law" (313). Therefore, there is no "pure space of transgression," but, on the other hand, no pure space of law; law becomes "unlike what we usually think" (314). This is not the only definitional problem that transgression presents. A system of transgression is necessarily immoral; in a sense, it takes immorality as a maxim for ethical behaviour. However, transgression in Sade's ethics cannot be reduced to immorality because it answers a higher call. It is in the theatricality, as well as the paradoxical logic of the libertine/victim relationship, that ethics pervades relations between individuals. Libertines' sexual scenes or tableaux, like their philosophical disquisitions, are performed for an audience. In a sense, the libertine performs for the victim as well as for other libertines, and all of society.

Thus Sade addresses readers from an ethical position. It is clear from a reading of those parts of Sade's novels which, either explicitly or by implication, seem to address the reader directly that ethics, and, in particular, the way one lives



ethically, is one of the foundational philosophical quandaries that informs Sade's writing. It is impossible to say now what Sade's motive in writing about ethics in this manner is, or whether he even has one. But the importance accorded to ethical theory and *practice* in his works overwhelms many other philosophical considerations. Furthermore, though it is impossible to judge the ethical position of an author based on their fictional works, there is a record of explicit statements which Sade made about ethics quite apart from his life's work. With such a shady figure as Sade, it is still difficult to divine whether these sentiments are genuine, but they nevertheless show that the ethical concerns in his works come from a mind itself deeply concerned with ethics. A letter to his wife, in which Sade laments how much his imprisonment has agitated his imagination and inflamed his fantasies, outlines Sade's ideas about how he would go about rehabilitating a libertine such as himself. He describes how he would drown such a man in vice until he had his fill of it and would return to virtue: "I would have cloistered him for a while with some whores ... in the middle of a harem *Monsieur le Six* [himself, a prisoner of cell number six at Vincennes] would have become *the friend of women*" and continues: "out of the depths of vice I would have enticed him back to virtue. For, once again, to a very vicious heart, virtue is but a lesser vice" (*Letters from Prison* 315). Another such letter to his wife urges her to read one of his manuscripts, the content of which he defends, saying: "'tis in no wise necessary that in the end vice be punished and virtue rewarded, ... one has no need to punish it. The condemnation of vice takes place *sotto voce* in the souls of all the spectators" (*Letters from Prison* 298-99). He echoes this thought much later in his life in a letter to his companion, Marie-Constance Quesnet, to whom Sade dedicated *Justine*. Sade describes his apparent intention in writing the novel – to engender a love for virtue strengthened by seeing it so tested by vice. He writes: "After having read *Justine*, wilt thou say: 'Oh, how these renderings of crime make me proud of my love for Virtue! How sublime does it appear through tears! How 'tis embellished by misfortunes!'" (*Justine* 456).

The authorial notes prefacing some of Sade's works make ironical and satirical ethical statements. He includes something of a disclaimer at the beginning of the controversial *Justine*: "If ... it should come to pass that we meet with nothing but brambles and briars, while the wicked tread upon flowers ... will it not be decided that it is preferable to abandon oneself to the tide rather than resist it? Will it not be felt that virtue, however beautiful, becomes the worst of all attitudes when it is found

too feeble to contend with vice” (457). He continues, describing the supposed point of the novel, and, presumably, hoping to protect himself as author from social backlash:

Doubtless it is cruel to have to describe, on the one hand, a host of ills overwhelming a sweet tempered and sensitive woman who, as best she is able, respects virtue, and, on the other, the affluence of prosperity of those who crush and mortify this same woman. But were there nevertheless some good engendered of the demonstration, would one have to repent of making it? ... we ask the reader’s indulgence for the erroneous doctrines which are to be placed in the mouths of our characters, and for the sometimes rather painful situations which, out of love for truth, we have been obliged to dress before his eyes. (458)

This kind of disclaimer was a standard apologetics found in novels with more dangerous content – designed as much to titillate as to protect the author’s reputation. The foregoing statement at the opening of *Justine* is mirrored in *Juliette* in the mouth of Madame Delbène when she says that “the paths conducting the one to virtue and the other to vice are equally strewn with briars” (*Juliette* 10). She assures Juliette, “heed me, and you’ll be one of those who, with the thorns that must be there, will find a goodly number of flowers in her path” (11). Interestingly, at the beginning of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the reader is greeted with a short note from the author which advises that it is only by “sacrificing everything to sensual delight” that one can “manage to sow a few roses among the brambles of life” (1). As discussed in Chapter One, the fact that Sade chose the libertine novel as his primary vehicle for the statement of his philosophy further underscores his concern for ethics. This is a form which, by definition, has a philosophical quality, and also pedagogical preoccupations.

It is clear that libertines are concerned with their own ethical conduct, and how well it fulfils libertine ethical prescriptions. They seek to bring their behaviour up to standard whenever it falls short. To this end, libertines reflect upon their actions and often proceed from theoretical foundations. They seek to perfect their libertinage in every iteration of every act. Clairwil outlines the way in which she expects Juliette’s libertine inclinations to grow: “the laws of nature and, even more so, satiety require that there be a gradual but steady growth: you begin by poking with a pin, you end up by stabbing with a dagger” (525). Earlier in the novel, Juliette

is praised by Saint-Fond for killing her father, and Clairwil admonishes Juliette for being motivated by passion and not crime. Juliette contradicts her, saying that she has come far enough in her libertinage that “where the seasoning of crime is lacking I taste no joy” (476). She does, however, still feel shame, and seeks Saint-Fond’s advice about mitigating these feelings. He suggests that such feelings are eliminated “by means of habituation” (477). It is clear that Juliette wishes to improve herself, and she is eager to be schooled further in libertinage even after having become equal to her teachers. Whenever libertines gather, they stage discussions about and compare their theories on libertinage, and how it should rightly be practiced. They immediately put their ideals into action. Apollinaire says that Sade sets out to convey what he thought was a “connection between the moral and the physical” (“The Divine Marquis” 65), such that in his work practice is always joined to theory and dissertations must be put to the test. The Sodality scenes are a good example: before being allowed to join the Sodality of the Friends of Crime, Juliette must prove that her actions are consistent with the approved theory which underpins the rigid rules of the Sodality. Juliette must first swear that she will place herself at the disposal of every member of the Sodality for one month before being allowed to access the benefits of the club, and she gives herself up to this gladly: “individuals of every sex passed through my hands, not a spot on my body was left unsullied” (443). Furthermore, she must admit to having committed crimes, and have a sponsor (in this case, Clairwil) who can vouch for her criminality. The term “sodality” is undoubtedly used in an ironic sense: sodalities are confraternities or organisations in the Catholic Church, often devoted to charitable or missionary activity. A well-known example is the Sodality of our Lady, which was founded in the sixteenth century.

### **Freedom in the Fall and the Will to Evil**

The interplay of free will and transgression is the basis of Sade’s ethical system, and of that system’s religious connotations. Sade wants to be free of ethical limits, but requires those limits: his libertines abide by their own essentially paradoxical ethical code which enshrines transgression as its motivating principle. Sartre’s idea that humans are “condemned to be free” (*Existentialism and Humanism* 34) wars with Christian notions of free will and evil in Sade’s works. The idea that humans are free to choose ethics is central to both secular and religious ethics, even if, with most

religious ethics, they are expected to abide by a set of laws, and choosing a different set of ethics is felt to be sinful. Augustine theorised that free will caused the fall of humans in the garden of Eden – that it was Adam’s will falling away from God’s will and becoming turned to its own ends, rather than the act of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, that caused the fall. This is something which will be explored in detail in the following chapter. For now, it is enough to note that the intersection of the religious and the secular in Sade is visible here. This thesis has established that libertines transgress in order to do evil, and doing evil is the expression of a definite *will* to evil, chosen freely and with full knowledge and consideration. It is the second part of this equation which is most interesting to the secular realm: libertine ethical praxis is always the result of a carefully considered set of theories. Libertines exemplify the idea that ethics can only be and must be chosen by the individual, a position which is in line with the ideas of Hume and Kierkegaard (in this one regard, if not in others). The consideration that goes in to such a choice articulates recognition of the freedom and responsibility central to ethics.

In contemporary ethical discussions, such a choice is still significant, although the theorisation of that considered choice is nothing new; Socrates famously stated that “examining [one]self and others” is the best thing one can do and that life would not be worth living without such examination, and Aristotle states in *Nicomachean Ethics* that contemplation is the highest virtue: “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. ... That this activity is contemplative we have already said” (194; bk. 10, part 7). The idea that virtue should align with happiness, and should involve self-cultivation points to the importance, which Foucault analyses at length in *The Care of the Self* (the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*), of the care of the self to the ancients and to ancient ethics. The idea of the care of the self or the cultivation of the self, something that Patočka picks up on in *Heretical Essays*, remained influential to early Christian authors and is carried through the history of philosophical thought right up to the Enlightenment. One enduring legacy of the Enlightenment (though hardly universally praised, and often overstated or oversimplified) was the idea that one’s rational capabilities could enable one to lead a better life, both in terms of civic virtue, and the organisation of society, and in terms of personal ethics. Post-Enlightenment, thinkers like Kierkegaard again emphasised the importance of ethical choice and responsibility.

The effect of the Enlightenment meant that Kierkegaard had to conceptualise ethics in a time when belief in a transcendent God was declining. Although Kierkegaard is not himself morally transgressive, he demonstrates the transgressiveness of such a God, even if accidentally. The parable of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, which has not lost any of its significance to ethical debates since Kierkegaard (it is discussed in Derrida and Levinas) portrays God as a transgressor. Kierkegaard is left to conclude that, in this instance, God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son *suspends* the ethical – operates outside and above the ethical, and indeed the rational realm. Obeying divine command is not ethical; only the decisions a person makes according to reason are ethical.

It is possible to see Juliette's passage from the aesthetic to the ethical, in the Kierkegaardian sense, over the course of the novel. She starts out taking up the libertine life because she loves pleasure, and thinks such a life will bring her success, happiness, and riches. The lessons she learns along her path to libertinism persuade her that physical pleasure and material gains are not what should motivate her to transgress. She should commit crime for the sake of crime. She perfects her conduct until, by the end of the novel, she is willing to sacrifice her own daughter, Marianne, for the sake of the transgression alone, and calls the crime "too mild" (1187). In an ethical system which takes transgression as its highest value, she has acted perfectly in compliance with her morals. Nancy Miller says in "Gender and Narrative Possibilities" that Juliette's trajectory over the course of her novel "demonstrates the characteristics of a *bildungsroman*" (which was emerging as a literary form in Sade's lifetime); her passage from "ignorance to knowledge," from "apprenticeship to mastery" is evidence of "an education – even a spiritual one" (213). Her story is pedagogical; it exemplifies the perfect course of pedagogy and the principles which motivate it. Of course, her education, her creation as an ethical subject, is only possible through transgression, and her choices are not solitary and personal, but come out of her relationships and conversations with other libertines.

She is first introduced, both sexually and philosophically, to the world of libertinage by Madame Delbène. Not long after this first induction, she and Justine are orphaned and go their separate ways, with Juliette deciding to further the education that Delbène had begun. Early on in the novel, but already well-versed in the ways of libertinage, Juliette makes her first ethical mistake. A friend implores Juliette to lend her influence to the cause of an embattled kinsman, and, "moved by

the desire to make someone happy,” a desire which, Juliette thinks, is a “fatal desire wherefor the hand of Nature” [sic] she accepts (200). This kinsman turns out to be the valet to the libertine Duc Dennemar, whom Juliette had robbed a year before. Juliette is betrayed to the police by the valet Lubin and is incarcerated. She swiftly learns from this experience, but not in any way chastened as would be expected from such a misfortune. She muses: “coldly furious to discover myself a dupe for having given virtue’s case a single instant of heed; [I] resolved – profoundly determined – never again to permit it the faintest entry into my heart” (201). She resolves never again to be moved by any impulse but that which drives her to crime. Later on in the book she is tested again: Saint-Fond desires her help in a scheme which will cause the starvation of two-thirds of the population of France. Juliette weakens again: “corrupt to the core though I was, before the idea I shuddered” (549). After refusing Saint-Fond, she retires to bed and has a terrible nightmare, which she takes as a portent of approaching misfortune: “I stopped being vicious for a fleeting instant, I shuddered at a proposed horror; misfortune is about to engulf me, it is sure” (549). Her prophecy is correct; Saint-Fond is a man of power and influence, and she must flee Paris to escape his wrath. It is only at the end of the book, having fully embraced vice, and having her life’s choices confirmed for her by Justine’s death (in a way which is suggestive of divine wrath), that Juliette can enjoy seemingly limitless prosperity:

“O Nature!” She exclaimed in her enthusiasm, “it is then necessary to thy plan, this crime against which in their stupidity a multitude of fools inveigh; though dost desire crime then, since thy hand punishes them who dread it or refrain from committing it.” (1191)

Success is in itself not proof of a successful ethical system. However, it is clear when comparing the tropes of the novel of sensibility (or the moralising novel) to those same tropes inverted and mocked in *Juliette*, that Sade does want to imply that a libertines’ success is evidence of their superior morals. Juliette reflects that the story of her life could well be titled “the prosperities of vice.” In the moralising novel, the peace and good fortune that the heroine enjoys (or that, by the example of her death, she guides other people to righteousness and therefore to prosperity) is a direct result of the heroine’s upstanding morality and is the final proof of it. Obviously in *Juliette*, it is the heroine’s final commitment to vice which ensures her

prosperity, and in wavering from her ethical commitments, she encounters only misfortune.

