FOR THE FIRST TIME—A PHENOMENOLOGY OF VIRGINITY

by

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I argue that virginity is a distinct phenomenon with essential structures that can be apprehended and described using a phenomenological method, and thus offer the first robust phenomenology of virginity. A more complex passage than the physical transaction of first sexual intercourse, virginity manifests the event of a coming to love through the conduit of the sexual-erotic body. Calling on Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness, I argue that virginity qualifies as a saturated phenomenon, exceeding or overflowing intuition and signification in its paradoxical phenomenality. As a study in saturated phenomena my work pushes the limits of phenomenology by endorsing the exigency of a phenomenology of the evanescent and enigmatic to engage denigrated domains of human experience such as sex and love. Our access to virginity is possible because of our ontological constitution as sexuate beings, but also because of our essential potential to cultivate our sexuate existence through the lens of a primordial erotic attunement. Conscious development of our erotic potential is a form of asceticism that can elevate the sexual-erotic encounter to the ethical height of love. Still, virginity can never be forced, taken, or lost, since the phenomenon is ultimately only gifted through an act of erotic generosity and the intervention of grace. Virginity is not a one-time threshold crossing. It has the essential possibility of being perpetually renewed with each singular sexual-erotic encounter. I seek to sever sex from its legacy as mere animal instinct and from its functional and reproductive teleology in order to open a new way of thinking about our sexual-erotic being that focuses on its ethical potential and its usefulness as a model for being with others outside of the sexual-erotic
relation. I take seriously the Irigarayan possibility that we can craft an ethics of Eros. My work draws broadly from twentieth-century literature on phenomenology, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis, including that of Marion, Beauvoir, Irigaray, Derrida, Heidegger, Foucault, and Butler.
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§1 Introduction to the Phenomenon of Virginity

This work is neither a historical study of virginity nor a cultural critique of virginity’s use and abuse. Rather, it offers a phenomenology of virginity. I interpret virginity as a phenomenon in its own right with essential structures that are apprehensible and amenable to description using a phenomenological method. Virginity is often conflated with the first time of sexual intercourse, but this blunt physical transaction fails to reflect sufficiently the ethical potential inherent in Eros, and deflects our recognition of a more profound sexual-erotic initiation. I read virginity as manifesting the event of a coming to love through the conduit of the sexual-erotic body. Bringing this lost sense of virginity to light is the subject of this work.

1.1 The Phenomenology of Virginity

First, by providing a strategic approach and descriptive analysis of the phenomenon of virginity, I will defend the initially counterintuitive claim that virginity counts as a phenomenon. Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of *givenness* provides my primary methodological framework. Virginity ought to be recognized among what Marion calls *saturated phenomena*, a newly discovered class of phenomena distinguished in that they exceed intuition and signification. Saturated phenomena do not lack intuition; they overflow it. Among saturated phenomena Marion includes such difficult “things” as the face, the work of art, and the phenomena of birth and death.\(^1\) Because of their excessive nature, saturated phenomena have

\(^1\) Marion makes explicit that these phenomena are not actually *thingly* at all and ought to be construed as *selves*, which give and show themselves in unique ways.
often gone unrecognized or denied in their phenomenality, since our inability to grasp them with the mind can trick us into thinking that they lack an essential structure that presents itself to consciousness.

We can never adequately grasp these phenomena, since their nature is inherently paradoxical; but Marion urges that we can gain access to them by implementing a phenomenological reduction to givenness that looks to their counter-intentional structure. Counter-intentionality, derived from Lévinas’ work on ethics and the call, reverses the notion that we impose intentionality on objects of consciousness in order to give them form. Rather, it argues that these objects, these saturated phenomena, impose themselves on us, giving us our selves in the process. Saturated phenomena do not first show themselves to us; they give themselves. They appeal to us in a way that is enigmatic and demanding of infinite response.² Still, their enigmatic and evanescent nature makes saturated phenomena like virginity prone to skepticism and doubt.

My project contributes to the evolving study of saturated phenomena (although it may not always remain entirely faithful to Marion’s own work). A phenomenology of virginity, in its very insistence that there is a phenomenon of virginity that gives itself to us, appeals to the exigency of developing a phenomenology of the evanescent and enigmatic. In this sense, it challenges the limits of phenomenology and philosophy in new and productive ways, opening access to domains like Eros that have sometimes been foreclosed from philosophical investigation. We may experience the consummation that both inaugurates and transcends virginity only ephemerally, but virginity is worthy of philosophical and phenomenological investigation, since this event discloses most viscerally our nature as loving beings and the attendant ethical responsibilities that flow from this way of existing.

² For more on the counter-intentional structure of saturated phenomena, see Marion, Being Given 266–267.
1.2 The Exigency of Sexual-Erotic Initiation

What is the significance of recognizing virginity as a phenomenon? Figuring virginity as the event of a coming to love through the eroticized body, sex is first and foremost an ethical relation. I seek to sever sex from its legacy as mere animal instinct, biological or reproductive drive, or sentimental expression of love. While it may reflect any or all of these things, the highest use of our sexual capacity cultivates the ethical potential inherent in Eros. Philosophy has been recalcitrant in its efforts to understand the existential and ethical significance of sexual and erotic love, often actively conspiring to cast Eros outside the domain of proper philosophical investigation. While our culture lacks sufficient or mature structures for teaching us to use sex in positive, creative, regenerative, and life-enhancing ways, Eros nevertheless remains a promising path for developing and nurturing new models for sociality and ethical relations. The gap in our understanding of the positive possibilities underlying our sexual-erotic nature has resulted in a culture where perception of sex as an inherently violent, aggressive, and negative instinct or phenomenon prevails. Without wanting to entirely deny or sanitize libidinal forces at work within us, there may yet be another way to develop our sexuality in the service of ethics.

Virginity is made possible due to our natural constitution as sexuate beings and manifests our possibility to elevate our sexuate nature through the lens of a primordial erotic attunement. Cultivating erotic attunement can mitigate the violence of the sexual drive. Erotic attunement is a form of intentionality; a mode of quasi perception insofar as perception is a means of gaining access to something. It responds to the way that the specific body of the other arouses us as if

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3 The suggestion that erotic attunement is primordial ought to be associated with the Heideggerian idea of a primordial pre-understanding. Heidegger gestures to a certainty beyond knowledge when he talks of a primordial pre-understanding, particularly with respect to death. We know we will die with a certainty that goes beyond empiricism, which could never validate this phenomenon in advance. Similarly, when it comes to matters of the heart, as Pascal says, “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing. It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.” It is a primordial reason of the heart, an erotic rationality, which will sustain this work.
issuing a nascent form of call. Erotic attunement realizes an ethical development of the sexual drive, since pure libido commands me to respond only to my internally generated need, independent of arousal from an exterior force. This is why blind sexual instinct can seek gratification from any tool or instrument that it can use to its own ends. Erotic attunement is at least quasithetical, since it recognizes an other who attracts me by provoking my arousal, curiosity, and wonder. While erotic attunement perceives and is enamoured with the other, it requires another evolution to reach the height of love. With erotic arousal it remains to be seen how I will respond to whatever has attracted me and sparked my desire. Beauvoir says: “Eroticism is a movement towards the Other; this is its essential character.” But this erotic movement becomes loving when I begin to really invest in this other, appreciating the singularity, individuality, alterity, and ipseity of this wondrous foreigner who, gradually, can become my Beloved as she simultaneously opens and releases herself to me in a symbiotic movement of sharing and exchange. Cultivating this relation with the beloved amounts to a labour of opening the self to love. This work can be facilitated in and through the praxis of the sexual-erotic relation, that erotic generosity where what is shared includes the pleasures of the flesh. Virginity happens in the moment when this loving work realizes itself in a revelatory instant.

Our sexuate nature is part of our essential facticity, but the capacity to cultivate an erotic attunement to the world is a potential that must be nurtured and developed. This process of opening the self and learning to love makes possible the efflorescence of the phenomenon of

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4 The “other” in this case need not be a human other. Erotic attunement is provoked by the body or presence of the other, but there is nothing to say this other must be similarly embodied or even animate.

5 Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 446.

6 “Erotic generosity” is a turn of phrase inherited from Beauvoir, who invokes this idea in her writing about Eros in *Second Sex.*
virginity. Proper cultivation of our sexual-erotic potential engages our physical, intellectual, and spiritual elements, fostering a singularly human orientation to our sexuate being which is also erotic and loving. In and through our sexual-erotic interactions we gradually discover how to manifest and enact our embodied potential as loving beings. We must train our sexuate bodies in the way of love. Sex thus has the potential to teach us, as Jean-Luc Marion offers, that humans are not just thinking things. What fundamentally distinguishes us is that we are “loving animals.”\(^7\) A phenomenology of virginity also affirms that loving is more important to us than being or knowing, contributing to Marion’s evolutionary rewriting of the subject beyond the Cartesian heritage.

Virginity is experienced as a phenomenal revelation that immediately recedes into its own light but, while the phenomenon of virginity is fleeting and fades quickly, it does leave us marked and transformed on an ontological level. Our very mode of existence is altered with this induction into love, as the profound desire to merge with the beloved shatters the egoic care for being. The evanescent character of virginity means that this making oneself open and vulnerable to love will require interminable renewal. Virginity is not a one-time limit-crossing or a singular event, but a perpetual and renewing promise to be in love with the beloved that can be undertaken each and every time we meet the other in sexual congress. Finally, while virginity realizes the efflorescence of our sexual-erotic potential as loving beings, this coming to love

\(^7\) Marion’s claim that man is a loving animal can be read as the thesis of *The Erotic Phenomenon*. He writes: “Man is defined neither by the logos, nor by the being within him, but by this fact that he loves (or hates), whether he wants to or not. In this world, only man loves, for animals and computers, in their own way, think just as well as he, indeed better than he; but one cannot affirm that they love. But man does—the loving animal” (Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 7). It is also important to note the choice of the world *animal* in this context. In *Being Given* (in a passage that otherwise distinguishes mortals as having the gift of speech), Marion equates the animal with the mortal. While he does not explain this connection between animality and mortality, it seems likely that the notion of createdness underlying creaturity motivates his choice of words. In *Erotic Phenomenon* Marion explicitly evokes God as a divine presence who comes “before” us and in whose likeness we love, suggesting that we are created by this God in his image. The reference to human animality grounds us in this created nature (Marion, *Being Given* 270).
requires a measure of intervention or grace. Despite our every initiative, nobody can ever force
the phenomenon of virginity to manifest itself—we cannot will ourselves to fall in love.

Sexual-erotic love, with its embodied recognition of the singularity of the beloved, offers
a framework for understanding our access to the other and for deepening our recognition of our
obligations and responsibilities to those with whom we share the world. Virginity bursts upon us
with the revelation of a promise of goodness that exists not just within us, but also between us,
since the phenomenon of virginity is always shared and relational. I take seriously the Irigarayan
proposition that cultivating an understanding of our sexuate nature, including the ethical
possibilities inherent in sexual-erotic love, could be a means of salvation. Eros offers untapped
models for interacting with others beyond the intimacies of the couple in ways that could help in
realizing a more ethical culture. There is a warning but also an opportunity in Irigaray’s claim:

We know nothing of that dimension Hegel called the labour of love, or at least not
any more. And we are prevented from doing so by the cultural order. We must
interpret and go beyond this order in that it represents alienation from the human
for both sexes and for humanity as a whole, alienation leading the human species
to its loss. . . . We still know nothing of the salvation love brings, individual and
collective salvation.8

Perhaps Eros does offer a key to living differently. It seems worthwhile to at least
investigate this possibility. Sexuality, so often denigrated as animal, may provide the seeds for an
ethics of Eros.