The other element of Juliette's story which is important to the development of her ethical integrity is the novel-long narrative of education and self-development. Juliette begins the novel as quite an advanced student, having already decided based on observation that crime is "right" in as much as it seems to her to be required by nature and rewarded by providence. Her ethical missteps are resolved when she undertakes furious self-reflection, chastening herself. After her incarceration, angry at herself for refusing Saint-Fond, Juliette suffers horrible nightmares which strengthen her resolve to never again balk at the suggestion of even the most hideous crime. Her ethical learning is aided by her libertine fellows. At one point Noirceuil says, "this ruinous sensibility plaguing you must be dealt with" (475), and assures her that further study will enable her to overcome these problems: "you enter your prime readied by earnest study, by solid reflection, by a wholesale reflection of all the curbs and all the prejudices imposed and acquired in childhood ... that long and careful preparation shall not have been for nothing" (475). Juliette confesses that, although she is no longer bothered by remorse, she does still give in to feelings of shame. Saint-Fond advises her that shame "reflects the wound inflicted upon public opinion by a given piece of wickedness" and that she should "parade" her crimes, "show [her]self nude in public" and dress whorishly, she would soon "cease to blush at anything" (477). In any case, he advises, her membership in the Sodality would soon "make short work of the weakness" that plagues her (477). After taking in these pieces of advice, Juliette, later in the book, is able to pass on the wisdom to Olympia, who is "still unprepared to accept the horrors these misdeeds may involve" (665). She criticises Olympia's crimes as "in all likelihood justifiable" where they should be "gratuitous" (665). Olympia, unlike Juliette, never learns from this admonition, and later dies for it. Juliette and Clairwil kill Olympia by throwing her into a volcano. Juliette eulogises her: "libertine by temperament, with imagination, but who lacked depth and rigor in her principles; timorous, still in prejudice's grip ... unsuitable company for a pair of women as corrupt as ourselves" (1019).

Nothing demonstrates the libertine ideal better than the negative example of the victim. Like the perennial victim Justine, the victim serves as a cautionary tale. Victims can break their servitude if they undergo the transformation to ethical subject like the libertine. Blanchot points out that there is very little difference

between the experiences of the two sisters, victim Justine and libertine Juliette: “everything which happens to Justine also happens to Juliette, ... Juliette is also cast into prison, roundly flogged, sentenced to the rack, endlessly tortured. Hers is a hideous existence, but here is the rub: from these ills, these agonies, she derives pleasure; these tortures delight her” (“Sade” 49). The introductory chapters to both novels hint at the possibility of salvation for Justine, but she chooses the wrong path. As Sade repeats often, the path of virtue is strewn over with brambles. Justine consistently refuses to learn from her mistakes. Early on, she lodges with Monsieur du Harpin, who tries to induce her to thievery. When she refuses, he accuses her of theft anyway and has her sentenced to die. Later on when she saves Saint-Florent from death, he repays her by raping her and stealing all of her money. Clearly, reciprocity is not a part of the libertine ethos. When she is taken in by the Comte de Bressac, he tries to convince her to help kill his aunt; she refuses. This refusal is not enough to stop the crime from going ahead and she is again accused of a crime she did not commit. Despite her misfortunes, her faith never wavers, and, indeed, it strengthens. She tries to take cover at a Benedictine monastery, which, as one could guess, is run by libertine monks who imprison and violate her. Very late in the novel, as Justine is once again sentenced to death for a crime of which she is innocent, she reflects on her adventures. Noting each incident in which she has acted out of virtue only to be punished for it, she concludes that she is “utterly incapable of conceiving a single generous sentiment without immediately being drowned in a sea of misfortunes” (*Justine* 736) and while those who do her evil are overwhelmed “with favours, I hasten on to death” (737).

The Sadean libertine is distinguished from the victim in one chief particular: his/her ethical praxis is a consequence of self-reflection and self-development. The victim, like the archetypal victim Justine, typically follows the path of virtue and subscribes to social conventions. They are not ethical subjects because they never make ethical decisions; they are subjects in only a pejorative sense, in that they are subjected to a law or command or a deity. Libertines are often wrongly classified as amoral because of the misguided perception that they are subject to the capriciousness of their passions. However, libertines often actively suppress their passions in order to deepen transgression. Lingis says, “[t]he libertine must make the pure thought of a crime immediately imperative for his will, and short-circuit both imagination and feelings” (113). Indeed, libertines only indulge the passions when it



is ethically prudent to do so. Lingis explains that “[l]ibertines are men of principle; libertinage is defined formally by its relationship with law” (112). Libertine praxis emphasises that ethics can only be self-chosen. While much has been made of Sade’s supposed campaign for personal freedom, in the light of the relationship between the libertine and the victim, it seems counter-intuitive to describe Sadean ethics as an ethics of freedom. By its very nature, transgression would seem to be ‘freeing’ – though it always instantiates the same limits it attempts to break.

### **Pedagogy and Ethical Praxis**

Sade’s system is an ethical praxis which constitutes a challenge not only to its own foundational theoretical principles, but also certain systems of rational ethics. Praxis has been often neglected, but (ironically) much theorised in Western ethical theory. Although Sade’s writing contains ethical principles that libertines expound during their dissertations, the enacting of these principles in the text itself forms a praxis that points to different guiding principles. Looking at these contradictions reveals a tension between Sade’s ethical systems and the rational ethics of the Enlightenment – along with some unusual affinities between Sade and thinkers like Hume and Nietzsche. The guiding force of this praxis is, as always, the transgressive, that is to say, the erotic, the violent, and the passions which motivate such transgressions. Sade outrages certain codes of moral behaviour, but the actions of his libertines are in line with (and partially constitute) an ethical system within themselves. They can hardly be said to be acting immorally when they act strictly according to their own codes. Klossowski points out that, although Sade’s atheism seems “destined to establish the reign of the total absence of norms,” it cannot fulfil this destiny because the transgression which the libertines frequently affirm to be the source of their pleasure would lose all meaning if social norms and moral categories were to be abolished (15).

Concern for praxis is evident in the pedagogical scenes in Sade’s work. Libertine pedagogy<sup>39</sup> is interested first and foremost with tutoring ethics, both in theory and practice. Such practices can be seen in the induction of young males and females into libertine life, a plot device employed in all the major Sadean novels.

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<sup>39</sup> As explained in Chapter One, libertine pedagogy parodies the pedagogical texts and theories of the Enlightenment era and the educational aims of the sentimental novel.

Eminent among them, *Philosophy in the Boudoir* chronicles the induction of the ingénue Eugénie into libertine society. Her induction requires a thorough and systematic re-education, designed to strip her of her virtue both physically and philosophically. At the beginning of the novel the female libertine Madame de Saint-Ange voices her plans to Chevalier and Dolomance, the men who will provide the practical element of Eugénie's teaching: "we will nourish her with our philosophy" (7) in order to "otherthrow all the false moral principles that have benumbed her mind" (8). Eugénie is a quick study, but she protests briefly at the outset of her introduction to libertinage that she fears their conduct outrages virtue. Dolomance advises her: "Renounce all virtues! ... is there a single sacrifice we make to those false deities that's worth a minute of the pleasures we savor while outraging them?" (23). He tells her that rebelling against the passions is unnatural, and that so-called virtuous women are motivated by passions "far more horrible" than libertines; those are: "pride" or "vanity" or just "coldness of temperament," and that they "sacrifice to egotism" rather than, as libertines do, to the passions (23). He later elaborates: "a person comforts his fellowmen purely in order to show off and never simply to do a good deed" (31). Dolomance eventually convinces her that vice and virtue are entirely relative: "What is considered a crime here is often a virtue a few hundred leagues away" (32). Eugénie, who has already stated that she hates her mother, eagerly asks for a more detailed analysis of how relative and excusable certain crimes are, particularly in relation to "the libertinage of girls, then the adultery of wives" (32). Madame de Saint-Ange happily obliges her with a vindication of the freedom of young women, and the uselessness of parents after she comes of age. She says: "It is nonsensical of our parents to predict that libertinage will cause misery. There are thorns everywhere, but roses bloom over them on the road of vice" (35). She ends with a practical injunction: "fuck, Eugénie, fuck away, my dear angel! Your body belongs to you, to you alone. You are the only person in the world who has the right to enjoy your body and to let anyone you wish enjoy it" (35). Once philosophically prepared, Eugénie is deflowered by Chevalier, as she exclaims: "kiss me, my executioner, kiss me! ... I adore you!" (101).

Pedagogical practices are contrasted in the twin novels *Justine* and *Juliette*. *Juliette* opens with a protracted pedagogical scene in which the heroine is inducted into libertinage by Madame Delbène, who gives Juliette "the basic precepts of the morality" which sow in her "the seed destined to flower into vices without number"

(3). Delbène, “eager to undertake [Juliette’s] education,” invites her to lunch with another pupil, Euphrosine,<sup>40</sup> where she performs oral sex on both girls and then directs them to “pollute” one another and herself, saying: “do unto me everything I have done unto you” (8). Juliette narrates: “we struck a thousand different poses; continually altering our roles” and in short performing upon one another every act possible between women (8). Such is Juliette’s first initiation, but certainly not her last. By contrast, *Justine* presents a cautionary tale, which is ironic because the character Justine is a parody of heroines of the sentimental novel which often provided cautionary tales, as well as moral lessons. When the sisters first part ways, Justine refuses her sister’s advice to abandon virtue, and this has immediate repercussions. She attempts to find refuge with a priest, and although he promises her food and shelter if she works for him, in kissing her, he soon reveals his libertine inclinations. Justine, ever incorruptible, pushes him away and scolds him: “I am soliciting advice whereof my youth and my misfortunes put me in need, and you would have me purchase it at an excessively inflated price” (462). The priest turns her away; meanwhile, her sister, committed to vice, has flourished as a prostitute and is soon married to a rich count (whom she later murders). Justine is often faced with pedagogical opportunities, but she refuses to learn. In protecting her virtue and her morals, she loses both, to no happy end. Her sister gleefully abandons virtue, and, in constructing a new ethical code for herself (based on transgression), she finds only happiness and fulfilment in her life of vice.

### **Ethical Principles and Religious Categories: The Perverse Piety of Libertine Ethics**

Contemporary understandings of Sade’s project (where they even acknowledge such a project) view it as a one-man campaign for sexual freedom and liberation of the passions. There are certainly elements in his libertine novels which support this interpretation, but taking this as Sade’s motivating principle results in an overly narrow view of his philosophy and ignores the importance of satire in his work. There is certainly a desire for radical freedom embodied in some libertine characters, but to the extent that this figures in Sadean ethics it is not to make a case for radical

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<sup>40</sup> Euphrosyne is one of the three charities in Greek mythology, representing joy or mirth. Use of this name continues Sade’s often ironical preference for classical or religious names.

and sweeping reforms, but rather to provide a satirical look at both revolutionary and aristocratic ideals. That the right to freedom seems to be limited to a privileged few is telling in that it forms part of Sade's satire of the class hierarchies of his time. Sade was no great campaigner for equality, but this satire was undoubtedly ethically motivated. For instance, entry into the Sodality is "barred to those unable to indicate a minimum yearly income of twenty-five thousand livres" (419). Most of the libertines are nobility, and they increase their fortunes through crime. There is not a poor libertine in all of Sade's works. A look at the satirical aspects of Sade's work suggests that not only does Sade question traditional boundaries and hierarchies, but he wants to make a farce of them, and, in so doing, encourage others to recognise and question such boundaries.

Extrapolating liberation of the passions as a motivating principle for libertine ethics is not just overly narrow, it directly contradicts many of the ethical statements found in libertine speeches and action. While the role of the passions in Sade's ethics still remains to be explored, it will become evident that the passions are not, after all, the basis of the Sadean ethical project. At times, following Hume and pre-empting Nietzsche, libertines use the passions to justify their behaviour, phrasing these arguments as ethical precepts. At other times, in line with (and satirical of) Enlightenment rationality, libertines reject the passions as constituting valid motivating principles, especially for ethical behaviour, and take up arguments which see nature as offering guidelines for ethical behaviour. Like his treatment of the passions, his treatment of reason turns out to be subversive and satirical, revealing the potential for monstrosity and perversion in reason. To complicate matters further, at still other times libertines espouse relativistic arguments which not only problematise the role of the passions, but also the validity of religious and secular ethical categories. However, libertines' commitment to transgression, and through it, to Christian ethical and theological categories, suggests that Sade's ethical system is hardly secular at all. The next half of this chapter will examine the various possible bases for Sade's ethics and it will demonstrate why Sade's ethical project must be considered, in a perverse way, to be religious.

Sade's transgressions are not for the sake of transgression, because Sade's philosophy *appears* subjugated to passion (*Sade My Neighbour* 13). His dissertations are always a prelude to sexual activities, so they are a kind of foreplay, and the way in which libertines act on their slightest whim in relation to sex suggests that the

novels advocate for the freedom of expression of desire and the passions. In *Juliette*, Minski says of justice: “let us abandon our belief in this fiction, it no more exists than does the God of whom fools believe it the image; there is no God in this world, neither is there virtue, neither is there justice; there is nothing good, useful, or necessary but our passions” (607). Once again this concept points to the transgressive principle. Clairwil explains: “Sensibility, my dear, is the source of all virtues and likewise of all vices, ... the operation we term the effect of the passions, begins to determine our habitual bent for good or for evil” (277). At the beginning of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the author’s note also encourages readers to take their passions as guiding principles, since they are the only thing capable leading one “to happiness:” “these passions, with which cold and shabby moralists try to intimidate you, are simply the means used by nature to help human beings attain nature’s goals” (1).

### **Vice as its own Reward: Rationality against the Passions**

However, a more thorough reading of Sade’s novels contradicts initial impressions that libertinage is about indulging in the passions, because, more often than not, libertines must actively suppress the passions in order to heighten transgression. They seem to value the cold, calculated exercise of reason against the excesses of passion. One of the most straightforward conflicts which occurs between libertine theories and actions in Sade lies in the idea of vice for its own sake. Sadean libertines repeatedly stress the value of transgressing for transgression’s sake, which constitutes a prudential justification for a system of ethics in which values are felt to be intrinsic properties. As explained in the previous chapter, virtue is felt to be its own reward and doing good can and should be undertaken without additional motivation. Indeed, additional motivation is often felt to undermine the virtuous nature of the action. In the case of the Sadean libertine, it is felt that crimes should be performed solely for the sake of vice. Therefore, if a crime is committed only for the sake of passion, it is felt to lessen the transgression, and so is not in line with the libertine creed. Passion is not even seen as an acceptable motivator for pleasure. It quickly becomes clear that libertines’ pleasures are not the measured, moderated pleasures of the Epicureans, undertaken in the spirit of pleasure or passion for its own sake, and never to excess. Vice itself is said to be sufficient, and the highest pleasures exalted are those which come from vice, not from the passions.

It is typical to see the libertines in *Juliette* speak about the value of vice performed for its own sake, not for the sake of satisfying the passions. The libertines in *The 120 Days* proclaim that doing evil is sufficient in itself to quicken lust and to slake it: Durcet says, “in evil I discover precisely what is needed to stimulate in me all of pleasure’s sensations, and I perform evil for that reason, for it alone, without any ulterior motive” (363). The Président and the Duc concur, with the Duc asserting: “it is not the object of libertine intentions which fire us, but the idea of evil, and that consequently it is thanks only to evil and only in the name of evil one stiffens, not thanks to the object” (364). The Bishop adds this maxim: “the doctrine which must perpetually govern our conduct is this: the more pleasure you seek in the depths of crime, the more frightful the crime must be” (364). However, if ever-increasing pleasure demands ever-increasing crimes to fuel it, an endless destruction is required, something which, the four arch-libertines lament, is not possible. Durcet: “I must declare that my imagination has always outdistanced my faculties ... I have conceived of a thousand times more and better than I have done, and I ever have complaint against Nature who, while giving me the desire to outrage her, has always deprived me of the means” (364). Curval adds, apocalyptically: “Ah, how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world!” (364). Later, the Duc says: “it is then true that crime has of itself such a compelling attractiveness that, unattended by any accessory activity, it may be itself suffice to inflame every passion and to hurl one into the same delirium occasioned by lubricious acts” (426).

In order to perform evil for evil’s sake, the libertines must erase any other motivation to commit crime. Libertines typically want for little since they are usually very rich. Even if they do not come from the upper class, they have found a way to amass large fortunes. They do not commit crimes out of material need. Accordingly, it is not any material needs or rewards that crime might offer, but the drive of the passions that is the one thing that could potentially undermine the idea of transgressing for transgression’s sake. Libertines often argue that crimes driven by passion can lead to feelings of remorse and guilt after the fact, two emotions felt to be useless. However, libertines are also concerned that crimes committed in the heat of passion are not a true expression of a rational will, and are pressed into the service of the erotic. A little further on, Clairwil criticises Juliette in much the same way after Juliette murders her own father: “I seem still to notice the same failing in her:

whenever Juliette commits a crime, it's enthusiastically; but so long as her cunt is dry she might as well be paralysed. One must proceed calmly, deliberately, lucidly. Crime is the torch that should fire the passions." She later says: "I expect Juliette to do evil – not to quicken her lust, as I believe is her habit at present, but solely for the pleasure of doing it" (476). Clairwil lectures to Juliette about what it takes truly to commit acts of vice: "they consist in doing, immediately, in cold blood, that very thing which, done in the throes of passion, has been able to cause you remorse when later on you recover your wits" (450). Klossowski suggests that Sade's motivation in stressing the supposedly inherent benefits of transgression for its own sake is to question hedonistic motivations. He says:

reiteration is at first the condition required for the monster to remain on the level of monstrosity; if the reiteration is purely passionate it remains uncertain. For the monster to progress beyond the level that has been reached, he has first to avoid falling back shy of it; he can do so only if he reiterates this act in absolute apathy, a kind of *divine apatheia* [the concept that God cannot experience emotions, or at least does not experience them in the way that humans do]. This alone can maintain him in a state of permanent transgression. ... Sade introduces a critique of the sensuous, an especially a critique of the primary benefit of transgression – the pleasure inseparable from the act. ("Philosopher-Villain" 49)

Libertine dissertations furthermore attack the theory (found in the works of Hume and Rousseau) that ethics should be based upon "natural" sensibilities like compassion. In *The 120 Days* the Duc opines, in an anti-Spinozist and anti-Humean manner, that "Compassion is a fool's virtue. Close examination reveals that it is never anything but compassion which costs us delights" (390). Later on, Curval, facetiously, poses a rhetorical question: "Haven't you heard tell of the sweet pleasures of doing good unto others?" (427). Durcet replies that any delight derived from this is "illusory, a fiction ... founded upon vile prejudices" (427) It is only "through the agency of pride, the most false of all our sensations" that doing good can provide one "a brief instant's titillation," a feeling which is, even so, "almost nothing" (427) By comparison, doing others harm is a principle founded "upon reason" and so is "authentic, real" and a "veritable mental pleasure-taking, and it inflames every other passion by the very fact it runs counter to common opinions" (427).

### **Sadean Materialism and Ethics in Nature**

Sade engages with popular, if controversial, theories of natural ethics in his work, which is part and evidence of his materialist views. Sade responds to theorists like Spinoza, Hume, and Holbach when his libertines often appeal to nature for justification and to bolster their ethical views. Sade engages with an Enlightenment trend to appeal to nature as a basis for ethics. Even so, he engages with these theories in order to satirise them, because the rationality of the theories he borrows is undermined by the libertine system into which they have been co-opted.

Often theories of nature are used to argue against social laws: in his dissertation to Juliette, the Pope says that nature's voice "makes no mention of consanguinary or social duties, for these things are false and it speaks the truth only. Neither does it tell us not to do unto others that which unto our own selves we would not that there be done" (780). Coeur-de-Fer argues against the Rousseauian social contract when he says:

all men are born isolated, envious, cruel, and despotic; wishing to have everything and surrender nothing, struggling to maintain either their rights or achieve ambition, the legislator comes up and says to them: Cease thus to fight; if each were to retreat a little, calm would be restored. I find no fault with the position implicit in the agreement, but I maintain that two species of individuals cannot and ought not to submit to it, ever; those who feel they are the stronger have no need to give up anything in order to be happy, and those who find themselves weaker also find themselves giving up infinitely more than is assured them. (494)

He goes on to assert that, since society is only made up of the weak and the strong, there is no rational being who should submit to that contract, and a "truly intelligent person" is the person who "lashes out in irrevocable violation of that contract" because by rupturing it he stands to gain more than if he was the weaker class. If that person should be caught, he would undoubtedly be executed, which, according to Coeur-de-Fer, is again a "misfortune less great than existing in opprobrium and wretchedness" (494-5).

In making a mockery of the idea of virtue being rewarded and vice punished in the next life, if not this, Sadean libertines again call upon Nature. Coeur-de-Fer continues his thesis on the social contract: "there are two positions then available to us: either crime, which renders us happy, or the noose, which prevents us from being



unhappy” (495). When Justine protests this thesis, she appeals to “God’s justice” – the idea that the unfortunate might suffer in this life, but be rewarded in the next – to support her injunction that even the weak and oppressed never lapse in their virtue. Coeur-de-Fer points out that, although it is nice to think that the misfortunate might gain reprieve in the afterlife, the idea is misguided. Then he takes his logic a step further when he says that “it is essential that the misfortunate suffer” since “their anguishes are included in what Nature decrees” (495). Furthermore, this “truth” “should stifle remorse in the tyrant’s soul or in the malefactor’s; let him not constrain himself; let him blindly, unthinkingly deliver himself up to causing every hurt the idea for which may be born in him, it is only Nature’s voice which suggests this idea” (495).

A similar line of reasoning is employed in *The 120 Days*: the Bishop asks Durcet whether one should be tempted to “succor the lowly and wretched” whereupon Durcet replies that all “voluptuousness” would be lost if one should “cause them to taste an instant’s happiness” since it would destroy “all the pleasure afforded by comparison” (362). Indeed, Durcet suggests that true happiness consists in causing others pain: “what fools describe as atrocities” are actually “pleasure-giving distinctions and have made many a delectable comparison” (363). Durcet later says, “I regard charity not only as something evil in itself, but, what is more, I consider it a crime against Nature” (427). This line exposes some of the contradictions and problems in Christian (and indeed, moderate Enlightenment) thinking about nature. In characterising nature as brutal, vicious, and selfish (by virtue of the fact that it abhors charity and supports pleasure gained from vice), Durcet holds the almost Gnostic view that nature is fallen and corrupt. This view is also in accordance with a Hobbesian conception of the state of nature as being brutal and warlike. However, Durcet’s comment also invokes Christian ideals of nature as a divine “blueprint” for human actions, since he extrapolates from this vicious nature a set of laws for ethical conduct, no matter how counter-dominant a view of ethical conduct. Looked at in this way, Durcet’s reference to crimes against nature again recalls Christian injunctions against, among other things, sodomy, abortion and murder, only to turn such arguments against themselves in seeing nature as the foundations of transgressive behaviour.

Justine resides with Bressac for four years, all the while harbouring feelings for him. One day, Bressac comes to Justine with a plan to murder his aunt, the

Madame de Bressac, who Justine describes as “filled with piety and virtue” (*Justine* 517). Furthermore, Bressac asks that the murder be performed by Justine herself. She refuses, and Bressac tries to persuade her with some philosophical and materialist reasonings on the subject of murder and morality:

With regard to the crime of destroying one’s fellow, be persuaded, dear girl, it is purely hallucinatory; man has not been accorded the power to destroy; he has at best the capacity to alter forms, but lacks that required to annihilate them: well, every form is of equal worth in Nature’s view; nothing is lost in the immense melting pot where variations are wrought: all the material masses which fall into it spring incessantly forth in other shapes, and whatsoever be our interventions in this process, not one of them, needless to say, outrages her, not one is capable of offending her. (518)

Furthermore, Bressac argues:

What difference does it make to her creative hand if this mass of flesh today wearing the conformation of a bipedal individual is reproduced tomorrow in the guise of a handful of centipedes? Dare one say that the construction of this two-legged animal costs her any more than that of an earthworm, and that she should take a greater interest in the one than in the other? (519)

He concludes that “man’s pride alone erects murder as a crime” (520). Making another leap of logic and, in accordance with the Sadean libertine impulse, spinning this logic out to its monstrous end, he says that murderous desires, like all the passions, “come to us from Nature” (520). If Nature wants more creatures “she inspires lust in us” and if she wants fewer “she inserts vengeance, avarice, lechery, ambition into our hearts, and lo! you have murders” (520).