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8 Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You* 29.
1.3 The Path to Love

This work proceeds in five sections. Part One, “Virginity Lost,” addresses how our common or everyday understanding of virginity conspires to actively obscure virginity’s phenomenality. It must be admitted that the sexual instinct is sometimes a source of violence and aggression, and virginity has often been politically misappropriated in ways that legitimate and justify brutal social practices. We must start with some assessment of how and why our understanding of virginity has “gone wrong” before we can begin to rehabilitate the meaning of virginity’s essential structures. Part Two, “The Phenomenology of Virginity,” addresses how and why phenomenology offers a suitable method for thinking about virginity. This chapter defends the claim that virginity is a proper object for phenomenological investigation and that phenomenology is a particularly fruitful avenue for examining virginity, since it is capable of uncovering the ethical significance inherent in Eros. Here, I turn to an extended discussion of Marion’s phenomenology of givenness and to Beauvoir’s and Irigaray’s contributions to erotic phenomenology. Part Three, “An Ontology of Eros,” asks what kind of entities we are insofar as we are capable of experiencing virginity as a phenomenon. I ground my exploration in the ontological claim that we are sexuate, erotic, and loving entities, distinguishing these capacities and orientations. I argue that our potential to develop an erotic attunement towards the world is what permits an elevation of the sexual instinct to the ethical height of love. I see the cultivation of this possibility as a form of work, and I question what this work might entail in Part Four, “The Labour of Love.” This section establishes that, although erotic intentionality is a potential that inheres within us as loving entities, developing this attunement requires nurturing and devotion. I describe the forms of ascesis and kenosis involved in opening the self to sexual-erotic love and the risks attendant in this work, since preparing to welcome the phenomenon of virginity is indeed difficult and painful labour. Finally, in Part Five, “Grace and Releasement,” I
expose the danger that if we continue to neglect our essential sexual-erotic potential and fail on
an individual and cultural level to work on initiating ourselves into Eros, then we may lose our
way quite entirely and either forget, cover over, or abdicate virginity in its phenomenality. This
call implicates philosophy, since it recognizes that philosophy has largely foreclosed the sexual-
erotic from its domain of investigation and I call for a phenomenology of givenness to return the
discipline to its loving roots. I point to the exigency of cultivating our erotic potential while
acknowledging, that despite our best work, we can never demand virginity to manifest itself.
Contrary to the common understanding, we must admit that virginity is never taken or lost, but
always given in an act of grace.
PART ONE


VIRGINITY LOST

§1 A Reason for Sex—Reproduction

Sex is ordinarily thought to be necessary for human reproduction. Like other animals, we must engage in the activity we call sex in order to perpetuate our species and to ensure our continuing existence. Human sexuality is understood as more complex than the instinctual drive of other sexed animals, because as civilized and social beings we can learn to manage and redirect this instinct in the service of culture. Still, we continue to perpetuate the idea that sex has a reproductive teleology, and the sexuate body is thus considered the instrument of reproductive fecundity.¹ Sex reduced to reproduction is underwritten by an economic logic that sees the child (who in many traditional societies is little more than the property of the father) as the useful product of sex. Sex becomes an instrumental function, producing something of economic utility through the procreation of other humans, or else it becomes a hydraulic activity for releasing unwanted tensions and overcoming energetic discomfort through orgasm.

Reducing our sexuate being to a primarily procreative function drives us towards thinking that our erotic constitution has an economic value and that it is something that we ought ideally to be able to control and master. New reproductive technologies make it seem that this dream is much closer now, if not already here. When we think about sex exclusively in terms of its reproductive capacity then it becomes useful for begetting the child and for maintaining

¹ Of course male and female bodies share dissymmetrical burdens in the task of reproduction and I will argue that the semiotics of motherhood and giving birth have been developed such that virginity becomes a primarily female or feminine phenomenon; that is, something that happens or applies to women more than men.
populations. Such thinking is dangerous because it covers over the idea that sex could have another function, a function that is really no function at all. Virginity does not depend on our reproductive being, and the appearance of the phenomenon of virginity is by no means simultaneous with conception, nor need it exclusively manifest itself during heterosexual intercourse—the kind of sex that might lead to the generation of the child. If we choose in future to reproduce outside of bodies, this in no way threatens the disappearance or foreclosure of the phenomenon of virginity and may in some ways only help to facilitate its better understanding. Recognizing that the sexual intercourse that manifests virginity is often quite distinct from that which produces a child is an important step in elucidating a phenomenology of virginity.

Reproductive sex does not demand an erotic or ethical dimension, nor need it have anything to do with love. Sometimes attempts are made to argue that the child is ideally or rightfully conceived in love but, more often, procreation is framed as an obligation to society or species and childbearing becomes a production impoverished in ethical significance. We see this in many societies where reproduction is first of all a duty. We also see it in the grievous instances where procreative activity is used as a tool in colonization or even genocide, as in tribal and ethnic conflicts where women are sometimes raped and forced to bear children from outside their group in order to degrade its alleged purity. Finally, engendering the child using new reproductive technologies demonstrates that childbearing can become a scientific and technological undertaking quite apart from love; we also see this in livestock farming and in eugenic breeding programs. Such initiatives reflect a will to master sexuality, even to the point of possibly rendering obsolete sexual reproduction and perhaps even the sex act itself. The longing to gain ultimate control over the processes of life and death, including procreation, sometimes

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2 This critique has resonance with Foucault’s work on biopolitics. Foucault argues that the form of disciplinary power that characterizes the modern era aims to economize and normalize peoples and to make bodies docile. A biopolitics of population is integral to this project.
seems the ultimate fantasy of the technological era and sexual desire itself is derided as an animal instinct that we can eventually hope to overcome.

The culture that reduces sex to its reproductive function, dreaming of mastering procreativity for its practical and economic needs, similarly attempts to commandeer virginity in keeping with its techno logic. The reduction of sex to a primarily reproductive function is attached to a patriarchal inheritance that has been extremely violent, not just to the women who are set upon to create more humans in pregnancy and childbirth, but also to virginity: it ignores virginity’s intrinsic phenomenality and instead imposes a virginity that meets its own needs. This man-made virginity seeks to master reproductive bodies (primarily women’s bodies) through prohibiting both sexual freedom and pleasure and also claiming the child and its labour for the patriarchal lineage. Virgins become currency for men and virginity becomes a reproductive, technical, and economic value grafted onto women. Woman becomes wife or mother, a social role or a natural function and not her own person. The patriarchal imposition of virginity, which is also used to marshal social behaviour and the politics of love, has little to do with the phenomenology of virginity, but manifests only an attempt to master sex in keeping with its reductionist understanding of a degraded Eros. This demotion of our sexual-erotic potential also compromises us as humans because it covers over our capacity for erotic attunement, subordinating it to an economic program of control over bodies and the ways they love.

§2 How We Love—The Sexual Act

We often take for granted that we know what we mean when we talk about the act of sex. The reproductive teleology of sex conspires to circumscribe the sex act, in keeping with a system of compulsory heterosexuality. A phenomenology of virginity demands that we rethink the basic assumptions underlying this politic. In the phenomenology of virginity the sex act is an ethical and erotic encounter; it is intercourse that amounts to a sharing of flesh. Compulsory
heterosexuality has nothing to say about this, since its version of sexual teleology is functional and mechanical. The heterosexual law has its own idea of what counts as sex—the procreative act, penile-vaginal intercourse (PV sex), the kind of sex that might result in conception and pregnancy. Only potentially reproductive sex counts as proper sex in this framework, and everything else is relegated to the catchall category of perversion. Virginity has typically been understood as marking initiation into this form of PV sex; that is, the individual’s entry into the community of potentially reproductive citizens. This understanding of sex also endorses notions that sexual difference is binary, that the two sexes are complementary, and that the love that exists between these opposite sexes is the only logical and proper kind of sexual love. Thinking beyond the confines of gender dualism and compulsory heterosexuality and rewriting the story of sexual difference is essential for reconceiving virginity. Indeed, phenomenology needs to engage the politics of sexuality in order to properly do the work of the phenomenological reduction.

Inscribing the sex act as PV sex, compulsory heterosexuality circumscribes the sex act in keeping with two elements that both serve patriarchal politics: first, the functional and economic axis of reproduction, and second, a semiotics of mastery that depicts sex as an act in which the male is the active participant who administers or takes the woman’s virginity. In the traditional picture for a woman to take another woman’s virginity would be incomprehensible, and while a woman might “give” her virginity to a man it is unusual to suggest she could actively “take” it from him. The taboo of homosexuality, which Judith Butler figures as a law more primal than the Oedipal taboo, works to deflect from Eros, since it delimits the sex act—how we can love and also who we can love—in keeping with a politics of gender dualism.

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3 Our culture typically regarded the idea of a woman raping a man impossible, and it is only in recent years that we’ve been able to accommodate this idea as a logical possibility and as a genuine act of violence.
The idea that PV sex counts as the definitive sexual act errs on several counts. First, it figures a mechanical and instrumental interpretation of sex over one based on the intercourse of eroticized bodies. This is certainly not to say that procreative sex cannot be a loving act, only that there is nothing necessarily ethical about reproductive sex. Secondly, figuring heterosexual PV intercourse as the sex act par excellence limits the possibilities for erotic pleasure open to individuals, since it allocates the zones available for bodily pleasure according to reproductive function. Compulsory heterosexuality, with its patriarchal impetus, actually works to circumscribe pleasures among erotic bodies, especially feminine jouissance, which has been subordinated almost to the point of being lost entirely. Finally, reducing sex to PV sex limits erotic partnerships to heterosexual couples, those with allegedly complementary genital structures. This leads to the absurd conclusion that gay or lesbian couples could never become sexually initiated if they fail to engage in the particular act of heterosexual PV sex. A phenomenology of virginity would pose no such impediments to homosexual love, since there is no reason why same-sex couples could not undertake the physical and spiritual congresses that the phenomenon demands. The heterosexual schema also leads to the similarly bizarre conclusion that one could remain a virgin despite having engaged in oral or anal sex, an inconsistency that the popular media diagnose as having contributed to a genuine problem of sexual health, since those who are not having the kind of relations they believe count as “sex” within the heterosexual framework sometimes fail to take proper medical precautions with respect to the same. A philosophy of the erotic needs to rewrite virginity as a more profound and ethical passage than the initiation into reproductive being or as the first time of potentially procreative sexual intercourse. Virginity actually gives quite a wide margin to which bodily

4 In fact, perhaps homosexual sex has a unique contribution to make in reorienting us to a different figuration of virginity; it recognizes that there is no one act that ought to reign supreme in an imaginary hierarchy of sexual acts, and that virginity is breached not with any specific physical transaction, but through a more complex physical and spiritual engagement.
configurations might count sufficiently to bring about its manifestation. As it turns out, virginity isn’t all that interested in circumscribing the sex act, and it sees that compulsory heterosexuality has been violent in foreclosing love. Virginity may be a coming to love through the intercourse of sexual-erotic bodies, but it doesn’t care much about the specific architectures of these bodies.