By extrapolating from nature a set of transgressive principles (paradoxically, a law of transgression), Sade demonstrates the irrationality of using nature as the basis for a rational ethics. Nature is defined according to the needs of the libertine in the moment of argument, as justification, as pedagogical tool, and as a way of reasoning out ethical principles from which to act. Sade invokes existing understandings of nature only to invert or subvert them and shows how ephemeral and arbitrary the category of nature is; it can be used to justify any action, no matter how potentially damaging to society, or at odds with social norms. This ultimately demonstrates that an ethics based on nature or some conception of natural law is as arbitrary, relativistic, and irrational as any based on religious scripture or revelation.

Additionally, libertines at times reject outright the idea that human behaviour can be governed by nature, however conceived. Pope Pius states in *Juliette* that “Nature cannot bind man to any law” and so “once cast, man has nothing further to do with nature” (767).

### **Satire and Anti-rationality**

Just as libertines appear to value theories of nature only to undermine them, they seem to value rationality and reason-based ethics, but the transgressive quality of Sadean ethics subverts reason. As Dalia Judovitz notes in “‘Sex,’ or, the Misfortunes of Literature:”

Everything that up to Sade constitutes the exterior of reason – evil, crime, monstrosity, and sexual perversion – is brought within its domain, thereby redefining the positive connotations which his contemporaries associated with reason. The very premises of eighteenth-century thought are systematically exposed and debased by Sade, so that the underpinnings of its logical foundations are pitted through parody against themselves. (172)

Sade points to the instability of a rational ethics by inverting the traditional function of ethics as a way to contain and limit passions which society deems destructive, even violent. For example, *Juliette* and *Justine* together display a central Sadean theory, the inversion of the religious maxim that good is rewarded and evil punished. *Justine*'s eponymous protagonist is virtuous, generous, and pious, but her only rewards are her constant violation, torture, and eventual death. Juliette, Justine's libertine sister, is rewarded for her vice: she becomes rich, gains political favour, and the death of her sister only affirms the merits of her own life choices in comparison. Neiman explains that, “in showing a world where crime always pays while virtue always suffers, Sade rakes reason over coals” (195). By inverting the traditional idea that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished, Sade does more than present a monstrous reflection of social mores, he satirises them by pointing out the naivety and the arbitrariness of such norms. Once again, by following an idea to its most extreme end, Sade demonstrates the monstrosity of rationality. By positing a world in which vice is consistently shown to be rewarded, the rational agent would choose vice over virtue, and this is indeed what Juliette does. The consequences of this, Sade demonstrates, are limitless transgressions which threaten the social order, making

victims of the vast, uninitiated masses who still cling to the idea that virtue will be rewarded, even if that reward is the ephemeral promise of paradise after death.

Lacan's essay "Kant with Sade" (originally "Kant avec Sade") suggests that Sade's ethics are in line with the categorical imperative, which in many ways redefined the way that readers viewed Sade. Sade's ethics seem, in a Kantian reading, to be much more in line with reason than one would think. Lacan reduces Sade's ethics to a single ethical maxim, which states: "I have the right of enjoyment over your body, anyone can say to me, and I will exercise this right, without any limit stopping me in the capriciousness of the exactions that I might have the taste to satiate" (58). Lacan argues that, although this principle is no doubt monstrous, it is perfectly in line with Kantian ethics. He is here clearly referring to one of the rules of the Sodality of the Friends of Crime that readers are introduced to in *Juliette*. In particular, rule twelve of the group's manifesto states that in "hours dedicated to corporative frolicking" all must be naked and "there is no such thing as valid refusal whereby one individual would deny his pleasure to another" (420).

However, Sade's ethics of transgression question the rational authority of morality. As praxis, they deny any suggestion that ethics can be unmotivated by the passions. A Kantian view tends to take Sade's ethics out of context. Sade frequently expresses disgust with certain rational systems because they negate the value of human life and death. Libertines are driven by the desire to transgress, to be excessive, an impulse which, however much they would like it to be motivated by a cold and dispassionate transgressive principle, is in line with Bataille's sacred (which is not rational). It may frequently come at the cost of human life, but because of the nature of transgression, even death can only affirm the value of that human life, for that is the value which it aims to transgress (and transgression cannot help but desire the things which it transgresses against). In addition, Sade hardly advocates a Kantian system whereby all beings are ends in themselves. Libertinage is predicated upon a hierarchical system where there are definite victims and definite aggressors. While it may be true that it would be difficult to victimise a true libertine, there is still a class of victims who are used only as means. Sade meant this to be at least in part satirical, and sets up such a horrific system to question certain aspects of his society. Also, the victim/aggressor relationship is not so clear cut, as libertines need victims no matter how much they disavow a need of anybody. Yet this does not change the fact of the way that those victims are treated.

Therefore Sade's ethics cannot, despite attempts by thinkers like Lacan, and even Sade's own commentaries, be thought of as a rational ethics. The veneer of rationality that libertine dissertations lend to ethical (and philosophical) claims is only satirical. Sade destroys, from the inside, the notion of a rational ethics. Like his objections to religion, Sade's problems with rationality have an ethical basis. As previously explained, Sade's determinism is satirical; he takes rationality to its logical extreme and monstrous end. Lacan, perhaps in this spirit, does the same to Kant's ethics when he considers them in the light of Sade's philosophy. If it is possible to say that dominant views of Sade's ethics were challenged by Lacan's analysis, then it is valid to say that common views of Kant's ethics become equally problematic upon contact with Sade. Here, Sade's ethics work to undermine rational ethics without the benefit of satire. What makes a Sadean maxim horrifying (and, by association, the Kantian law upon which it is based) is its transgressive quality: "Lacan shows that the very act of making this conjunction is founded on the break, limit, or blind spot that each breaks out in the other's system" (Reinhard 785).

Since Sade's novels undermine the possibility of a secular ethics based in reason, the passions, or nature, it appears as though they do not admit to any possibility of a firm grounding for secular ethics at all. Despite the implication in some passages that evil is inherent in and natural to some actions, Sade's characters, and Sade himself in some non-fictional writings, implies in a number of speeches that they believe values of good and bad to be shifting and relative. Libertine diatribes on the idea of vice for its own sake, while justifying libertine actions, point to a system of valuation wherein things are felt to be inherently good or bad, inherently transgressive. To commit evil for evil's sake implies that there is some inherent value in evil, that it is a property that certain objects, subjects or activities must possess, and that those phenomena contain the benefit to evil in and of themselves. Ethical relativism seems to deny the idea that transgressing can be done for its own sake. Either there must be some other motivating principle, or there is a problem with the categorisation of libertine ethical principles. Now, in pointing out contradictions in the text between libertine statements and actions, and comparing this to observed ethical principles, it is easy to run up against a number of problems. The first is assuming that a coherent ethical system can be derived from Sade's novels, such as one would expect to find in the pages of a traditional philosophical tract. Leaving aside the difficult and ultimately unanswerable question of Sade's

motivations in writing such texts, any preliminary reading shows such paradoxes and contradictions that this cannot be the case. Second, it would not do to make equivalent the attitudes of those paper-and-ink libertine characters with those of their flesh-and-blood libertine author.

### **Sade and Religion**

If Sade's ethics cannot be said to be based on the passions, rationality, or nature, and yet they are an ethics, with a definite basis, for libertines' insistence on moral categories complicates any reading of Sade's ethical system as unproblematically relativistic. It becomes clear, after the kind of investigation into Sade's ethics and transgression which has now been conducted, that libertines maintain, they do not destroy, Christian moral and theological categories like evil, sin, vice and virtue. Lacan explains in "Kant with Sade" "that the Sadian fantasy situates itself better in the bearers of Christian ethics than elsewhere is what our structural landmarks allow us to grasp easily" (74). Sade's self-reflexively transgressive ethics refer to a metaphysical principle outside of the rational, the atheistic and the material.

It has already been said that the very principle of transgression suggests the law. It is true that Sade showed contempt for political and social laws in all aspects of his being and writing. It is also true that he took pleasure in the transgression of those laws. Yet these are not the laws that are to be found as the basis of what has here been referred to as his ethical project. Sade was deeply suspicious of religious laws, and not just laws, but the entire principle of religion, particularly Christianity and the Christian God. His rejection of these is an ethical rejection, but it is no unproblematic or simple rejection, because Sade's ethical transgressions, by appealing to peculiarly Christian theological notions of vice, evil, and sin, must be placed in the category of the religious. In the essay "A Preface to Transgression" Foucault elaborates on the relationship between law and transgression: "transgression is not related to the limit as black is to white ... the outside to the inside ... their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust" (35). Judovitz makes this clear: "Sade's extensive exploration of the boundaries of sexuality is interpreted by Foucault as the prototype of all transgressive gestures, since it stages the challenge of the limits of philosophy and religion" (172). However, in this thesis, the expected implications of Sade's challenge to religion, to God, are problematised. It would seem that a system which challenges God could

only be atheistic in nature, but Sade retains the categories which he should want to abolish, and they are the basis of libertine ethics.

Sade, appearing many years before Nietzsche, nevertheless hits upon many of the same points expounded in *On the Genealogy of Morality (Zur Genealogie der Moral)*. The Sadean libertine, as an ideal, is a kind of sovereign, noble creature whose superiority subjugates inferior beings, might exemplify the kind of noble morality of which Nietzsche speaks. In practice, however, the Sadean libertines fall far from the reality of this ideal, although they are themselves ignorant of this fact. It is their recognition and glorification of the principle of evil, and its attendant principle of transgression from which it cannot really be separated, that results in the paradoxical enslavement of the libertines to the very slaves they feel they must naturally dominate. Furthermore, Sade's co-option of Christian understandings of vice, virtue, sin, law, and evil, although meant to explode Christian ethics from the inside, become implicated in the preservation of Christian dialectics. This poses additional problems for libertines, who seem to want to cast all moral principles aside and live as sovereign rulers, but whose sovereignty is threatened, as will become clear in the next chapter, by the principle of transgression which governs their behaviour.

**Chapter 8**  
**Self-denial, Transgression and the Absent God:**  
**Reading Sadean Ethics through the Postmodernist Ethics of the**  
**Other**

now I see where  
 this revolution is leading  
 .....  
 To the withering of the individual man  
 and a slow merging into uniformity  
 to the death of choice  
 to self-denial  
 to deadly weakness  
 in a state  
 which has no contact with individuals  
 but which is impregnable  
 So I turn away  
 - Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade*

Sade's ethics, like his philosophical doctrines, are not coherent or cohesive – yet this thesis has demonstrated that it is possible to extrapolate some underlying principles which can be brought to bear in ethical debates in postmodernism. Doing so enables Sade's ethics to be thought anew, and in ways which radically challenge the notion of the sovereign man in Sade, by demonstrating the perversity of the ethical relationship to the other in Sade's works. In turn, Sade's ethics can be used to critically evaluate the transgressive strain in contemporary understandings of responsibility to the other in ethics. When he is not denounced as a pornographer, Sade is thought of in the popular imagination as a political and literary revolutionary, largely because of the enthusiastic reception and rehabilitation of his work by the Surrealists, who read his work as an expression of his desire for freedom, and celebrate Sade as an example of the sovereign man. In the movie *Quills* and the movie *Sade*, freedom (in the form of freedom of expression and thought) is taken to be an ethical imperative which lies behind his works, and the audience is encouraged



to sympathise with Sade to the extent that they also hold freedom to be an important ethical value. The shortcomings of such portrayals have already been discussed in the introduction to the thesis. Sade did have a desire for freedom, but freedom of a peculiar kind, and, as this chapter will elucidate, freedom in the form of sovereignty is at the core of the libertine ethical problematic. The word problematic is appropriate here precisely because libertine sovereignty, far from being affirmed through transgressive acts, is problematised by libertines' relationships with and responsibility to the other, a result of their commitment to transgression.

While Sadean libertines aspire to sovereignty and singularity, the transgressive principle which motivates their actions leads to self denial and opens up to the relationship to the other. This serves to show that the argument that Sade's ethics might be useful and interesting to discussions of contemporary debates is not a tenuous or idle one. It is not the intention of this chapter to rehash tired arguments about censorship and sexual freedom in Sade as the Surrealists did; rather, this chapter will demonstrate how the underlying principles of Sade's ethics can be used to analyse and even illustrate contemporary concerns about the place of the "other," and the so-called "turn to religion," which is found chiefly in the work of Derrida and those he influenced. The "turn to religion" has already been opened for discussion in relation to philosophy and ethics. This chapter will continue that discussion by examining Sadean sovereignty and transgression in terms of alterity and metaphysical notions of the relationship to God as other, a relationship which seems to affirm sovereignty and freedom but which also dissolves it in the moment of transgression. The goal of the chapter will be to show the ways in which Sadean ethics exemplify the limits of ethical responsibility conceptualised as a relationship to the other alone.

### **The Will to Evil**

Since Catholic theologians have theorised that evil is a result of the creation of free will in humans (most famously Irenaeus, Augustine and Aquinas),<sup>41</sup> this doctrine is foundational to Christian ethics. In exploring the many different theories of evil,

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<sup>41</sup> However, this is not an outdated idea; contemporary theologians have taken up the argument. Notably Alvin Plantinga extensively explores and supports the free will defence in his 1977 book *God, Freedom and Evil*.

Sade never loses sight of its theological significance. All of the typical Gnostic themes are considered, including the idea that the world is created and presided over by an evil god, which makes nature itself evil – a fact which the libertine Saint-Fond uses to justify the idea that nature desires that humans be evil. In the many libertine theses on the importance of living as close to nature as possible,<sup>42</sup> the idea of fallen nature is preserved and exploited for satirical purposes. Saint-Fond's thesis that God Himself is evil is one of the more overtly Gnostic ideas Sade explores. The subversive quality of Sade's treatment with these themes is not that he expresses Gnostic ideas which are heretical, but that he implies that orthodox thought itself is essentially Gnostic. Sade's libertines often affirm the value of free will and autonomy, but ultimately, the freedom that they believe they are exercising when they transgress is not the exercise of free will, but is actually the expression of responsibility to the other, as this section will begin to explain. Freedom and autonomy are superseded by responsibility to the other, for to affirm one's own freedom at the expense of the other is to betray the other.

In discussing the brutal and malicious intent of natural forces and, indeed, human nature, Sadean texts appear to be entirely in line with Christian orthodoxy in as much as he always maintains the opposition between evil nature, on the one hand, and religion, society, and virtue, on the other. Libertine dissertations and behaviour suggest to the casual reader that evil is the result of a surrender to nature and a falling away from conventional virtue and piety. It is only the attentive reader who notices the ways in which the Sadean text breaks down this opposition through satire and exaggerates the hypocrisy and corruption of religious and secular social institutions alike. The idea that human nature is fallen is represented only to be subverted: Sade's libertines often justify their ethical principles in their contention that the urge to do evil is inborn (even if, at times, this sentiment is contradicted by bouts of relativism) but to them this inborn desire is to be celebrated and encouraged rather than punished and suppressed. That is why a libertine calling another person wicked is the greatest compliment that person can receive.

Evil is also seen, entirely in accordance with conventional views, to be something performed for the sake of transgression. The libertine makes a rational

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<sup>42</sup> An idea also explored in bucolic literature, but Sade's writing is hardly pastoral.

decision to do evil; this choice is the act of a free and thoroughly considered will to transgress rather than an inadvertent mistake or lapse of judgement. There is a double significance here. First, libertines are true ethical agents in that their ethical choices are a result of rational deliberation (even if they do not support a rational ethics) and self-reflection; they do not simply follow existing laws or commands.<sup>43</sup> Second, Augustine (followed by many other great theologians, including Aquinas) explains away the problem of evil in Christian theology with reference to the free will that God chose to give humans:

The good will, then, is the work of God; for God created him with it. But the first evil will, which preceded all man's evil acts, was rather a kind of falling away from the work of God to its own works than any positive work. And therefore the acts resulting were evil, not having God, but the will itself for their end; so that the will or the man himself, so far as his will is bad, was as it were the evil tree bringing forth evil fruit. (*City of God* bk. 14, ch. 11)

Augustine says that all evil acts are preceded by an evil will, and that “[t]he wicked deed, then – that is to say, the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit – was committed by persons who were already wicked. That evil fruit could be brought forth only by a corrupt tree” (*City of God* bk. 14, ch. 13). Adam committed an evil act because he fell away from God and became prideful or “turned towards himself,” such that he was able to prefer “the request of his wife to the command of God” (*City of God* bk. 14, ch. 13). Eve, likewise, must have already fallen away from God in order to be susceptible to the suggestions of the serpent. The Devil is, in Augustine's view, the originator of the sin of pride because he was the first who “wished to live according to himself when he did not abide in the truth; so that when he lied, this was not of God, but of himself” (*City of God* bk. 14, ch. 3). Therefore, when Adam and Eve fell away from God, they became like the Devil, and had evil wills, which preceded the evil act of eating the fruit of the tree. Such an explanation for the presence of evil in the world thereby exculpates God, but it also suggests that rebelling against God was an essential or foundational human act – at least, it forms the basis for thinking through both the nature of evil and the nature of humanity. The human will is conceptualised as essentially evil, in as much as it can only be good in

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<sup>43</sup> Such a position, as explained in Chapter Six, would constitute a lack of autonomy.

supplication to God's will, something outside of human reckoning. That Satan himself rebelled out of free will (he is the ur-rebel), and thus fell away from God<sup>44</sup> provides a very attractive template for behaviour to Sadean libertines.

It is important to note several effects of this falling away from God, which is in fact the very essence of the way in which one can understand the changes that Christianity engendered, not only "in sacred matters" (*Erotism* 120) as Bataille maintains, but in the way that one conceptualises God, the good, and the self. In this scenario, God, along with human beings who are separated from Him, are discontinuous beings and cannot be reconciled to continuity (characterised by Bataille as sacred), even in death, because of the immortality of the individual soul. This aligns with Patočka's view that the solitary personal God of Christianity and classical theism, the God who sees into the heart and to whom each person is individually beholden, made possible the current conception of individuality, sovereignty, and responsibility. The consequences of this will be discussed in more detail further on. For now, what is interesting is that a transgression ensured human fallenness and isolation from God, but at the same time created the possibility for responsibility to God. Humans are beholden to God in transgression, and it is through transgression that any relationship to God – or, as will be elucidated, the other – becomes possible. Christianity is not uniform in its conceptualisation of the problem of evil, the fallenness of humanity, or the idea of free will, but Augustine's ideas have been so influential that even if some denominations of Christianity, including Catholicism, have denied that humans are guilty of Adam's original sin, they still conceive of humans as essentially inclined to sin. These ideas have become an essential part of Western thinking about human nature and sin.

### **Deconstructing Transgression**

As a means to do evil, transgression is the meaning and the motivation of the larger part of Sade's work, as interpreted by thinkers like Bataille and Foucault, although it

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<sup>44</sup> Quite literally, according to Milton in *Paradise Lost*: "Nine days they fell; confounded chaos roar'd" (284; ch. 6, verse. 870). Satan and the other angels who had rebelled against God fell from heaven for nine days. Milton's Satan is a compelling character precisely because he is self-assertive and autonomous, and tries to establish his own sovereignty in relation to God – an interesting parallel to the libertine.

is necessary always to keep in mind that, as Bataille says: “He had neither the consistency nor the rigour which allows us to reduce his life to any one principle” (*Literature and Evil* 112). Bataille says that Sade “spoke only of irregularity” (195). It was not, as some interpretations would have it, the desire for sexual freedom (or indeed, freedom itself) which motivates the libertine, because:

[N]othing heats the passions more than irregularity. De Sade’s essential merit is to have discovered and effectively demonstrated one function of moral irregularity in carnal pleasure. This excitement should theoretically lead to sexual activity. But the effect of any irregularity at all is stronger than the immediate manoeuvres. De Sade finds it equally possible to seek satisfaction through murder or torture in the course of a debauch, or by ruining a family or country, or even just by stealing. (*Literature and Evil* 196)

As demonstrated by the apathy which characterises libertine criminal behaviour, satisfaction or pleasure is not the motivation for committing crime. Lingis explains in his essay “Society of the Friends of Crime”:

The libertine as imagined by Sade is constituted in essential criminality by violation of every form of social contract, in essential sacrilege by the incessant aggression against God, in essential monstrosity by violation of nature. Libertinage is the singular, and singularizing, will to violate the law for the sake of violating the law. (112)

Lingis states that evil is an act of the will for libertines, and suggests that transgression is the sole motivating principle of the successful libertine. It underpins all libertine action and interaction, and most importantly, ethical praxis.

The purpose of libertine transgression is not to recategorise or recast evil in the light of any specific metaphysical or theological theory; nor do libertines want to secularise the notion of evil, if that is even possible given that it is a theological concept. It is to do evil for evil’s sake, since this is how one exercises free will and instates one’s own sovereignty and autonomy, as seen in Satan’s fall and the “falling away” of humans from God. To take up Augustine’s ideas, it is as though libertines turn free will against God intentionally. The Platonic conception of “the Good” as the principle which stands behind and motivates goodness and, as such, the moral law is overthrown in Sade. Sade instead attempts to transcend this moral law, according to Deleuze, by instituting “the Idea of Evil, the supreme principle of wickedness, which subverts the law and turns Platonism upside down” (*Coldness*

*and Cruelty* 87). If the libertine were able somehow to overturn social conceptions of an act,<sup>45</sup> then performing that act would cease to be meaningful to them. They would have to find some other way to transgress. Even if the purpose of co-opting some of these theological ideas is to undermine them, it is only partially successful in doing so. By invoking the concept of evil, libertines give implicit support for theological notions of evil *especially* in those circumstances in which an act is committed solely because it is evil.

Paradoxically, if libertines wish to transgress, they must, by implication, unknowingly embrace the theological law which makes such transgression possible. Transgression is what defines the law; it is a part of the law. Law must always admit to the possibility of transgression. As already discussed at length in a number of points in this thesis, Bataille defines (and redefines) the sacred as the realm of transgression. However, the sacred is also the realm of the divine, death, the erotic, and the continuous, as distinct from the discontinuity of the individual. Bataille says: “it is a world of celebrations, sovereign rulers and God” (*Eroticism* 68). He also says that death “disrupts the creature’s discontinuity: what remains ... is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one” (82). The significance of the role of transgression in disrupting discontinuity, a phrase which is itself as paradoxical and disruptive as the process which it signifies, is evident in the *apparently* sovereign nature of the libertine and the libertine’s relationship with the other, which ultimately compromises all sovereign borders.

### **Transgression and Negation: The Limits of the Will to Evil**

Although transgression is what sets libertines apart and is their main ethical motivation, it is inherently limiting for the libertine because it can never achieve complete negation of limits, laws and being. Interestingly, Augustine conceptualises the falling away of Adam and Eve from God and indeed of Lucifer from God as a kind of negation, reasoning that if God created nature, and vice is contrary to nature, vice is a falling away from nature to nothingness:

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<sup>45</sup> There are dissertations made by libertines which seem to have this aim, although it is notable that these dissertations are only ever directed at fellow libertines. For instance, arch-libertine Dolomance defends murder, theft, rape, and more besides in his long treatise “Frenchmen, Some More Effort if you Wish to Become Republicans” (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*).

Consequently, that it is a nature, this is because it is made by God; but that it falls away from Him, this is because it is made out of nothing. But man did not so fall away as to become absolutely nothing; but being turned towards himself, his being became more contracted than it was when he claved to Him who supremely is. Accordingly, to exist in himself, that is, to be his own satisfaction after abandoning God, is not quite to become a nonentity, but to approximate to that. (*City of God* bk. 14, ch. 13)

The idea of negation through transgression as employed here is not solely dependent on Augustine's interpretation, but his thought provides an interesting example of the ways in which negation and transgression have been conceptualised in Christian theology. This almost-negation of being is interesting to an examination of Sade because, first, it suggests that, through evil, one comes into one's own subjectivity and autonomy (where previously one had been subject to God) and, second, because Deleuze claims that Sadean libertines aim to achieve a kind of negation through transgression. As discussed earlier, the libertine would dearly love to commit a crime which would have everlasting and constant effects, like Lucifer's crime of rebelling against God in Christian mythology, even against the nature which the libertine seems to love. As Klossowski pointed out, libertines turn against nature because nature seems to limit the possibility of total destruction, Deleuze explains: "[d]estruction is merely the reverse of creation and change, disorder is another form of order, and the decomposition of death is equally the composition of life" (*Coldness and Cruelty* 27). Negation, on the other hand, is "all pervasive" (27). Libertines are limited to partial negation in the form of causing destruction in "secondary nature" (the nature of lived experience as opposed to the principle of nature). Hence, says Deleuze, "the rage and despair of the sadistic hero when he realizes how paltry his own crimes are in relation to the idea which he can only reach through the omnipotence of reasoning" (28).