§3 The Child

Two of the most important phenomenological investigations of sex and love, those of Lévinas and Marion, both elevate the child as essential for understanding the “why” of sexuate existence. Both resist reducing the child to a reproductive product, and yet neither can entirely dissociate sexual-erotic love from the procreative act of childbearing. Marion distinguishes a phenomenological understanding of the child from a biological or sociological understanding, arguing that:

Reproduction is not first of all or even essentially a matter of maintaining the species, reinforcing the community, or enlarging the family; in short it is not a matter of perpetuating the past in the future by iteration or accumulation. . . . According to phenomenology, the passage to the child has the function of producing a more stable visibility of the erotic phenomenon already accomplished by the oath, and repeated by enjoyment, and thus of assuring the visibility of the lovers, as it is present and to come.⁵

The phenomenon of the child is important for Marion because it becomes a testament of love, a phenomenon that recognizes love even if the love that engendered the child fails to recognize itself after the conceptual moment has passed. This phenomenological rendering of the child situates the new flesh in a logic beyond that of simple reproduction, for the child does not

⁵ Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 197.
come about as if through some mechanical process but appears in its own time and form, and in complete defiance of traditional reason. The child is irreducible to any determinate act on this account, and yet in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion treats the child as a necessary stage in the larger process of coming to love. Marion presents the child as part of the erotic journey that unfolds as a sort of progression or ascent. Such manifest, material, and concrete fecundity remains integral to his epic of sexual-erotic love. For Marion, the child is important because it is an “event” that “imposes itself”; it is singular and “unrepeatable.” We can never simply will the child to appear. This evokes ideas of mystery and grace, conjuring the notion that love itself requires some intervention. Ultimately, Marion knows that the child is not enough to guarantee love (only God can do so in Marion’s philosophy), but the child comes forward as an “unavoidable stage” in the erotic reduction. While this phenomenological rendering of the child seems more ethically attuned than the traditional understanding of reproduction, it is still difficult to exonerate Marion’s story from lingering metaphysical and heterosexist presumptions.

Lévinas offers the child as a response to what he perceives as one of the key problems provoked by the sexual-ethical relation, that of how I can be “in you” while yet remaining “the ego that I am.” He argues that the child ultimately demonstrates this possibility more effectively than any other lover/other, elevating paternity as a special form of living ethical alterity. Lévinas thus states: “How can the ego become other to itself? This can happen only in one way: through paternity.” The son (and for Lévinas the child is always the son, that most literal representation of the father) embodies an infinity: as the father, I live as both inside and outside myself, as interiority and exteriority. Sexuality, paternity, and death are introduced as figures that make us

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6 See Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 200.
7 See Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 198.
8 Lévinas, *Time and the Other* 91.
live the duality of our existence, bringing our ethical nature to the fore, and letting us overcome the trap of Eleatic Being, the preoccupation with a totalizing drive for substantial Being and Knowing that characterizes the metaphysical epoch. Paternity is a form of fecundity, and fecundity is associated with infinity, since both are a form of relationship with the future. Only in paternity, that special form of fecundity, does one live “total transcendence,” understood as “the transcendence of transubstantiation . . . [wherein] the I is, in the child, an other . . . a structure unforeseeable in formal logic.” This is a form of fecundity that isn’t about the needs of the species (as when procreation is cast as an instinctual, reproductive drive) but a distinct instance of fecundity that interrupts my egoity in a way that is profoundly ethical. This ethical intervention carries the force to upset logic and metaphysics, since we realize with this encounter that Being is not the most important aspect of the human affair. The son is created, but he is not caused, and the relevant difference is that this creation has a freedom that leads to fraternity, including the responsibilities to the other that ground community.

Both Marion and Lévinas make important contributions to a philosophy that properly acknowledges the sexual-carnal dimension of love, but they continue to perpetuate the idea that the child is a necessary aspect of human fecundity. Two dangers emerge from this formulation. First, the meaning of sexuate being remains tethered to its instrumental use-value insofar as it must engender a product (the child) for the erotic experience to carry its proper weight. Both

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9 See Lévinas, *Time and the Other* 92.

10 See Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 267. Note that the child is engendered in and through an unavoidable encounter with the “feminine other,” but ultimately the son proves a more pivotal figure than the mother/lover in learning of ethics and coming to love. It seems in the end that the sexual-erotic relation is reduced in Lévinas, degraded to a quasi-instrumental function in awakening us to a higher sort of love.


13 Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 279.
Marion and Lévinas consider the child in a way that seeks to transcend its valuation as a product of the sexual encounter, but in the end neither can entirely dissociate sexuality from its reproductive aspects, even if they seek to reinscribe its formulation. Fecundity remains essentially procreative. Secondly, both Marion and Lévinas affirm traditional ideas about the roles of men and women in the sexual-erotic drama, perpetuating the notion of sexual dualism and a heterosexuality teleology of love. Without severing Eros from these fetters, such readings are bound to reinscribe traditional notions of the meaning of sexual difference, sex, and love, despite their best efforts to transcend the same.

The demand that a proper erotic love produces the child obscures the ethical potential of Eros and the Irigarayan possibility that sexuate existence can foster a felicity and fecundity beyond human procreation. Beauvoir and Irigaray both insist that the ethical aspects of Eros be distinguished from sex’s procreative function, and that sexuate being must not be reduced to reproduction. Even while Irigaray is cautious of advances in new reproductive technologies, she calls for a reconception of sexual-erotic love

. . . without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh. For loving partners, this would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new poetics.14

Irigaray makes an important distinction between cultivating ourselves as men and women versus constituting ourselves only as fathers and mothers.15 The sentiment that a woman becomes a woman when deflowered reveals a certain truth in its acknowledgement that an individual is transformed by the sexual-erotic encounter. However, we have too often perceived that this


15 Irigaray, *I Love To You* 143.
change comes about because with the first instance of heterosexual intercourse it becomes possible for a woman to fulfill her assigned economic duty to and for the community as wife and mother. Irigaray lets us see that this strange expression, “becoming a woman,” perhaps ought to point to the process of cultivating an ethical fecundity, a new form of generativity that we could take up through the nurturing of sexual-erotic love. Virginity has too long been understood as marking the passage into reproductive being at the expense of eclipsing a more profound initiation. Coming to sex and coming to love are not the same thing; being a reproductive being by no means necessitates or guarantees the efflorescence of the phenomenon of virginity. “Insofar as it reduces sexual love to a reproductive fecundity,” Irigaray complains that our age and its “economy” suffer a “sexual immaturity.”¹⁶ We need to cultivate the idea that sex generates not just new embryos but that it also nurtures, sustains, and regenerates the spirit of the individual and the social group. Eros has a generativity that begets something other than the child.

§4 The Couple

The couple is typically taken as the primary social and economic unit, the bedrock of the family and of community.¹⁷ But Beauvoir and Irigaray recognize that the couple is first and foremost an ethical partnership, and they are critical of how patriarchy reduces the couple to a reproductive, economic, or political unit. Both seek to advance our understanding of the couple beyond its binary and heterosexist cast, as they draw attention to the couple as a relationship fundamentally attuned and even thriving on otherness and difference. Cultivating an awareness

¹⁶ Irigaray, I Love to You 136.

¹⁷ I’ve chosen to retain the couple as the name for the erotic partnership. However, I am expanding the couple to include more-than-two.
of sexual difference and developing the sexual-erotic relationship as a creative endeavour that can produce more than the child drives towards the possibility of a genuine ethics of Eros. Beauvoir and Irigaray’s work on the couple illuminates the potential of this union and provides a contrast to the corollary critique of how its ethicality is subverted in patriarchal culture.

Beauvoir critiques patriarchy for breaking down and corrupting a natural bond between the sexes. Men have been the primary beneficiaries of this system, but ultimately both sexes have suffered from the subordination of woman as man’s “inessential other.” Patriarchy hobbles women in developing their individual and collective subjectivity; and yet, Beauvoir says, women have failed to resist this oppression entirely, since they cannot foreclose the value of the bond.18 It seems that women are unable to erase a primordial, ethico-erotic intuition. Beauvoir writes: “Male and female stand opposed within a primordial mitsein, and woman has not broken it.”19 Debra Bergoffen stresses the erotic nature of Beauvoir’s thought, arguing that woman seeks this bond with the foreign other, even delights in it, and that the couple is the meeting place where we first seek to explore the wonder of the other that ultimately becomes a key to sociality itself. She says:

As fleshed intentionalities we pursue the disclosure of otherness because we find it joyful. We find the disclosure of otherness joyful because it is part of an emotionally warm/welcoming world. . . . This bond may extend beyond the ties of the couple. In its intersubjective sense, the erotic opens us to the human other. In

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18 Beauvoir reads patriarchy as a response to the biological differences between the sexes that made woman responsible for childbearing and childrearing. This put woman in a role where she was discouraged and gradually forbidden to engage in the transcendent projects necessary for forging her own essence. Relegated to the home and a life of immanence, she sought her reason for being inside herself, in her biological processes, or living through her husband or children. The couple, as economic and reproductive unit, subordinated woman’s needs to those of others and thus evolved a dangerous situation that is difficult and sometimes almost impossible for women to overcome.

19 Beauvoir, Second Sex xxv.
its intentional sense, the erotic awakens us to the warm face of otherness of being.\textsuperscript{20}

Beauvoir’s couple begins as a natural unit, but her existentialist commitments lead her to argue that cultivating erotic generosity is a project for men and women to undertake in furtherance of their development not only as authentic individuals, but also as humans. Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity sees that my freedom is contingent on my perpetually endeavouring to foster the freedom of others; and that erotic generosity, including the embodied practice of sharing flesh with one another, can help cultivate ethicality. She sees that the “battle of the sexes” is ruinous for erotic partnerships, and that sexual pleasure itself depends on establishing a relationship of reciprocity and mutual pleasure between loving partners, under which conditions it becomes an exercise in exploring our ambiguous nature as both subjects and objects, free and contingent beings perpetually in a process of becoming.\textsuperscript{21} While she casts sexual difference as part of our facticity, Beauvoir sees that men and women share the ambiguity of fleshly existence and must ultimately confront the same existential threats and challenges that come from this condition. Her ethical theory thrives on respect for otherness, and revels, erotically, in difference. Beauvoir openly acknowledges the importance of working towards initiating ourselves into Eros; coming to love ought to be undertaken like any other existential project. But only when we abolish patriarchal sex slavery will “the division of humanity . . . reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Bergoffen 190. My interpretation of Beauvoir (and also of Irigaray) is heavily informed by Bergoffen, who repeatedly stresses the erotic dimension in Beauvoir’s thought and the way the themes of reciprocity, erotic generosity, the bond, and the gift animate Beauvoir’s phenomenology and her existentialist ethics.

\textsuperscript{21} Beauvoir, \textit{Second Sex} 401.

\textsuperscript{22} Beauvoir, \textit{Second Sex} 731.
Irigaray reinforces the idea that the couple is a fundamentally ethical amalgam whose existence depends on forging a bond that permits the partners to co-exist and even to flourish without obscuring each other’s freedom and ipseity. She says the couple has often become a violent and antagonistic relationship, since it fails to be a between-two sustained by an erotic bond, devolving in favour of a domestic partnership underwritten by economic exigency. Irigaray attempts to reinstate the ethical underpinnings of the couple through this between-two, conceived of as a relation that that expresses mutual regard as a “love-to-you.” These aren’t just linguistic quibbles; between-two and love-to-you emerge as important ethical and phenomenological innovations. Irigaray writes that the “to” in love-to-you “safeguards a place of transcendence between us, a place of respect which is both obligated and desired, a place of possible alliance.”23 Lovers need distance as much as they must be “two,” and the “to” in love-to-you protects this space. As a between-two, the couple is always sustained by a certain gap. This gap does not mark a limit or abyss; it is a fecund site or ground that rises between lovers and which manifests as what Irigaray calls a sensible transcendental. This sensible transcendental respects our embodied existence and takes seriously the idea that we can use our bodies to facilitate transcendental experiences with and between one another. Our bodies—and in sexual-erotic love this means our shared bodies—become the ground for going beyond their own limits. This affirms Irigaray’s belief in the importance of embodied love and reflects her suspicion and disdain for a philosophical tradition that promises an ethics always just beyond our grasp and certainly beyond the messy morass of the human body.