Libertines want to bridge the gulf between the personal and the impersonal; that is, the pain and disturbance that he or she causes, the effects of which could (theoretically, but not in actuality) recur infinitely. This is the clue to the apathy of the libertine, and the libertine's eventual self-denial (in Deleuze, "negating the ego itself" [29]). Because libertines are motivated by the "coldness of demonstrative reason," that is, they wish to demonstrate, through partial processes, this fantasy of total negation, the violence they do "must not be dissipated under the sway of

inspiration or impulse, or even be governed by the pleasures it might afford, since those pleasures would still bind him to secondary nature” (Deleuze 29). The demonstrative function of the violence they cause would be limited to the purely practical, experiential realm. Returning to Augustine, who conceptualises negation as falling away from nature and from God, the will to evil is preceded by a turning away from nature and God. Even though libertines speak of nature constantly, they are against nature, as argued by Klossowski in his “Nature as a Destructive Principle.” Klossowski finds that “Sade insults Nature as he used to insult God” (72). To the libertine, or, the “Sadean man,” as Klossowski puts it, the “double bind” in which nature finds herself, in which she creates and destroys only to create again, effectively trapped by her own laws and unable to reach her highest potential, provides a parallel to the libertine’s own situation:

Just as Nature creates obstacles for herself by her will to create, Sadean man creates his neighbour out of a will to create himself. He seems to do this out of a need to destroy the other. Yet once he had aspired to break with this necessity; through his aspiration toward innocence he had admitted the existence of others and given them reality. (“Nature as a Destructive Principle” 80)

### **Singularity and Sovereignty: The Effects of Solitude in the Sadean Ethical Subject**

Ethics in Sade aims at subverting universalising values and laws, resulting in a conception of the ethical subject as singular and of ethics as singularising. Postmodernist ethical theories following Levinas and Derrida are predominantly concerned with the relationship between the self and the “other” who makes a claim on the subject. The other, and one’s responsibility to that other, are seen as central to, and constitutive of, ethics. Although this approach to ethics posits a pre-ontological ethical relationship, Chapter Six has demonstrated that this kind of ethics is singular and singularising, a reaction to the universalising ethics of thinkers like Kant, and a host of other Enlightenment thinkers, and also a reaction to the social effects of such universalisation under the law. The conception of the other in this ethical relationship is like God, or, rather, God is one way in which such alterity might be conceptualised. Derrida reads the Christian idea of the *mysterium tremendum* as something which assures the individuality of the self and the self’s oneness before



God, the wholly other, enacted through sacrifice, or “the gift of death,” a gift which cannot be given by anybody else in one’s stead and which is pure gift in as much as it is given without assurance of restitution or reward. God ensures the alterity of the other. Sadean libertines see transgression as the key to maintaining this kind of individuality, though the cost of transgression is self-denial in the movement towards transgression and the movement towards the other.

Previous chapters have discussed elements of Sade’s distaste for universalising laws and the way that libertines break with the universal. Chapter One discussed this in terms of the literary figure of the libertine, who is by definition (and by his/her morals) outcast. Chapter Three elucidates the ways in which Sade’s atheism and his materialistic arguments about nature serve as an objection to the totalising nature of religious dogma and institutions. Chapter Four examines the ways in which transgressive sexuality is used to explore and subvert Christian ideas about the body, reproduction, and the sacred. Chapter Five explains Sade’s atheism in depth, particularly the ways in which it constitutes a direct challenge to the Church and the religious and political institutions which dominated in his time and which Sade felt to be repressive. Chapter Seven begins to explore the nature of Sade’s ethical objection to Christianity, and how this underscores his entire ethical system. This chapter will continue the mission of Chapter Seven in establishing the place of God in Sadean ethics, Sadean subjectivity, and the libertine’s relationship to the other. The libertine posits his or herself as a lone, autonomous, and sovereign individual. Whether the libertine’s projection of his or herself is fully realised is another matter – but libertines always strive, through transgression, to realise sovereignty. It is this other matter which is significant to reading an ethics of the other in Sade, because what libertines do not realise is that transgression cannot guarantee them freedom.

Much has been made of libertine sovereignty in literature; the libertine is usually conceptualised as a lone figure who operates outside of the rules of society and social and moral conduct. Through the libertine, Sade tries to make a case for the inviolability of the rights of the individual, even above the law. Although libertines may make strategic alliances with other libertines and so operate within a kind of society of libertines, the most extreme example being the Sodality of the Friends of Crime, libertine societies always posit themselves as remaining essentially outside of society – friends of crime, of anti-sociality, rather than of law (ironic since the

Sodality itself has many strict laws which acolytes must obey). Even so, libertines will readily betray their own (non) society. All alliances are shown to be, at best, temporary.

To justify self-interest as the expression of sovereignty, libertines frequently emphasise the inherent loneliness of existence, a fact from which they draw conclusions about ethics and acceptable moral behaviour. In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Dolomance lectures Eugénie:

there is no comparison between what others feel and what we undergo. The strongest dose of pain in others must assuredly be of no concern for us, and the slightest titillation of pleasure felt by us will touch us personally. So whatever the price, we must prefer this slight and delicious titillation to the immense quantity of other people's sufferings, which must never cause us distress. ... Aren't we all born alone? (92-3)

And we all die alone: according to Derrida's reading of Heidegger and Levinas in *The Gift of Death*, death is the thing which cannot be experienced for us or given to the other; it constitutes us in our subjectivity. In *Justine*, the libertine Dubois, upon killing three travellers for their money, justifies the murders: "the cessation of the victims' existences is as nothing compared to the continuation of ours, not a mite does it matter to us whether any individual is alive or in the grave. ... there is no rational commensuration between what affects us and what affects others" (491). She continues, stating that the rational individual

will sense that the vastest multitude of wrongs inflicted upon others cannot offset the least enjoyment lost to himself or be as important as his slightest pleasure purchased by an unheard-of host of villainies. Joy pleases him, it is in him, it is his own, crime's effect touches him not, is exterior to him.... (492)

Dubois borrows from Hobbes: "All men are born isolated, envious, cruel and despotic" (495). Departing from Hobbes, who believes that the social contract is what civilises and raises humanity up, libertines take this originary loneliness as the cue to defend the individual against the social contract. The libertines would also, to put it lightly, take issue with the solution Hobbes offers to this state: a sovereign monarch whose rule would civilise humans. Here Sade uses the rational lines of argument to evil ends – thereby problematising the ethical value of rationality.

### Sovereignty and Self-Denial

The impossibility of being outside oneself, and the libertine awareness of this, is the reason for Blanchot's claim that Sade's morality is "based upon the primary fact of absolute solitude" ("Sade" 41). A denial of humanity is implicit in those claims which insist that the pain, suffering, or even pleasure of another produces no pleasure in oneself – it is meaningless. Bataille discusses the reasons behind this denial of humanity:

De Sade's system is the ruinous form of eroticism. Moral isolation means that all the brakes are off; it shows what spending can really mean. The man who admits the value of other people necessarily imposes limits upon himself.

(171)

Taking this logic even further, Bataille concludes that this can be a moral stance on behalf of sovereignty, since, through "solidarity" with others, one denies one's own sovereignty:

Respect of man for man leads to a cycle of servitude that allows only for minor moments of disorder and finally ends the respect that their attitude is based on since we are denying the sovereign moment to man in general. (171)

In Sade's system, this stance is against universalisation and ethical totalisation. Respect for all men as a universal maxim, Bataille suggests, can only be followed if one ultimately betrays that respect by denying, not only one's own sovereignty, but by extension the "sovereign moment" for all others, which is what happens when respect is based upon a universal law grounded in humanist metaphysics of comprehension (which see a person as worthy of respect only because they belong to a general category, something which erases alterity).

Moral isolation in Sade means that the rights or desires of the individual must always come before the civil law. When Eugénie asks why laws protect relations between human beings (as with marriage, incest and murder laws), Dolomance replies: "Because laws are not made for the individual but for the generality. ... The wise man protects himself against laws" (*Philosophy in the Boudoir* 97). The opposition between the interests of the law and those of the individual are reiterated in *Juliette* when Noirceuil says: "the individual's interests are nearly always opposed to society's" (141). In these quotes, it is evident that Sade sees the law as oppressive precisely because it is totalising and does not make room for alterity. In Sade's ethical thinking, the individual must be respected above and in spite of the law. In

that case, to libertines, ethics demands a sovereign moment to affirm individuality, and by implication totalising ethical laws or maxims, along with appeals to whichever transcendent ideals or forms those ethics are based upon are *unethical*. Sadean libertines *believe* that (though as explained further down, they are mistaken) the sovereign moment is attained through transgression, not respect for the other, but a lack of respect, a constitutive violence, which resists the totalising influence of the law. Recall the story of Abraham and Isaac: Abraham must become a murderer (though no murder is committed, he is a murderer both in his heart and in the eyes of God) to be responsible in his ethical relationship with the other who is God. Likewise, libertines renounce society, civil virtues, even bonds with other libertines in the name of transgression. Any and all bonds must be broken in the moment of transgression; the only one that remains is the bond with the victim, albeit one constituted by violence, and an atheistic commitment to outraging the absent God.

In denouncing civil laws and proclaiming the importance of individual autonomy, Dolomance has in mind a hierarchy: those “wise men” who are strong enough to resist the society’s pull and establish themselves as sovereign beings, and the “generality” who will simply acquiesce to those stronger than them, whether the strong are organised into a government or not. This is not in line with an ethics of the other, but is a sort of proto-Nietzschean ideal of a society where the strong attain power through the strength of their will, and the weak are slaves, inevitably subjugated by their sovereign masters. Sade’s system does not, ultimately, instantiate such an ideal, and in practice results in self-denial at the moment that sovereignty should be assured. This logic is paradoxical, but is made possible through transgression, which is itself a paradoxical movement against the law.

### **From Singularity to Relationality**

The idea that to transgress is to be free and affirm sovereignty in the face of oppressive law is to misunderstand and oversimplify transgression, and Sade’s ethical system. While libertines cannot admit to the value of other people, transgression implies, not a respect for those others, but at least the affirmation of those others as existents in their own right. As much as the libertine would like to be able to negate being in general, and beings specifically, libertines can only ever transgress against other beings. Transgression exposes the mechanism of taboo and of the law. The moment of transgression makes all involved conscious of the rules

which structure the law, and of the arbitrariness of such laws which appear unbending but contain the possibility of their own destruction. It becomes clear that nothing is inherently transgressive; it is only the presence of (socially constructed) taboos which bring about the possibility of transgression. Paul Hegarty explains that transgression “is more than simply breaking a rule – it is a replaying of the fact of having rules, and of there being an outside to them” (*Georges Bataille* 109). This entails both consciousness in the act and a “loss of conscious control” and of reason. For libertines, who desire to commit transgression, the taboo is essential, and leads to a self-denial which is quite at odds with the idea of the free sovereign human.

Transgression, in its conceptual form, implies a loss of self; it is as binding as it is freeing; it recalls the law as it breaks the law. According to Bataille, Sade reaches the absolute pinnacle of sovereignty, but at that pinnacle lies a denial of the self: “we can see how he was forced in spite of his principles to accept the transcendence of the personal being as a concomitant of crime and transgression” (*Erotism* 175). The principle of transgression is internalised as a transgression of the very subjectivity which would seem to be set free in the moment of transgression. The law cannot be totally negated, only momentarily subverted. As the complicated paradoxes of sovereignty and restriction felt by the Sadean libertine demonstrate, transgression does not destroy that which it transgresses, but affirms it, so that there is a constant flux and interchange between transgression and the limit. If libertines transgress against others, they transgress against themselves since in that transgression they sacrifice their own sovereignty, both to the moment of transgression because they cannot negate the law entirely, and to the other, whose existence and necessity for transgression they must admit to in that instant. Foucault explains: “sexuality is a fissure – not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit” (30).

Aside from the theoretical implications of transgression in itself, the libertine’s commitment to transgression ultimately leads to self-denial, an effect which Sade did not perhaps anticipate or desire in writing the novels. As evidenced by Clairwil’s admonition of Juliette’s passion, examined in Chapter Seven, true libertines cannot freely seek pleasure, but must only be motivated by crime. Bataille observes, ironically: “All the great libertines who live only for pleasure are great only because they have destroyed in themselves all their capacity for pleasure”

(*Erotism* 173). Such cultivated apathy results, argues Bataille, in self-denial: “personal enjoyment ceases to count, the crime is the only thing that counts, and whether one is the victim or not no matter; all that matters is that crime should reach the pinnacle of crime” (175). This is curious, since, as Bataille says, “denial of others should be an affirmation of oneself,” but since denial of others is pushed beyond a quest for personal enjoyment, and since the libertine has no true subjects, although “free in the eyes of other people,” “he is no less the victim of his own sovereignty” (174). Libertines are not free to “stoop to a lower degree of pleasure” or transgression, and in Juliette’s occasional hesitation in the face of certain criminal acts, the consequences of doing so are made plain. Blanchot says that self-denial requires “enormous moral energy” (qtd. in *Erotism* 189). It requires a commitment to a principle of transgression that is absolute, in the name of which one is willing to sacrifice one’s own freedom and pleasure. Rather than exercising the will and thereby one’s own sovereignty in an act of transgression akin to the fall of man, the will is denied in the very moment which would otherwise affirm it. Although they may posit themselves as above and against the law, they ultimately deny the very “self” which is posited against that law.