23 Luce Irigaray, To Be Two 19.
4.1 Sexual Difference and Gender Dualism

The classical interpretation of sexual difference begins with the allegedly empirical observation that sexual difference is natural and that the sexes are two. This encourages us to read sexual difference on a binary model that sees our sexuate identity as embodying one of two available subject positions: male or female, man or woman. This division is thought to reflect biological and anatomical distinctions among humans that are natural and real. Everyone is born one sex or the other and our sex is thus is not something we can choose or decide, modern technological innovations aside. Judith Butler’s critique offers an alternative to this understanding of sexual difference. Following Foucault, she adopts a discursive understanding of the person, reading sexual difference as a discursive construct applied to the individual. Dismantling the sex distinction, she argues for a malleability of sex and gender, grounding both in a theory of performativity.

Sex may be as tenuous as gender, since the genealogy of sex and gender are hopelessly entangled. Rather than looking for the truth about the sexuate body, Butler focuses on the truth effects of sex/gender and the material ways that our thinking about sex limits and impinges upon our ways of being. Of special concern are those who exist as counterexamples to the allegedly natural binary division. Ambiguous in their sexuality, such individuals are considered unnatural and errant. They are often abjected from the system and taken out of the sexual economy, since their place and their use-value is questionable, ambiguous, or even imagined devoid of value or meaning.24 Butler remains agnostic about the truth of sex, since she says it is impossible for us to discuss sex without imposing linguistic strictures and limitations upon it. Instead, she points to the indeterminacy of this dilemma. The question of whether a physical body could exist prior to

24 Butler 155–156.
the body we perceive is ultimately “an impossible question to decide.” Butler thinks there is reason to believe that the way we lay down the body’s boundaries is highly arbitrary and that the supposed features of the sexual body are suspect, since what we recognize as various sexuate body parts—penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth—reflect a circumscribing of the erogenous body with this naming, ultimately fragmenting body in ways that benefit some more than others. The unity imposed on the body by the category of sex is a disunity, “a fragmentation and compartmentalization, and a reduction of erotogenicity.”

Without wanting to entirely exonerate Beauvoir and Irigaray from charges of heterosexist thinking, I note that both do leave doors open for thinking about sex and gender beyond binarism. Irigaray, without ever quite developing the idea, offers repeatedly, if cryptically, that the sexes are “at least two.” In her preface to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says explicitly that while the sexes may appear “two” at this juncture, this may be prone to change in the future, arguing that someday we may live our sexed relations in very different ways. Increasingly, this is borne out not just through the kind of gender-bending performative exercises that Butler invokes in *Gender Trouble*, but also through the recognition gained by intersex individuals and by the transgender movement. As we become more open to the diffuse and diversified “natural” possibilities for sex and gender, and as sex/gender becomes more mobile and malleable through technological innovation, the possibility that we may move beyond binary construction of sexual difference seems here already, although yet to be worked out in a particularly ethical form.

Rewriting sexual difference is important for creating new forms of love, new modes of fecundity, and new relational possibilities between the sexes. We need to work towards dismantling the ways that patriarchal violence has used sexual difference to corrupt existing

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25 Butler 155.

26 Butler 156.
relations between the sexes. Thinking beyond the confines of gender dualism and compulsory
heterosexuality is essential for reconceiving virginity. We ought to be aware of how the classical
interpretation of sexual difference—with its concerns for binarism, hierarchy, mastery, and
reproductivity—uses sexual difference to obscure the phenomenon of virginity, and how a
rereading of the meaning of sexual difference can help bring the phenomenon of virginity to
light.

4.2 Compulsory Heterosexuality

Elevating the couple as an ethical unit as opposed to a reproductive unit can help to give
dignity to the same-sex loves often derided by compulsory heterosexuality. Moving beyond
gender dualism can help overcome patriarchal definitions of sexual difference in ways that can
lead to a rehabilitation of same-sex love. Discovering that sexual difference may be more diffuse
than the two-sex model may eventually make the very notion of “same-sex” untenable. The
ethics of Eros sees that sexual difference can open itself beyond the stark forms of man and
woman and let us find that each body is sexually different and sexually distinct, insofar as each
of us takes up and lives our sexual-erotic being in different ways. Can I not find an astonishing
sexual difference in the way a lover who has the same genital configuration or basic hormonal
constitution as me lives, despite our ostensibly similar embodiment? Cannot this beloved live her
sexuation in a way that is so singular as to seem wondrous and foreign to me? Isn’t each lover to
be ethically distinguished in her singular sexuation and her singular erotic being in a way that
transcends forcing her to behave like a “woman” or a “man”, since there are as many ways of
living feminine or masculine sexualities as there are women and/or men? Again, we find reason
to suspect that virginity thrives on a singular and ethical sexual difference and not on the surface
differences of ostensibly opposite sexuation. Looking to the singular way that each individual
lives her sexual-erotic difference makes the distinction between homo- and heterosexual relationships seem blunt and superficial.

Judith Butler addresses the melancholy that can result from the imposition of binary and compulsory heterosexuality. She sees that as we come to take up gendered positions in culture, bodies and pleasures are simultaneously delimited. A consequence of this is that we learn to distinguish certain areas of the body as erotogenic. The ways that the sites of jouissance are mapped onto the body is, in some sense, arbitrary. As Butler puts it:

\[\ldots\] some parts of the body become conceivable foci of pleasure precisely because they correspond to a normative ideal of gender-specific body. Pleasures are in some sense determined by the melancholic structure of gender where some organs are deadened to pleasure, and others brought to life. Which pleasures shall live and which shall die is often a matter of which serve the legitimating practices of identity formation that take place within the matrix of gender norms.\(^{27}\)

Some pleasures are bestowed with normality and acceptability, even morality, but other forms of pleasure are forbidden, even impossibilized in the metaphysical schema. Heterosexual pleasures, and particularly the pleasures experienced by male bodies, are elevated in the sexual relation with an intense focus on the male orgasm. Women, on the other hand, often fail to understand their own sexuality and their own jouissance, leading both Butler and Irigaray to call for women to cultivate an understanding of specifically female pleasure. Recognizing that sexual pleasure and what counts as “sex” have been shaped by regulative forces can help in breaking down such restrictions, since we can begin to appreciate that sex might not be a form of law to which we are naturally or inevitably subject, but a set of possibilities for interacting with an other that we can cultivate and delimit for ourselves in keeping with ethics. What the system of

\(^{27}\) Butler 95–96.
compulsory heterosexuality neglects is the teaching of an *ars erotica*. Naturalizing sex to a functional potential inherent in almost any body fails to appreciate the need to train our bodies in the art of loving. The most natural of sexual acts needs to be tempered by Eros, which is only an innate potential and by no means instinctively realized in an automatic way. In the end, what if what sex seeks is not actually the production of a child but virginal efflorescence, a path to love?

4.3 Polyamory

The traditional reading of sexual difference as binary has no doubt contributed to our understanding of the couple as almost synonymous with “two.” But pushing sexual difference beyond a binary construction advances a vision of the couple that may not rely on a dualistic structure. If the couple can be read as “beyond-two,” perhaps this also opens the possibility that polyamorous relationships are a couple-beyond-two that could be hospitable to the phenomenon of virginity. Might it be possible to imagine an intimate couple that consisted of three or more partners? Could the profound experience of sexual-erotic love that is virginity occur with more-than-two? Irigaray expresses a lingering concern with the idea of the multiple, since she thinks it has proven to be a fragmenting and dangerous drive in the era of post- and anti-philosophies that have relentlessly sought to deconstruct metaphysics, ontology, theology, and divinity without offering anything for humans to build on in the wake of such intellectual and ontological destruction. While Irigaray’s concern (that multiples can fracture) is a worthy precaution, and while the very idea of orgiastic sex suggests a frenzy that abdicates intimacy and ethics in favour of more mechanical and physical pleasures, it does seem that small multiples might be able to sustain the ethical intimacies necessary to meet the other(s!) on the kind of ethical ground that Lévinas, for example, calls the face-to-face encounter. The couple is important because it reflects the notion of a hyperethical intimacy and exigency between individuals who are able to recognize one another as beloved, and who make ethical demands upon and arouse one another
based on this appeal. The capacity to relate to more-than-one and thus to form a bond of more-
than-two does not seem untenable. An expanded definition of coupledom beyond the binary might be possible if, without trying to affix any specific numerical limits on this couple-group, intimate multiples are still able to retain the ethical exigency that underwrites the “two.”

Confronting assumptions about sexual difference is important because it orients us to the otherness of the beloved, and when we take this otherness seriously, even coming to delight in its mystery, then the sexual relation becomes an ethical undertaking and not a mere biological drive. Virginity demands this work so that I can open myself to the beloved and prepare to receive her in a way that respects her sexually distinct embodiment and which allows us to become, together, that wondrous and loving partnership that Eros recognizes as the couple.

§5 Virginity Lost—Two Paradoxes of Virginity

The word *virginity* has multiple and sometimes contrary connotations. A constant confusion and slippage between them seem inevitable, insofar as virginity’s traditional meaning and value are found precisely where the imaginary treasure is lost. Virginity is perceived as an essential quality that can inhere in a person who embodies a state of sexual untouchedness, and thus is often conceived as a state of sexual innocence or purity that is lost when sexual knowledge and experience are gained. Virginity can also indicate a stage or passage navigated on the way to sexual maturity. The Greek and Hebrew words for virgin, *parthenos* and *bethulah*, both refer to the transitional period in the life of a young girl triggered by feminine nubility and marital eligibility.28 During this period the young woman’s social, economic, and property status

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28 Mieke Bal’s study on ancient Hebrew virginity in the Book of Judges reads virginity as a precarious transitional period in the life of the young girl whose social status hangs in the balance of a negotiation of her transference from the care of her father to that of her husband. Bal sees that nubility triggers an anxious time in the life of the girl that if not resolved favourably for her could have very traumatic if not tragic consequences. Giulia Sissa’s book, *Greek Virginity*, similarly argues that *parthenos*, the most prevalent Greek word for virginity, is an uncertain period triggered by nubility. During this time the daughter must be carefully transferred from father to husband, but Sissa’s study also brings to the fore the spectre of occult fears that come with burgeoning feminine
all change as she is transformed from daughter to wife, from girl to woman. Insofar as physical changes trigger this stage, ancient anxieties about burgeoning sexuality lend virginity an occult flavour. The understanding of virginity as a stage is less common today but a lingering notion of puberty as a precarious time of sexual and social transition certainly remains. Finally, virginity is sometimes used as shorthand for the instant of virginity’s loss. “Defloration” and virginity share a joint implication, since defloration marks the imaginary threshold where virginity finds its meaning in the instant of its negation.

What these readings of virginity as a state, stage, or instant all share is the implicit understanding that virginity ultimately gains its meaning and value as something that is taken or lost. But when we try to understand virginity as a phenomenal event it soon becomes apparent that virginity is given, or better yet that it gives itself. Virginity is not something lost, but something to be gained. It is won, found, and eventually granted after an assiduous process of opening the self to sexual-erotic love and training the sexuate body how to use the libido in the service of Eros so that ethical relations with the beloved may be achieved. In this understanding virginity is no longer a state of blank, white plenitude to be annihilated with the puncturing ruin of sex. Instead, virginity offers itself in a bursting forth of an unforeseen event that could not be precipitated or welcomed without active and embodied preparation, labour, and work. Virginity

sexuality, and the preoccupations with mastery that animate the patriarchs who see themselves responsible for managing young women during this transition. In both studies, virginity is read as a stage of ontological transformation, where the girl’s social status and her value to the community undergoes a significant shift (she moves from daughter to wife and mother; from girl to gynê). But also apparent are anxieties associated with the fact that the nubile virgin is potentially fearsome because she is, far from being without sex, quite bubbling, almost bursting with its potential. (For more, see Sissa.)

A contemporary example of how we may continue to think of virginity is a stage is reflected in the debate surrounding the HPV vaccine. The vaccine is ideally given to girls who are just on the cusp of their physical sexual maturation, but before they are actually sexually active. Little girls or babies aren’t eligible for the vaccine and it is not typically suitable for women (although there is some medical evidence contrary to this later claim). The stage when the vaccination ought to be administered is precisely when the girl becomes nubile, but before she is actually sexually initiate—the stage of virginity.
presents as an election, perhaps even a revelation, but only in its own time and when proper conditions obtain.

Virginity does risk getting lost when we try to blunt the experience by making it conform to logical and rational definitions that deny its excessive structures. Anxious about the indeterminacy of our sexual and erotic natures, we have imposed definitions of virginity that don’t actually map onto the experience of virginity as a coming to love. In common interpretations, virginity is lost during the first instance of sexual intercourse, divesting virginity of its ethical elements in favour of a mechanical interpretation. Robbed of its spiritual and erotic aspects, virginity becomes a quantitative and qualitative concept to be manipulated through calculable transactions at the expense of sexual-erotic love. The way we ordinarily understand virginity leads to two particular paradoxes that demonstrate the insufficiency of our common interpretations for doing justice to the phenomenon of virginity.

The first paradox is the paradox of virginal purity. This story imagines that before becoming exposed to or infected with sexual knowledge and experience we are “pure”—that is, free from sexuality. But, since sexuate being is part of our natural, essential constitution, we are never actually without sex nor without the capacity for erotic attunement. What the myth of sexual purity forgets is that we are given as sexuate beings. To imagine otherwise is to deny human facticity and to impose a grave impediment on our ethical functioning, since sex and desire aren’t just experienced as a drive to aggression and self-satisfaction, but also as an ethical impetus that draws us to the other. To imagine humans without sex is an absurdity, but also a sanitizing gesture that would cut us off from a valuable means of interacting with others and the world. Anxieties about the force of libidinal instinct and occult fears about the impurity of sex all contribute to a strange fantasy wherein man wishes to divest himself of sex and desire in order to
become pure, like the angels or an asexual God, at the expense of embracing or cultivating a capacity for sexual-erotic love that could make him truly human.

The second paradox of virginity follows from the idea that virginity is lost with the first instance of penetrative sexual intercourse. Virginity is thus figured as a one-time threshold crossing, a determinate event that we can locate in time and space. This interpretation leads to the difficulty of trying to fix the evasive instant of virginal border-crossing, whether as a trace or mark on the body or by affixing it as a determinate point on a clock or a calendar. This interpretation overlooks how virginity might be more than a physical transaction; it might not leave a clear or enduring mark on a body, since the initiation is both physical and spiritual. Attempts to mark virginity in time prove equally evasive, since there can be no traditional philosophical evidence of its coming to pass. Moreover, there can be no singular event of coming to love because the phenomenon of virginity has an interminable and renewing structure. It turns out that coming to love is not just a one-time threshold crossing but something that can be perpetually affirmed with each sexual-erotic encounter. Virginity is supposed to mark the first time, but the singularity of love requires interminable affirmation and commitment, in keeping with love’s endless demands.

In the next two sections I expand on and develop these two paradoxes of virginity to refute understandings that virginity is a state of virginal purity or a one-time threshold crossing.

§6 First Paradox—Virginal Purity

Virginity is often understood as a state of purity. The two states are so closely allied that they are frequently used synonymously and interchangeably. For Western philosophy, purity remains a quiet preoccupation, if not an obsession. Its interest in purity can be traced to primitive, religious, and prephilosophical thinking but pure/impure remains an essential category for philosophical logic, which traditionally relies on a system of binary opposition and
noncontradiction. Mary Douglas’ anthropological research in *Purity and Danger* and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of defilement in *The Symbolism of Evil* both argue that the drive for purity addresses ancient and persisting concerns with ordering and classifying the universe to eradicate troubling ambiguity. For example, Douglas argues that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.”\(^{30}\) Persons, things, symbols, and concepts associated with impurity or defilement reflect the contravention of some order and the lingering danger of chaos. Worse, impurity threatens, if not promises, to contaminate or pollute that with which it comes into contact. Purification rituals reflect attempts to correct or maintain good order from the dangers of ambiguity and impurity. Virginal purity is always juxtaposed to the inevitable and contaminating fall that guarantees its meaning; and so the virgin becomes a fearsome entity.

Douglas says humans are ordering and meaning-making creatures; our classifying and ordering activity is a “human universal,” and the drive for purity is to some extent “rational behaviour.”\(^{31}\) However, impurity is a politicized concept put to use in the service of culture. Thus, she also claims that *dirt* is essentially a human construct, so that what counts as *impure* fits the social and political needs of the society that deems it such. The problem with impure things is that they have certain mysterious or unpredictable natures; their ambiguity makes them uncertain and dangerous. Douglas’ anthropological research leads her to conclude that fears of impurity and attendant rituals often surround sexual and procreative activities. She says:

> In primitive cultures, almost by definition, the distinction of the sexes is the primary social distinction. This means that some important institutions always rest

\(^{30}\) Douglas 5.

\(^{31}\) Douglas xvii.
on the difference of sex. . . . We find pollution ideas enlisted to bind men and women to their allotted roles.32

Concerns about sexual difference persist for contemporary cultures, particularly, since the two sexes are often cast in oppositional and frequently antagonistic roles and anxieties about impurity are still used to marshal sexual morality.33 Douglas observes that, in patriarchal cultures, dissymmetrical pollution fears attach themselves to women’s sexuality, noting sex, procreation, and virginity as areas of problematization and confusion.

Ricoeur also identifies the link between sexuality and taboo as an ancient, pre-ethical phenomenon. However, his analysis adds that philosophy inherits the quest for purity, as archaic and mythic sources are taken up and translated into religious and philosophical symbolism and ideology.34 Concerns with defilement and “the stain” symbolizing danger, impurity, and evil continue to enliven philosophy. Characterizing our philosophical heritage as being born of the Greek encounter between Hellenic and Jewish sources (with Judaism acting as the nearest “other” to Greek heritage), Ricoeur asserts that pagan, primitive, or religious concepts of defilement are ultimately translated into the “ontological regime” underlying Western philosophy.35 The pre-ethical, prephilosophical schema of defilement—with its overarching concern for purity and impurity, and for the creation of order versus ambiguity, intermixture, and

32 Douglas 174.

33 The connection between purity, virginity, and morality is made clear in contemporary abstinence movements like Purity Now, which often leverage the idea of purity in such rituals as purity balls (where daughters promise to remain pure and fathers pledge to protect their daughters’ virginal purity), purity rings (which bearers wear as a promise and reminder of their chastity until marriage), and purity pledges (during which teenagers swear their purity, often signing contracts to this effect).

34 Ricoeur also makes the remarkable claim that impurity and virginity have a deep and trenchant alliance that underwrites our anxieties about sexuality. He writes: “At the end of this line on which we have just encountered the theme of the primordial defilement of sexuality, there appears the identity of purity and virginity: virginity and spotlessness are as closely bound together as sexuality and contamination. This double assonance is in the background of all our ethics, where it constitutes the archaism that is most resistant to criticism” (Ricoeur 29).

35 Ricoeur 20.
disorder—is still operative in philosophical thought. As Derrida argues, the pure/impure distinction remains the founding category for our ontological and metaphysical frameworks.\(^{36}\) Ricoeur affirms that for cleansing the soul, the “purifying act par excellence is knowledge.”\(^{37}\) Thus, philosophy, with its promises that wisdom and \textit{logos} can lead from ambiguity and obscurity to true knowledge, has its own pretensions of becoming a discourse and a vehicle of purification.

Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence is entangled with his ongoing critique of purity as he links the philosophical preoccupation with purity to a concern with presentness or \textit{Being}, with finding something that “is” in its most unadulterated or virgin form. For Derrida, Western philosophy is structured around a system of conceptual polarities hierarchized in favour of a metaphysics of presence. Philosophy aspires to master ambiguity—or at least to mask it. And yet even while philosophy aims to keep its categories distinct, Derrida knows that it is perpetually thwarted by the dissimulation, dissemination, and \textit{différence} that plague language and meaning. Philosophical logic aims for a binary logic of exclusion, but it finds that nothing is ever as tidy, distinct, or pure as it had hoped. The metaphysical obsession with purity is linked to a quest for certainty of knowledge and meaning, and fantasies of mastery, with corollary ritual, hygienic projects of purification. Derrida reads the desire for fully self-present meaning, determinate value, and stable truth as a very human longing, but while “one cannot help wishing to master absence,” he simultaneously cautions that “we must always let it go.”\(^{38}\)

\(^{36}\) “To keep the outside out. This is the inaugural gesture of ‘logic’ itself, of good ‘sense’ insofar as it accords with the self-identity of \textit{that which is}: being what it is, the outside is outside and the inside, inside” (Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” 128).

\(^{37}\) Ricoeur 300.

\(^{38}\) Derrida, “Dangerous Supplement” 142.
The Derridean critique also highlights the patriarchal bias underlying our philosophical heritage, in which *logos* is associated with the word of the father, the phallus as master signifier, and paternal Law. Patriarchal culture fears women because they are endowed, if only in and through the patriarchal imagination, with a mysterious and illogical or irrational capacity that threatens philosophy and its good order. Richard Rorty credits Derrida with demonstrating how “the philosopher’s quest for purity” is connected to “the view that women are somehow impure.”39 According to Rorty, Derrida sees that “the logocentric tradition is bound up in subtle ways with the drive for purity—the drive to escape contamination by feminine messes.”40 Feminine power has a long history of being associated with the magical, mysterious, disruptive, and dangerous. It plays with what we do not expect, with ambivalence. Derrida describes how “before being reined in and tamed by the *kosmos* and order of truth, *logos* is a wild creature, an ambiguous animality. Its magical, pharmaceutical force derives from this ambivalence.”41 Inasmuch as Derrida demonstrates that philosophy is never really purged of this feral nature, neither is it purged of the feminine elements and powers that we imagine animate this force. And the virgin, with her propensity to conjure all of these fears, becomes a unique symbol of patriarchal, metaphysical, and philosophical anxieties.