If the core of libertine sovereignty is self-denial, something which is a result of total commitment to transgression, then it is no longer possible to posit subjectivity and singularity as the foundation of libertine ethics. Through transgression, the libertine is open to the other, whose necessity, singularity, and alterity are affirmed in that moment. This entails also the sacrifice of the libertine’s own sovereignty which, in the experience of being open to the other, is itself transgressed against. They appear before the other, but the other, paradoxically, is put before the self. What results is self-denial, only possible through the affirmation of one’s sovereignty from the outset. This passage to relationality is a demonstration of what Bataille terms the passage to continuity, which is only possible through transgression, because transgression involves a rupturing of taboos which guard the profane world of discontinuity from the sacred. This is a destructive sacred where discontinuity opens out to continuity; it is the world of the divine, or excess, which is contained by taboos which regulate the mundane world of work.

Bataille says that transgression involves an encounter with one’s own death (which, as Derrida points out, can only be experienced by the self and is singularising), something which “raises life up” because it causes the self to go over

to the other. It also calls one to one's humanity by calling one above one's "natural" function to relationship with otherness in an overcoming of the self. It raises one out of the profane world of work which is objectifying and universalising, to the sacred and to continuity. Transgression is a rupture which makes the relationship with the other possible. Indeed, it is only through transgression, which is, for Derrida, the violence which always threatens the ethical and can never be eradicated, that the relationship with the other is possible.

### **Who is the Libertine's Neighbour?**

If it can be said that libertines are involved in a relationship through transgression, then it remains to be seen who the "other" of this relationship is. Libertines, who are motivated by a desire to transgress, certainly do not seem to fit within a purely Levinasian notion of ethics, which demands an unfailing and unfailingly kind, non-violent, and non-subjugating openness to the other. Yet as just demonstrated, transgression is not such a straightforward concept, and when introduced to the realm of ethics and sovereignty, it results in self-denial, which opens the ethical subject up to the other in a way that is not possible when all limits are respected. It seems an obvious extrapolation, in that case, to name the victim the 'other' of the libertine since it is the victim the libertine transgresses against when they do violence to others. This violates Levinas' injunction that one should not harm the other. Additionally, giving the other the name of victim can be totalising, and, after all, libertines have a prescribed way of treating victims. Deleuze suggests that the Sadean victim is, in a way, complicit in the Sadean system. He says:

The victim cannot be masochistic, not merely because the libertine would be irked if she were to experience pleasure, but because the victim of the sadist belongs entirely to the world of sadism and is an integral part of the sadistic situation. In some strange way she is the counterpart of the sadistic torturer. (41-2).

Nevertheless, as Derrida makes clear, unconditional openness to the other, unconditional hospitality, is only possible if one destroys all thoughts of sovereignty. But then, paradoxically, one would no longer be able to offer openness to the other because there would be no self to open. Like a city under siege which opens its gates unconditionally to the enemy, the self risks destruction in the form of a loss of sovereignty in a fatal and irreversible opening of borders. Accordingly, openness to

the other requires that one be sovereign, singular, and irreplaceable. The consequence of this is that the *ideally* unlimited, unconditional openness to the other that one strives for is *necessarily*, even structurally, limited. Such conditional and limited openness and responsibility is a form of violence. Therefore ethics is constituted by an inescapable and structural violence. Ethics seems to be inherently transgressive when it is defined as relationality.

### **Libertine's Victim, Victim as Libertine**

The ready transformation of the libertine into victim suggests a kind of reverse totality – in this case libertines are once again subsumed by the same impulse in them which oppresses others. They journey from singularity to totality. The line between the libertine and the victim is not always clear, precisely because of the nature of ethical transformation and transgression. This is exemplified in the notion of “hauntology;” in fact, it is possible to extrapolate from Sadean ethics prescriptions which comprise a relationship to the other that demonstrates the idea of “hauntology” in ethics.<sup>46</sup> In oppressing the victim, libertines must remain open to the possibility that they could be oppressed in return, and every interaction with the victim-as-other contains the possibility, the threat, and the chance of the individual libertine's transformation. This is not only a theoretical possibility; it is something which is implicitly recognised and actualised numerous times in Sade's work. In *Juliette*, the libertine Chigi says that he would prefer a personal ethical relationship based on mutual oppression rather than a universalising law which does not recognise individual sovereignty or encourage personal ethical relationships: “I prefer to be oppressed by a neighbour whom I can oppress in my turn than to be oppressed by the law before which I am helpless” (732). This statement already recognises the possibility of transformation in the ethical relationship and welcomes it.

Furthermore, there are numerous instances in which libertines are deceived or at least acknowledge the possibility of deception by other libertines, something which would render them victims. Juliette frequently murders her libertine companions, even those who once tutored her in the art of libertinage, either out of

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<sup>46</sup> In Chapter Six, the general theory of “hauntology” was outlined: the idea that the individual is “haunted” by what it is unable to integrate in itself, indeed, by what it actively excludes. The relationship between libertine and victim illustrates this process.



boredom or desire to commit crime. Juliette and her tutor Clairwil poison Sbrigani, a libertine who had been one of Juliette's mentors, had taught her to play cards (in order to cheat men of their money) and who had accompanied her on her travels for a large part of the book, having faced imprisonment and execution alongside her. Clairwil, after sex with Sbrigani, comes to Juliette with a plan to kill him. Juliette reproaches her: "Do you forget that he faced death for us?" (950). Clairwil replies, "there's one reason the more for detesting him, since this act illustrates stupidity" (950). Juliette needs no further argument: "I consented, could I coldly turn my back upon crime? So precious to me was anything bearing its stamp that I could not refrain from embracing it immediately" (951). The plan is executed swiftly, even though Juliette admits that the man had rendered her "many services" (950).

Later on, Clairwil and Juliette kill their companion, Olympia, another fellow libertine who had accompanied Juliette on her travels and participated in her criminal and libertine activities. They lead her up to Vesuvius under pretence of a tourist excursion, and, upon attaining the summit, they seize her and inform her that she will soon be flung into the volcano alive. She protests: "Oh, My friends! ... What have I done?" to which the other women respond: "Nothing at all. We are tired of you. Is that not quite enough?" (1017). They strip Olympia, torture her for two hours, and finally cast her into mouth of the volcano. The religious overtones of this deed make it an elaborate blasphemy. This is a ritual recalling notions of pre-Christian divinity; it is sure to outrage Christian sensibilities. Instead of the virgin, the whore is thrown into the volcano. The rite is observed not in prayer but in sexual ecstasy.<sup>47</sup> It is not even these inversions which most outrage the religious sensibility; it is the way the deed itself hints at the destructive force of the sacred, which here is joined with the destructive force of nature. The deed, under the guise of placating a destructive divine, outrages God.

The women, after murdering their friend, speculate on the possibility of outraging nature as well, and Clairwil says, "let her avenge herself, for she can if she wishes; let an eruption occur" (1017). Both women were so aroused by this that they "frigged each other like frenzied tribades" (1017). When the volcano does begin to spit rocks at them, Clairwil is quick to reassure Juliette: "nothing more readily

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<sup>47</sup>If one takes a Bataille view sexual ecstasy is a form of prayer, even revelation, to the mystics.

explained than this phenomenon,... whenever a weighty body falls into the volcano ... it provokes a slight eruption” (1018). This geological explanation is very likely written by Sade with the Lisbon earthquake in mind, and again demonstrates the growing influence of scientific and rational ways of thinking about the world, over religious and dogmatic assumptions and explanations.

Juliette and Clairwil make a promise to each other that they will never separate, a promise destined to be broken. Immediately after, they meet up with Durand, who convinces Juliette that Clairwil plots to murder her, and gives Juliette some poison for a pre-emptive strike. Once Clairwil is dead, Durand confesses to Juliette in the heat of passion that Clairwil was innocent, and that Durand was so jealous of Clairwil’s closeness with Juliette that she engineered the woman’s death. Upon hearing Durand’s confession, Juliette exclaims: “and now, your triumph is entire: I worship you to the point where, had this crime to be committed all over again, I would commit it unprompted” (1035). It is worth noting that, after her death, Clairwil’s body is sexually abused by Juliette and her companions. Thus do libertines undergo the transformation back to victim, a fate which could only have been avoided by being even more wicked and treacherous than Juliette, who is, by the end of the novel, something of an arch-libertine. If the Sadean libertine’s victim, although denied speech, were to rise up against the libertine, she or he could be saved – but only by becoming a libertine her or himself. The implication of this is that the victim as other can only be redeemed by becoming like the libertine. Libertines live according to transgressive principles which constitute an ethical system. Victims do not live according to an ethics; they typically only follow social convention and conventional virtue. In the Sadean world, if the victim were to become ethical in transgression, like the libertine, he or she would be redeemed by choosing the path of vice and would cease to be a victim.

### **The Undecidable Decision: The Individual and the Universal**

Sade’s appeals to reason in the torture of victims suggests that violence is justifiable under reason precisely because the influence of reason is to subsume and universalise. He tests the limits of reason and thus challenges Enlightenment fantasies about the reforming influence of reason on society and on social institutions. His reasoning itself implies that ethical decisions made according to reason are not justifiable – they are undecidable. Chapter Six elucidated Derrida’s

notion of the undecidable in ethical relationships which compromises every ethical decision from within. Furthermore, the presence of the “third man,” something that Derrida interprets as representative of the political, adds another dimension of difficulty to the ethical relationship. One cannot consider the third man without already betraying the other. Sadean libertines ultimately do not act according to reason, but, as this chapter has already explored, out of a will to evil. The central point of Sade’s satire and of his challenge to religion is that this will to evil is reasoned and justified, something which shows just how monstrous reason can be, taken to extremes, and something which also disproves many of the tenets upon which, for instance, natural theology is based.

Libertines *must* see the victim as other or else transgression against them is impossible. Hägglund points out in *Radical Atheism* that the expectation of a non-violent relationship undermines any critique since once again the other is subjugated to an outside expectation, the expectation of responding to the encounter with non-violence in kind. Sade’s ethics pervert the intentions of Levinasian ethics, but as a result they avoid coming up against the problems Hägglund identifies in Levinas. Sade’s ethics depend on a relationship with the other that is based on transgression and violence, and which does not call upon the other to reciprocate in an ethical way. Since Sadean ethics are conditional on transgression, they are indebted to the other because transgression cannot work without the scandalisation of the other. As such, these ethics do not attempt to subsume or subjugate the other, at least not metaphysically. To subsume the other would be to preclude any opportunity for transgression, because transgression needs boundaries and taboos to transgress, and an “other” to witness this transgression, or else it is meaningless. There is an interesting interplay of freedom and responsibility here. This chapter has already discussed the consequences of the sovereign life lived in pursuing transgression: a denial of the self which would seem to preclude freedom. In actuality, the libertine chooses the responsibility of the ethical life through a considered freeing of their wills from social laws and conventions. They choose the transgressive principle which holds them responsible to the other, and to their own ethical code.

Ethics in Sade demonstrate Hägglund’s approach to Derrida’s notion of responsibility and freedom. Hägglund reasons that, because “the spacing of time opens the possibility of alteration at every juncture and makes nonassurance intrinsic to every relation,” “the desire for the other can never be a desire for the immutable

other” (115). The transformation of the libertine to victim and the potential for transition to libertine demonstrate that any relationship to the other must recognise the mutability of the other. Likewise the changeability of libertine relations: any friendship is compromised by the inherent possibility of betrayal. Justine’s faith in the immutability of the other is constantly shown to be misplaced, as friends betray her, priests turn out to be debauched libertines, and even her own flesh and blood serves as enthusiastic witness to the rape of her corpse in the final pages of her story. She trusts to God and providence, only to be struck by lightning, a final betrayal of her faith.

### **Who is Sade’s Other?**

God, the impossible, ungraspable, other who is not beyond but *otherwise than* being, is the only other who can maintain the singularity of the libertine and who can be maintained as other. As demonstrated above, the victim in Sade can never escape entering the Sadean totality. In Sade, the relationship to the victim-as-other entails the sacrifice of the self. It also entails a desire for the other as mortal. The death of the other is something which can be conceptualised as both achievable and unachievable. It is always possible to kill the victim, but it is never possible to negate the other’s existence, or to achieve total destruction. If one posits God as other, then the libertine would dearly love to kill God, and, indeed, this is the main thrust of many libertine atheist tirades. They have an existential rage which stems from the fact that God, as infinite and definitely immortal, cannot be killed. Killing him in theory is the best solution, but the lack of a response or witness in God leeches satisfaction from this victory. The libertine, furious at God, would like nothing better than a display of divine wrath in return, like a great eruption from Vesuvius.<sup>48</sup> The ethical encounter that takes place between the Sadean libertine and God is unique because the libertine neither wishes God away, nor wants to destroy God, either literally or metaphysically, by attempting to subjugate God to the limits of human knowledge. Klossowski says that the crimes committed by the libertines are “provocations addressed to the absent God, as though scandalous provocations were a way of forcing that God to manifest his existence” (“Nature as a Destructive

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<sup>48</sup> Such an eruption would, in any case, be explained away as a natural occurrence in order to better fit with a libertine’s materialist philosophy.