Once we understand the archaic, mythic, and philosophical aversion to ambivalence and disarray, it becomes easier to grasp how and why virginity and the virgin become so unsettling for our intellectual inheritance. Sex is a disquieting act, since sexual intercourse sees us live materially and concretely just the sort of ambiguities from which philosophy would like to see us delivered. Sex calls into question the very distinction between the pure/impure or the

39 Rorty 102, footnote 10.

40 Rorty 101.

41 Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” 116.
inside/outside of ourselves. During the sexual encounter, we undergo a phenomenological experience that finds our physical boundaries challenged, as the inside/outside of our own body is called into question by the strange and intersubjective experience of sexual intercourse. But in addition, during the sexual act our sense of personal identity and autonomy can suffer a disquieting rupture. Virginity invites the confusion of sex, which is not just a conceptual confusion but a lived experience that threatens our own proper body, our ego-identity, and implodes the very structures of space and time as they are ordinarily understood. It is comforting to imagine that we could be pure of sex and exist outside of its corrosive influence and the dangers that its unsettling urges compel us towards.

The philosophical tradition sees libidinal desire as dangerous because it is tantamount to madness, failing to conform to reason and instigating behaviour that is unpredictable, irrational, and potentially destructive. The lived experience of Eros poses a phenomenal affront to the intractability of many of the categorical binaries that logic uses to structure our sensible and orderly universe. Polar distinctions such as those between form and matter, male and female, self and other, are all disrupted in the sexual encounter, where these absolute terms can no longer be counted on to uphold their dualistic and binary status and so system and classification are interrupted and chaos intervenes. The erotic interrupts the desire for knowledge, truth, certainty, and identity by making these self-absorbed quests seem ridiculous and futile in the face of love’s demands. Fearing the ambiguities and mysteries that are no doubt a part of our erotic being, philosophy has often sought to partition sex and love from its domain, and yet, despite this purification project that underwrites philosophy itself, we are never actually partitioned from Eros. Integral to my argument that virginity is a phenomenon accessible to human experience is the claim that we are sexual, erotic beings from the very beginning, as part of our essential structure and our facticity. Philosophical attempts to ally purity and virginity will always meet
with frustration, since the project of separating the human from Eros is fundamentally misguided. Rather than seeking to master or eradicate sexual desire we need to find more positive routes for expressing our sexuate existence and for effecting a more ethically responsible initiation into Eros.

§7 Second Paradox—The Impenetrable Threshold

Virginity is traditionally recognized as the crossing of a threshold, border, or limit. This instant of defloration sees the virgin effect a passage that once and forever initiates her into the realm of sexual knowledge or experience. Virginity is transgressed or broken in a moment that immediately and everlastingly partitions the initiate from a former state of sexual inviolateness. In a strange twist, virginity is only sensible due to that instant when it is negated, making defloration the contradictory pinnacle of the virginal experience. Reading virginity or defloration as a one-time border-crossing creates a paradox that distorts our understanding of the phenomenon of virginity. How is it possible to cross the virginal threshold? What evidence proves or testifies to this crossing? How can we regulate or control this passage? And what is the significance of the traversal?

Why is our tradition so obsessed with fixing defloration as a determinate and inexorable passage? Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence can again be of service. He links the philosophical aversion to ambiguity with attempts to master uncertainty, through fixing clear categorical boundaries that make objects and concepts transparent to knowledge, and hence to manipulation and control. The ability to locate virginity within some intelligible horizon so that we can predict and observe its transaction promises that virginity can be grasped, managed, and made meaningful and useful. This helps temper the passage of any mysterious or occult flavour. Reducing defloration to the act of first penetration facilitates this aim. The preoccupation with the border or limit attempts to fix virginity as a determinate traversal effected
at an instant that we can mark on the territorial space of the physical body or plot on the temporal history of an individual. The reading is in direct opposition to the phenomenological reading of virginity as a saturated phenomenon with an excessive nature that stubbornly refuses conceptual mastery or control, since we cannot command or provoke it into being.

7.1 The Hymen—A Case Study in Threshold Crossing

The body is one of the most significant limits confronted by classical philosophy. The obsession with delimiting virginity’s spatial and temporal border is reflected concretely in the preoccupation with the vaginal hymen. The hymen allegedly offers a material and localizable marker of defloration, tangible proof of virginity’s negation. The blood that flows from this ruptured membrane provides a visible sign of the moment when the virgin crosses over and woman’s sexual innocence is mastered or overcome. The hymen is such an intoxicating symbol because it offers the potential for asserting that virginity could have a clear and determinate being in space and time.

Medical evidence firmly disputes that the hymen is a reliable arbiter of virginity. First, it’s not even clear that all females are born with hymens. Moreover, hymens can break due to all sorts of trauma well before a woman’s first intercourse. Even if a hymen is broken during intercourse, it need not always bleed. And finally, some women have hymens that can grow back, even after childbirth. The use of this skin flap as a true sign of a woman’s physical virginity (and in this scheme, virginity attaches itself to the feminine body in particular) should definitely be cast into doubt.

Hymenal obsessions reflect a conception of the virgin body that demands the woman be pricked, punctured, or otherwise burst to be properly deflowered, and the phallus takes up the authoritarian role as the instrument most naturally or manifestly designed to perform this function. Heterosexual intercourse is cast as man’s triumph over or colonization of the body of
woman. This physical semiotics gives men the sole power to penetrate and rupture virgins, and it creates a certain property relation between the man and the woman he deflowers. The myth of the hymen serves to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality by arguing that penile-vaginal intercourse and the penile rupture of the hymen is the only way to burst virginity. This is what Derrida calls a performative gesture; it comes to stand for and decide what counts as proper defloration. Such performativity manifests an “interpretive violence”, since it simultaneously institutes and imposes a particular interpretation of defloration at the expense of permitting us to access or think about virginity as the kind of initiation disclosed by a phenomenology of virginity. The corollary violence associated with this gesture of conquest and appropriation is further reflected in the wisdom that the hymen’s rupture is only properly recorded when blood flows. In many cultures, if there is no such proof of virginity or its loss the consequences for women can be serious, even deadly.

Given the hymen’s unreliability as arbiter of virginity lost, what motivates the bizarre impetus to accept this symbol and why does it have such strong hold on the imagination? I believe that the hymen has such appeal because it promises to actualize the philosophical and patriarchal fantasy that we could be sure of the purity of woman and that we could thus partition our thought and our culture from the risks and uncertainties that sexuality makes manifest. The hymen is a fantastic symbol, to be sure, satisfying the yearning for an impossible clarity that would fix the meaning of virginity and protect us from the uncertainties and ambiguities of a troubling relation with Eros. The danger of perpetuating this fantasy is that the fetishization of the hymen blocks us from questioning what is really at stake in sexual initiation and in sexual-erotic love. In so doing, we foreclose an important ethical domain.

Part of the hymen’s dangerous promise is that it creates a symbol to fixate upon, such that we can avoid the ethical responsibility and the fears of sexual-erotic love, thus facilitating a tidy, if ultimately ruinous, evasion of Eros. The hymen is a symbol that comes to stand for sex with women, allowing men to direct their attention and their desire to this symbol instead of relating to the woman on human terms. The hymen is not a sexual organ for women (in fact it is not really an organ at all), but it becomes an erogenous zone for men because of the value that it gains in the symbolic economy. The fetishization of the hymen also turns sex into an onanistic act, insofar as it lets sex continue to be about masculine conquest instead of the intersubjective relation that must be part of a more genuine Eros. The imaginary rending that marks the breaking membrane lets man master not just woman, but sexuality and desire. While preferring the hymen may be perverse, it can be justified insofar as it is less dangerous—for the system that upholds the privilege of logos, paternity and father-law—than actually moving beyond the masterful attitude to engage sex in its ambiguity and to engage the other on ethical terms as lover. The hymen rewire and short-circuits desire, directing it from the lover to the membrane, not to an other, but to a thing.

The figure of the virginal threshold and the hymen that comes to symbolize it ultimately serve to keep lovers a safe distance from one another. It forbids genuine contact, obfuscating the ethical demands that come to the fore in sexual-erotic love. Our willingness to accept these borders evidences Heidegger’s diagnosis of an innate human tendency to cover over or flee from existential experiences that cause anxiety. And sex is anxious business, a polluting and messy

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43 The fetishization of the hymen is dramatically apparent in the current fashion for hymen reconstruction surgery, a procedure during which a prosthetic hymen is surgically crafted for a woman whose hymen has previously been broken, whether through sexual intercourse or some other occurrence.

44 I am using the perhaps too general term “men” here in order to avoid a more unwieldy although philosophically more precise term like “the patriarchal subject.” I do respect that of course not all men endorse or enjoy the patriarchal politics of sex or the particular hymenal fetish under discussion.
affair, as the discussion of purity has affirmed. In the erotic encounter, bodies commingle, discrete identities are blurred, and changes occur in bodies and souls that are both mysterious and yet undeniable. A phenomenology of virginity rewrites the phenomenon of virginity as a coming to sexual-erotic love, an ethical moment of contamination with the other and with the beyond. I believe that there is a distinct and genuine experience that we are trying to elucidate with our virgin-talk, but that it has nothing to do with hymenal rupture. If we come to see that virginity, coming to love, is not about the first time we have penetrative sex, but a much more complex procedure, then we won’t be able to uphold the hymenological fiction. Replacing the vulgar interpretation of virginity, we can start engaging a phenomenology of virginity on its own terms.

7.2 Interminable Eros

For Derrida, borders are mediums of exchange and contamination, rather than absolute impediments.45 The virginal limit is not a partition that we burst through, as if by force. This border is subject to a perpetual opening and closing; it is a metaphorical membrane that keeps us together while distinct, prohibiting a fusion that threatens the lover with colonization or overcoming while simultaneously contradicting the discrete partitioning of one from the other during the sexual-erotic encounter. Virginity does not demand penetration of an obdurate threshold; rather, it urges an active and ethically aware opening and exchange, a making-available of self to other that awakens and brings to the fore the ethical aspect of virginity as a fundamental offering of the self to the other.

This also permits us to conclude that the virginal border-crossing is not the singular penetration of a one-time partition, whether biological, epistemological, or social. A phenomenology of virginity reveals that what is really at stake here is a much more amorphous

45 For more, see Derrida, Aporias 80.
passage, an ethical traversal that has been covered over and remains somewhat obscure. The opening of the self to the other that is requisite for making oneself responsive to sexual-erotic love is a perpetually renewing undertaking. This call for renewal is also in keeping with the evanescence of the phenomenon of virginity. Its recessive nature makes it prone to forget; thus, it must be reaffirmed at every turn. Virginity has infinite potential to give itself, and coming to love opens the possibility for renewal each time we meet the other in the nakedness of his/her sexual-erotic body. This doesn’t mean that every sexual encounter has to be lived as a loving intercourse, but it recognizes the possibility inherent in the bodies that can take on erotic risk.

Figuring virginity as interminable is consistent with the very structure of ethics and Eros. Virginity does not make a one-time appearance any more than ethicality or love is a singular commitment. Love demands a perpetual goodness—it isn’t just a one-time effort at being good. Figuring virginity as a one-time event, we can be done with the terrifying entrance into the sexual-erotic domain, even shirking ethical responsibility and fleeing love. But ethics and Eros issue an endless call. Conceiving of the sexual-erotic project as a coming to love through the eroticized body becomes an enduring, weighty undertaking. The virginal threshold opens a space for love; it does not foreclose some imagined innocence.
PART TWO

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF VIRGINITY

§1 Why Phenomenology?

Initially, phenomenology may not seem to offer a suitable method for thinking about virginity. Indeed, the very claim that virginity is a phenomenon is often met with puzzlement and reserve. What does it mean to talk about virginity as a phenomenon? In this section I trace a particular and very recent historical opening that permits a phenomenological reception of virginity. Welcoming virginity as a phenomenon has the potential to expand and develop the scope and method of phenomenology in new and productive ways, since it may well turn out that Eros is more integral to phenomenology than typically acknowledged.

§2 Jean-Luc Marion and the Phenomenology of Givenness

Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness traces the history of phenomenology through three reductions:¹ First, the transcendental or epistemic reduction, which applies to the phenomenal constitution of worldly objects. Secondly, the ontological or existential reduction, which permits us to grasp a horizon of Being that is integral to our interpretation of the world and which acts as a backdrop to understanding how phenomena appear to us. Thirdly, the erotic reduction, which realizes a traversal beyond Being to a new, supraethical domain of rationality where Love reigns and where phenomena, which always gift themselves, appear in the light of

¹ There can be no definitive history of phenomenology. In offering Marion’s historical account I no doubt provide only a partial, perspectival, and somewhat inexcusably truncated overview of this movement, simultaneously revealing my own bias that the phenomenology of givenness moves phenomenology in a direction it ought to pursue.
this givenness. Only with this final reduction does Marion’s method evolve sufficiently to recognize and address the phenomenon of virginity.

The first two reductions still show residues of metaphysical thinking, but in the third reduction Marion sees phenomenology finally moving beyond its metaphysical legacy.² The three reductions seem akin to three regions or domains of experience, and the progression through them unfolds in a way that is not entirely unlike the ascent described in Plato’s cave allegory. Situated in the darker regions prior to the erotic reduction, consciousness appropriates objects of knowledge with false certainties, or myopically asserts the transcendental ego or Dasein as central in the constitution or interpretation of phenomena. But with the erotic reduction such longings for and pretensions of mastery fall away. In the third reduction the centre shifts, when the constituting ego becomes a gifted one—a lover—and erotic rationality gives way to a higher register of contemplation obscured in the first two reductions. Again echoing Plato, the erotic reduction goes beyond being or knowing to illuminate something comparable to the Platonic Good. In this way, coming to love is a journey of ascent, and Marion’s ultimate philosophical and phenomenological project can be described as an effort to show a way to love.

2.1 First Reduction: Husserl and the Transcendental or Epistemic Reduction

Marion reads the Husserlian transcendental reduction as the first stage of phenomenology’s development, during which phenomenology attempted to apply itself to those

² “Phenomenology does not break decisively with metaphysics until the moment when and exactly in the degree to which—a degree that most often remains in flux—it names and thinks the phenomenon (a) neither as an object, that is to say, not within the horizon of objectness as such . . . or by excess (the divine and the insensible) . . . (b) nor as a being, that is to say, within the horizon of Being. . . . To let phenomena appear demands not imposing a horizon on them, whatever the horizon might be, since it would exclude some of them. The appariation of phenomena becomes unconditional only from the moment when they are admitted as what they give themselves—givens, purely” (Marion, Being Given 320).
phenomena most frequently interpreted as objects or things. Husserl identified *phenomenon* as that which appears to consciousness, figuring this in the technical language of intentionality in keeping with the twin notions of *noema* and *noesis*. From here he evolved the transcendental reduction, which attempts to divest thought of its natural attitude by bracketing the presuppositions we bring to our experiences in order to examine the contents of consciousness in their pure phenomenality; that is, as objects of knowledge with discernable essential structures. In this manner, the reduction and the phenomenological attitude are intended to take us back to the things themselves.

And yet in Marion’s analysis, reducing phenomena to objects of consciousness denigrates them to fallen phenomena: “[we] reduce [objects] to the rank of phenomena of the second order, of common phenomena, without according to them full, autonomous, and disinterested appearance.”

At this stage of the transcendental reduction, the “I” of consciousness is still too concerned with shaping the object to make it adhere to the limited categories of our human understanding; we cannot yet hypostatize the phenomenon in an object-hood or *thinglyness* that permits its ostensible comprehension or grasp. The ego wants to make the object conform to its own understanding. Common phenomena—objects—are most amenable to this sort of epistemological and metaphysical, thematizing violence, although Marion thinks we do them an injustice in this first mode of reduction. Trapping something in its objectality to examine its phenomenality proved an indispensable part of the history of phenomenology but this kind of

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3 Marion frequently invokes both Descartes and Kant in his historical work, indicating that he reads these figures as phenomenologists in their own right, and as integral to understanding both the early history and the evolution of phenomenology.

4 Marion, *In Excess* 35.
reduction covers over the givenness of the phenomenon, truncating and limiting the reduction, 
the phenomenalization of the phenomenon, and our intercourse with it.⁵

2.2 Second Reduction: Heidegger and the Ontological or Existential Reduction

The second reduction nests in the first and seems a progression or evolution. Marion 
credits Heidegger with recognizing that objects or beings require a further reduction to be 
understood in their own phenomenality. This reduction lets us grasp phenomena beyond their 
thingliness. Heidegger’s insight expanded the scope of phenomenology so that it could examine 
phenomena within the ontological or existential horizon of Being. To acknowledge beings as 
partaking in Being is to acknowledge that phenomena will always have certain aspects that fail to 
disclose themselves; they will always conceal themselves from our immediate grasp, since they 
present themselves to us against a horizon that is always limited, as Being has a way of 
concealing and unconcealing the objects it discloses. Heidegger saw that phenomenology must 
be supplemented with a hermeneutics that respects the infinite interpretations to which any given 
phenomenon will be subject, since phenomena always appear from a particular perspectival 
horizon and that phenomena hold back even when they give. Heidegger thus wanted 
phenomenology to go beyond metaphysics; he demonstrated that we can never grasp phenomena 
as anything present or substantial.

And yet, measured against the horizon of Being, Heidegger was typically criticized for 
reinscribing phenomenology and philosophy against an onto-theological backdrop that 
perpetuated metaphysical thinking under a new guise. The problem with the second reduction is 
that Dasein, as the being that is concerned with its own Being, remains at the centre of the 
analysis and so the second or ontological reduction fails sufficiently to recognize givenness.

⁵ This has important implications as we approach a phenomenology of virginity, since it points to how and 
why trapping the other in an objectal mode of being is violent and unjust—but it also explains why this violence is 
so tempting.
However, it may be that Marion’s critique of the Heideggerian system is too harsh, since following the alleged “turn,” Heidegger did seem to be increasingly interested in something like the idea of givenness. The mature Heidegger who turned away from Dasein in favour of the mortal recognized that this mortal is but one element in the fourfold and so in perpetual intercourse with the world and the divine. Inasmuch as Heidegger accused mortals of being in danger of compromising and covering over this important relation, it seems Marion gives insufficient credit to Heidegger’s receptivity to ideas of givenness, giftedness, and openness in his mature work. Heidegger’s later writing did recognize the exigency of something like the call or appeal that Marion thinks marks the third reduction.

2.3 Third Reduction: Marion and the Erotic Reduction

The third reduction focuses on givenness, the idea of which acknowledges that there is something independent of “me” preceding the phenomenalization of the phenomenon. This recognition takes us beyond the horizon of Being, registering a concern that supersedes even ontological anxieties. Marion’s work on the erotic reduction is recent and continues to evolve, notably with the 2003 publication of The Erotic Phenomenon. Here, Marion gives the third reduction its specifically erotic character and in his discussion of an erotic rationality, invokes love. While it is clear that the third reduction is heavily indebted to Lévinasian ethics, invoking themes of responsibility, unsubstitutability, and the call, in his most recent work Marion delves into even more radical territory with his claim that the third reduction is the domain of love. In the third register concerns for truth, certainty, and even the care of our existence are exposed as

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6 Heidegger’s notion of givenness is encountered in and through the idea of es gibt, alternatively translated as “it gives” or “there is.” The problem with this thinking of givenness, which comes through in Lévinas’ analysis and critique, is that es gibt remains too anonymous, a sort of belching nothingness that impersonally delivers its givens into a universe where there can be no real sense of ethical responsibility, accountability, or even consciousness associated with the benefactions of this void “It.”

7 The idea that Heidegger’s work is indeed erotic will be defended further; see Part Two, “Sexuate Phenomenologies,” where I develop the idea of an erotic world.
destitute if they lack assurance that we are loved. Also at stake here is a radical transformation of
the subject. Just as the transcendental ego gives way to Dasein, so too Dasein is rendered
obsolete by the one who recognizes himself as beloved, the one who is gifted as a lover.\(^8\) When
we enter the third reduction, the ego-self evolves beyond the priority of the transcendental “I”
and even beyond Dasein’s care for Being. With its focus on givenness, the “I” recognizes that it
is not simply a bearer of Being and the sole being capable of constituting the world; it also owes
a higher debt to the very givenness that gifts the self from the very beginning. Transformed from
Dasein to the lover, the focus shifts from Being to givenness and opening oneself to the
reception of what is given, ushering in the erotic rationality that characterizes the third and final
reduction and sees the full development of phenomenology as first philosophy.

Marion describes his project as an “attempt to radically re-envisage the whole
phenomenological project beginning with the primacy in it of givenness.”\(^9\) Because we cannot
justly impose phenomenality on phenomena we must reduce or open ourselves to receive
phenomena as gifts. Phenomena do not just present themselves as constituted in and through my
consciousness, since any phenomenon that shows itself, appears, or manifests itself in
consciousness must first give itself. In a double movement the phenomenon that is given or
gifted gives itself to me, and simultaneously gifts me to my self. In order for me to have any idea
of the self-hood of the phenomenon (which is now distinguished as a self, and hence as no mere
thing), I must also take account of how I am gifted in this very movement. As the focus shifts

\(^8\) Marion’s understanding of the rebirth of the subject in the third reduction continues to evolve with his
work. In his earlier writing on the phenomenology of givenness the subject was identified as the gifted one or
l’adonne. In Being Given Marion writes that a phenomenology of givenness dispenses with the traditional subject by
overturning it as a metaphysical or epistemological centre and re-conceiving it as a recipient or a gifted. Thus the
subject becomes “he whose function consists in receiving what is immeasurably given to him, and whose privilege
is confined to the fact that he is himself received from what he receives” (Marion, Being Given 321–322). But in The
Erotic Phenomenon, l’adonne seems to have morphed into “the lover,” and perhaps the beloved (one and the same).
It is beyond the scope of this work to engage a full discussion of Marion’s evolving subject, although this topic does
have important implications for a phenomenology of Eros.

\(^9\) Marion, In Excess xxii.
from how my consciousness shapes the phenomenon to how the phenomenon gives itself, I am able to see that I represent myself no more than I represent the phenomenon. We say that in giving itself the phenomenon actually appeals to me—it issues a call—and in the face of the call I, the subject, become the gifted, successor to the subject, and receives myself entirely from what I receive.

Marion challenges the traditional phenomenological mantra “to the things themselves!,” replacing it with the formula “so much reduction, so much givenness.” On this understanding:

. . . givenness is deployed according to the direct measure of the reduction: the more the reduction is radicalized, the more givenness is deployed. . . . The more the reduction reduces (itself), the more it extends givenness. The less the reduction brackets what is in question, the less givenness will be able to render it accessible. The preceding rule—“so much appearance, so much Being”—is therefore doubled by a more essential statement: so much reduction, so much givenness.”

Making the erotic reduction central to the phenomenological method encourages us to abdicate mastery in our attempts to impose our own structures of thought or parameters of understanding on phenomena. The erotic reduction demands a bracketing or epoché that sees me open myself to make way for what is given to consciousness; it amounts to a sort of peeling back or ground-clearing to let phenomena appear in their most pure givenness, in their most essential nature. Marion’s phenomenology is fundamentally relational. It demands “an account of the

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10 Marion, Reduction and Givenness 203.