Principle” 66). It is God’s absence, rather than His presence, which is key – if God were to be present, he easily could be conceptualised as part of the libertine system: another victim at worst, or, at best, a lawgiver to rail against. In His absence, God is utterly other. If there was no grand “other” to be a witness and a target of outrage, there would be no pleasure in transgression, since the target of transgression would be nullified. The encounter with God confirms the transgression, and so the Sadean libertine cannot help but desire it.

The absent God, by his absence, intrudes on the moral isolation of the libertine. Transgression against the absent guarantor of values is one way of subverting and invoking those values. It is not just nihilistic, but seems to affirm at once the very possibility of ethics (the possibility of doing evil or good, the ideal of Good or of Evil), and its impossibility (making an ethical decision which is unjustifiable given the absence or death of God). Derrida describes how, in the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul says that the disciples will have to work towards their salvation, not in the presence of God, but in his absence. They must obey “without either seeing or knowing, without hearing the law or the reasons for the law” (57). God is kept mysterious, secret, and silent, but the disciples must know that he nevertheless holds their fate in his hands, and sees into them, although they cannot see him. The essential dissymmetry of the relationship is preserved in both Patočka’s and Levinas’ theories of the ethical relationship. Libertines work to transgress in the absence of God – and so are perversely bound to the law like the disciples. They do not know God’s law or the reasons for it, but they work to transgress it with the same guilt as the disciples: they can never achieve total negation just as the disciple can never achieve salvation, for that is in God’s hands. This is not to suggest a form of faith on the part of the libertine or Sade. Instead, it is to suggest that God is a metaphysical category which is absolutely integral to Sadean ethics and the experience of transgression.

### **Inner Experience and Ethics**

The inner experience of responsibility and ethics in Sade is explicable through the theories of Bataille and Patočka: two thinkers who, this thesis has now demonstrated, conceptualise the sacred as demonic; the realm of transgression. This is significant to Sadean ethics because in Sade ethics are transgressive, or, to put it another way, Sade demonstrates that ethics are (and can only be) transgressive, just as he demonstrates

that reason, taken to logical extremes, is monstrous. Transgression – rupture – is the only way in which one is able to escape isolation and singularity. There is still the horror of being reduced to totality, which is the means by which taboos are enforced to prevent the discontinuous world of the profane from coming into contact with the destructive divine (or demonic – they are the same thing), which is to say, sacred continuity. In death, one returns to continuity; there is no self, no singularity which can be distinguished from other matter. Sex contains the possibility of death (in reproduction) and also involves a blurring of the lines between two bodies, a kind of continuity out of discontinuity. If the realm of transgression is the realm of the sacred, of continuity, how is it possible to keep from being reduced to totality in the moment of transgression? How possible to forge, out of the horror, the destruction, an ethics? Transgression always pulls back at the limit, reinstating the very boundaries which it breaks. This is how it is possible for the loss of singularity and its affirmation to take place at once, and, by this paradox, it becomes possible also to be responsible, even if only through irresponsibility.

In the Sadean world, transgression, which is conceptualised in the libertine tradition as the ultimate self-indulgence and self-interestedness, there is a denial of the self. This is because the Sadean libertine can never achieve total negation of the victim, can never achieve total transgression, because it is the nature of transgression to fall back from the limit (which defines and institutes transgression). They also, as discussed earlier, deny their own pleasure for the sake of transgression, which cannot even provide them with the pleasure of attaining “true” transgression. Libertines work towards transgression with the cold, passionless passion of an abstinent priest working for salvation.

Derrida’s reading of Patočka suggests that Christianity has still not come into itself, has not realised or adequately thematised the *mysterium tremendum*. Christianity, in Patočka’s thought, struggles with the Platonic, and still incorporates some idea of the Platonic Good in its metaphysics, but is unable truly to reconcile the Platonic idea of striving for the Good to the notion of striving only to be responsible to a God who sees into oneself, but who is inaccessible and inscrutable. This is the *mysterium tremendum*:

This dissymmetry of the gaze, this disproportion that relates me, in whatever concerns me, to a gaze that I don’t see and that remains secret from me although it commands me, is the terrifying, dreadful, tremendous mystery

that, according to Patočka, is manifested in Christian mystery. Such dread has no place in the transcendent experience that related Platonic responsibility to the *agathon* [the ideal of the Good]; nor in the politics that is so instituted.

(*Gift of Death* 29)

Responsible life in this conception is not something to strive for, but a gift which comes from above (and is always to-come), in the sense that it “has the character of the good, but also has the traits of the inaccessible” (Patočka 106). Christianity sees the Good as self-denial: Derrida suggests that the “gift” of the Good (of responsibility) is involved in an economy of sacrifice since it involves self-denial, self-sacrifice, and is actually the gift of death. Responsibility, then, is only possible in the view of God, or of the “absolute other,” who, in Levinas’ (and then Patočka and Derrida’s) view, pre-exists the self, is pre-ontological. One is responsible in the view of this other who one does not know or understand (since understanding is a form of subjugation). Furthermore, according to Patočka:

Transgression, too, acquires a new meaning: it is an offense against the divine love, a dishonouring of the highest, which is a personal matter and demands a personal solution. The responsible human as such is I; it is an individual that is not identical with any role it could possibly assume – in Plato this is expressed in the myth of the drawing of life’s lot; it is a responsible I because in the confrontation with death and in coming to terms with nothingness it takes upon itself what we all must carry out in ourselves, where no one can take our place [as they could if they were merely taking up a role]. Now, however, individuality is vested in a relation to an infinite love and humans are individuals because they are guilty, and *always* guilty, with respect to it” (107).

Transgression at once affirms the singularity of the libertine in their self-denial, a kind of putting to death of the self, and their relationship with the other, whose presence is what makes it possible to transgress; one cannot transgress alone. The structure of Sadean ethics is coherent in the context of the ethics of the other since there is a sense in which the other precedes the self (and indeed, involves the dissolution of the self). Libertines put the other first. To understand the role of the other, it is not enough to see them as victim since that denies the way in which libertines are subject to a law in the other. It is only in conceptualising this other as God that the full extent of the ethical system in Sade can be explicated. The other,

that pre-exists, that calls to responsibility (at the same time, inciting to irresponsibility in making ethics intimate and not general), that affirms singularity but also enables a dissolution of singularity, is God – in, as has been shown, an explicitly Christian idea of God. As metaphysical principle, this God is the absolute other.

Pure Christianity, the ethics of the other without a principle like the Platonic conception of the Good (which, as a theoretical concept, has its own issues), allows for the possibility of an ethics based on transgression. Transgression demonstrates the possibility and limits of such an ethics. Sade's usual methodology – to take a theory to its logical conclusion and in doing so demonstrate the integral monstrosity of a theory – can be applied to ethics also. Here, taken to its monstrous end in Sade, responsibility to the other is shown to be compromised from within by transgression.

Reading Sade's ethics with the ethics of the other demonstrates that, despite striving for total sovereignty, libertines' desire to transgress commits them to an ethical relationship with the other based on transgression. Furthermore, taking into account the full metaphysical ramifications of the libertine system, the other can only be understood as God. That this relationship is transgressive and is made possible only through transgression demonstrates at the same time the problematic nature of the ethics of the other in praxis. Although an ethics of the other where God stands in for the other by virtue of His alterity seems to make possible a relationship without the violence of comprehension, violence and transgression are essential to that relationship. Derrida has explored some of the paradoxes in being responsible, solely and above every other concern, to the other. Sade's ethics explores and demonstrates some of these paradoxes in practice.



## Conclusion

### The Afterlife of Sade: Transgression as a Critical Tool

This thesis is not the first scholarly study of Sade to have identified ethical principles and theories in his work. However, in contextualising his ethical system, this thesis has accomplished two things that are new. First, it has delineated the mechanics of a system in which transgression is the motivating principle of ethical praxis, and, second, it has shown that transgression is a valuable critical tool. Sade's use of transgression to subvert and evaluate dominant views of nature, human nature, and God is explicable in the context of Enlightenment satire – but the longevity of Sade lies in the fact that he goes further than others of his time in laying bare the violence of those ethical systems based on such ideas. Having established the power of the Sadean system in taking apart problematic assumptions about the good or truth, this thesis demonstrates that it is still useful to refer to Sade in postmodernist discussions of ethical principles.

Sade's ethics also suggest that ethical relationships are structured by transgression, and that it is not possible or desirable to erase any possibility for transgression – or violence. Derrida observes that violence compromises any relationship to the other, particularly when the other is conceptualised as any kind of positive presence, as in the face-to-face encounter with the other (“Violence and Metaphysics” 158-60). Responsibility to the other cannot alone guarantee a lack of violence, even on a metaphysical level (which informs ‘actual’ physical violence and enables it to be justified).

While Sadean ethics are an ethics of transgression, they are also essentially and perversely Christian. The darkly satirical impulse which is at least as strong in Sade's writing as any sexual or excessive feeling means that it is necessary always to read Sade's work against, both literally and figuratively, the prevailing ideas and thought of his time. Although the inescapability of Christian metaphysics and theology for Sade would probably outrage the man himself as much as it does his fictional heroes, it also makes for a more effective satire. Sade does not succeed in drawing up the blueprints for an effective secular ethics, as many Enlightenment thinkers tried to do. His ethics compromise and hollow out Christian ethics from the

inside by an integral monstrosity, to borrow Klossowski's phrasing (*Sade My Neighbor* 5), which demonstrates that Christian responsibility before God is always transgressive. The postmodernist ethics of responsibility is useful in thinking this through.

In examining the ethics of the other in terms of Sadean ethics, this thesis has also provided a kind of critique of that theory of ethics. Importantly, the tension between a general ethics which aims to make all subject to a universal law, and the ethics of the other, which aims to make the individual responsible to the other at the expense of all others, has been addressed. Derrida has already noted the ramifications of these tensions, but Sadean libertines are useful for illustrating such tensions because of the unusual shape of their ethical system. They demonstrate the constitutive violence at the heart the ethics of the other. This does not mean that the ethics of the other is to be discarded wholesale – it is itself a valuable critical tool for questioning and problematising the metaphysics of comprehension.

Sade's writing has been attractive and repulsive because of its sexual content, which is interesting because, although it is classed as erotic, it is not often regarded as erotic. The erotic colloquially refers to depictions of activities which are sexual or are related to the sexual for the purposes of titillation or arousal of sexual feelings. Bataille, drawing on his readings of Sade's work, defines the erotic as that which separates human sexuality from animal sexuality – whenever it “calls his [man's] inner life into play” (29). According to Bataille, it is the advent of work and with it, taboos, which prefigured eroticism, because humans came to consider sexuality as shameful and excessive and so it was only in the move “from unashamed sexuality to sexuality with shame” that eroticism was possible (31). This definition suggests that Sade's writing is erotic because it is excessive and transgressive. Nevertheless, if these erotic scenes are seen to do cultural work in establishing a world view, a philosophy, a libertine ethics of transgression, then to some degree they cease to be excessive. The extreme violence and breaking of taboos still held sacred will, for many, exclude Sade's work from being classified as erotic. In Bataille's view, this is precisely what makes it erotic. Yet it might be that Sade's writing – as, in some way, constituting *work* – pushes eroticism so far that it is no longer, properly speaking, erotic at all. Such an avenue of investigation marks one path of further inquiry, illuminated by the work this thesis has done in exploring libertine ethics.

This thesis also contributes something to how eroticism is perceived today, and, crucially to contemporary interests, how – or if – it differs from pornography. Studies of the erotic and of pornography have been often neglected in mainstream philosophy, where perhaps they are seen as the purview of those involved in gender studies or sociology. In 2014, a new journal was established, an event which would otherwise have gone unremarked outside of academia but that the journal, *Porn Studies*, publishes research on pornography. This is clearly a field that could potentially encourage the recognition of philosophical research outside of academia. Changing the ways in which pornography is perceived, particularly in relation to the erotic, could, as this thesis demonstrates, be accomplished by reconfiguring conceptions of transgression, the sacred and the profane, in the way that Bataille does. In showing the way that the erotic and ethics intersect in Sade, and the ways in which Sade's work can be considered erotic, but also can be seen, if it has an ethical goal, as a kind of work, this thesis has contributed to theories of the erotic by showing how it intersects with transgression and the sacred.

Sade still has value because his work demonstrates that the ethical order is always transformable and contestable through transgression. Furthermore, it demonstrates that ethics is impossible without transgression, not only to mark the limits of ethical behaviour, but also as an ethical principle in itself, which opens up the possibility for a relationship to the other. The self, its primacy and enclosedness, must be transgressed in order to make responsibility to the other possible. Sade demonstrates the potentially monstrous consequences of this kind of transgression, which serves an aspirational purpose in demonstrating that the work of ethics, of responsibility, is never finished and must be maintained through constant transgression and transformation.

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