11 While Marion claims that the phenomenology of givenness breaks decisively with metaphysics, I have some anxieties about how concerns with purity continue to infect Marion’s thought, especially, since, as Derrida has aptly demonstrated, purity remains a formidable and potentially dangerous anchor for philosophical thought.
relation between what gives itself and what shows itself."\textsuperscript{12} But it also discloses us to ourselves, so the method can help us to access the essential structures of our selves, understood first and foremost as loving beings.

A phenomenology of givenness is ultimately able to recognize and accommodate a species of phenomenon formerly denigrated or marginalized by philosophy and even by earlier attempts at phenomenology. And it paves the way for the reception of virginity as phenomenon. The phenomenology of givenness recognizes that the phenomenon does not appear when the “I” constitutes it, but rather when it shows itself or reveals itself from and of itself:

In contrast to the classic doctrines of phenomenality, which were constructed according to the paradigm of phenomena poor in intuition (logical utterances, mathematical objects, the doubting ego, the I of the reduction, indeed \textit{Dasein} in anxiety), the phenomenology of givenness follows the paradigm of the unconditional given, quite possibly saturated with intuition and therefore unobjectifiable. It can therefore do justice to the unconstitutable, which constitutes for us what is essential in our world . . . indeed in what passes beyond it.\textsuperscript{13}

This innovation lets in these saturated phenomena whose excessive phenomenality previously foreclosed them from the investigative domain of phenomenology. Emphasizing givenness, Marion makes apparent how and why it is not necessary for us to be able to fully “know” or grasp a concept, idea, or intuition in order for it to phenomenalize itself in some measure. With an emphasis on givenness, rather than apparition or appearance, we need no longer focus on the rational structures that let us understand the phenomenon as object, but can

\textsuperscript{12} Marion, \textit{In Excess} xxii.

\textsuperscript{13} Marion, \textit{Being Given} 321.
shift our focus to what has, in many ways, always been the phenomenological project—an analysis of how phenomena manifest themselves to us, not by us, but in and through their givenness. It is precisely these saturated phenomena (which must be understood using rationality) that typify the third reduction, which Marion’s most recent work identifies as an erotic rationality. With the recognition of the phenomenality of saturated phenomena it becomes possible to admit, for the first time, a robust phenomenology of virginity.

§3 Saturated Phenomena

With the discovery of saturated phenomena, Marion announced a “new concept for phenomenology.”\textsuperscript{14} Saturated phenomena distinguish themselves because they exceed intuition. On the surface they seem to lack intentionality, to be bereft of any concept, and in this way they are ostensibly ineligible for constitution as phenomena. But Marion says we misunderstand these phenomena in characterizing them as deficient; rather, they are saturated with intuition and this excessive element is precisely why they seem beyond constitution, comprehension, and signification. We can never entirely grasp saturated phenomena because they are paradoxes; Marion says this is the essence of their phenomenality. Saturated phenomena overflow us. More than mere objects, saturated phenomena—those poor and fallen phenomena that have succumbed to the authority of the ego—refuse to be “lowered” to objecthood, commanding us to engage in the infinite hermeneutic that reveals the received nature of phenomena and our particular role as the gifted, witness or lover in this phenomenological relation.\textsuperscript{15} Marion writes: “The saturated

\textsuperscript{14} Marion, “Banality of Saturation” 119. Without wanting to detract from the originality of Marion’s thinking, it should be noted that something like the idea of saturated phenomena appears throughout the history of philosophy. Descartes references such a thing directly in his idea of God, which has an infinity that overflows the cogito. Plato’s idea of the Good that is beyond being has a similar way of defying concept. The notion of saturation might also be glimpsed as the very motor underwriting deconstruction and Derrida’s différance, lurking in the psychoanalytic notion of jouissance, or in Kristeva’s reference to the semiotic as a mode of communicating that is beyond signification.

\textsuperscript{15} While we are capable and perhaps even innately vulnerable to the gesture of mastery that seeks to reduce all phenomena to objectality, Marion claims that in essence all phenomena are ultimately saturated. In the end, “the
phenomenon in the end establishes the truth of all phenomenality because it marks, more than any other phenomenon, the givenness from which it comes. The paradox, understood in the strictest sense, no longer runs counter to appearance; it runs with apparition.”

Saturated phenomena resist either transcendental or ontological reduction, but this does not mean that they are poor or lacking in phenomenality, only that we cannot hypostatize them using our limited categories of understanding. The ego cannot constitute these phenomena, but must instead admit a certain passivity and receptiveness in partaking of them as gifted and given. Referring to Kant’s categories of understanding, Marion says the saturated phenomenon exceeds such logical structures, since “in it intuition passes beyond the concept.” Marion writes:

. . . intuitive saturation, precisely insofar as it renders it invisible, intolerable, and absolute (unconditioned) is imposed in the type of phenomenon that is exceptional by excess, and not by defect. The saturated phenomenon refuses to let itself be regarded as an object precisely because it appears with a multiple and indescribable excess that annuls all efforts at constitution. The saturated

banality of the saturated phenomenon suggest that the majority of phenomena, if not all, can undergo saturation by the excess of intuition over the concept of signification in them. In other words, the majority of phenomena that appear at first glance to be poor in intuition [i.e. objects] could be described not only as objects but also as phenomena that intuition saturated and therefore exceed any univocal concept” (Marion, “Banality of Saturation” 126).

16 For more, see Marion, Being Given 227.

17 Marion has come under heavy fire for his focus on givenness, since this figuration tends to lead quite inevitably to questions of some “giver,” thus seeming to ground his phenomenological or philosophical undertakings in a decidedly theological horizon. Despite his Catholic pedigree and his implementation of theological ideas in his phenomenological analyses, Marion is insistent that his work remains philosophical. He sees phenomenology as capable of getting beyond metaphysics (contra, say, Derrida) because it does not seek recourse to either presence or a horizon of Being (seemingly necessary to ground all ontotheological ideas of God). While Marion thinks that mystical theology can indeed be a fruitful approach to phenomenology, and he actively fosters the development of such a method, he does not think that this means his work is either “mystical” or “theological” in traditional interpretations; rather, it acknowledges a need to get beyond, a willingness to take up the tools of a mystical theology in order to do precisely philosophical and phenomenological work.

18 Marion, Being Given 199.
phenomenon must be determined as a nonobjective or, more exactly, nonobjectifiable phenomenon.\textsuperscript{19}

The saturated phenomenon must be determined as a nonobjective or, more exactly, nonobjectifiable phenomenon. These are paradoxes, and this is why they bedazzle us, appearing in some sense impossible. Saturated phenomena have four main qualities. They are: (a) unforeseeable (in terms of quality, and also unrepeatability); (b) unbearable and intolerable (in terms of quality); (c) absolute (outside all relation and analogy including causality, thus giving them an excessive nature); and (d) impossible to constitute or gaze upon (we glimpse them only through anamorphosis). As examples, Marion cites the event (excessive in quality), the idol or the work of art (exceeding quality), the flesh (exceeding relation), and the icon or the face (which exceeds modality).\textsuperscript{20}

It becomes apparent that at least three of these qualities or aspects of saturated phenomena will be absolutely integral to engaging a phenomenology of virginity, the immediate although not wholly irrelevant exception being the idol/artistic creation. Indeed, Marion allows “the possibility of combining, on the one hand, some of these types and, on the other hand, all four together in order to describe other, still more complex, saturated phenomena.”\textsuperscript{21} Virginity has an event structure insofar as it “happens” as a radically singular event; an unforeseen election or intervention. It exceeds relation insofar as it gives or discloses itself through the body that is eroticized in its flesh. And what discloses the impossible gaze of virginity’s phenomenization more poignantly than the ecstatic and enigmatic face of the beloved? With the innovation of the

\textsuperscript{19} Marion, \textit{Being Given} 213.

\textsuperscript{20} One ought to note that this list morphs slightly as Marion’s work progresses and evolves. For example, Marion’s phenomenology of art and the place of the work of art have been given more attention and development in recent years.

\textsuperscript{21} Marion, “Banality of Saturation” 121.
saturated phenomenon Marion insists that it is possible and even necessary to take, as objects of phenomenological investigation, “not scientific but experiential types of knowledge (vision, “presences,” internal dialogues, words said in the heart, etc.)—[since] all these lived experiences of consciousness would hence appear as phenomena by full right, at least to the extent to which they are given to consciousness.”\(^{22}\) No doubt we have had trouble recognizing virginity as a phenomenon because we cannot seem to make it appear as an object of consciousness. But the notion of saturated phenomena opens a domain in which virginity becomes visible as phenomenon precisely in its invisibility. As Marion writes: “What is at stake here is offering legitimacy to nonobjectifiable, even nonbeing phenomena.”\(^{23}\) It seems quite certain at this juncture that virginity ought to be counted among saturated phenomena.

Virginity does not behave like an object, nor yet like some quality that we can attach to some object. Rather, it resists all substantial being or presence. Marion assures us that if our intuition of an object lacks concept or if our intentional grasp of the phenomenon of virginity fails, we need no longer dismiss it as lacking in phenomenality or disqualify it as a proper object of phenomenological investigation. On the contrary, this mystical obscurity may be the key to understanding that the phenomenon of virginity calls for a different kind of analysis, one that can only be undertaken with a reduction or perhaps induction into the erotic rationality that makes

\(^{22}\) Marion, “Possible and Revelation” 5.

\(^{23}\) Marion, “Banality of Saturation” 120. Two points ought to be acknowledged here. First, this extraordinary reference to “nonbeing phenomena” evidences Marion’s belief (and his ongoing debate with Derrida) that phenomenology, or at least the phenomenology of givenness, provides the tools needed to get beyond metaphysics. Secondly, although he is often accused of sliding into religious, mystical, or theological territory, Marion says saturated phenomena are not limited to “religious or spiritual phenomena” but can also include “purely historical, artistic, philosophical, or literary problems.” What they do share is a defiance of traditional objectality: “predictability and clear evidence (production), a relation to other similar phenomena and subject to the conditions of our experience (reproduction). On the contrary, they are given as unpredictable, intolerable, absolute, and unfathomable and are phenomenalized according to these forms of givenness” (Marion, “What Do We Mean By ‘Mystic’?” 6).
itself hospitable to virginity as phenomenon.\textsuperscript{24} Finally, we can take seriously the idea that despite its paradoxical and excessive nature, virginity is “given” to us; we are gifted with the manifestation of this phenomenon and despite its awesome and bedazzling nature we can use the phenomenological method to open ourselves to it.

Within the erotic rationality of the third reduction the saturated phenomenon operates not through intentionality, but through what Marion calls \textit{counter-intentionality}. Counter-intentionality does not let me shape the object of consciousness; rather it works on me—“it is therefore the saturated phenomenon as such that inverts intentionality and submits the receiver to the presence of the call.”\textsuperscript{25} Counter-intentionality seems to involve a measure of grace, since it is a mode of imposition, perhaps election. These excessive phenomena do not let me constitute them, since they constitute me.\textsuperscript{26} This seems an apt starting point to describe how we receive the

\textsuperscript{24} Does the study of saturated and/or erotic phenomena risk devolving into just so much mystical thinking? Marion acknowledges that examining saturated phenomena leads in the direction of the mystical, since the objects of its investigation have a curious and spectral nature. In fact, Marion says of saturated phenomena that “they all share a common trait—none of them presents the characteristics of the object.” Instead, they are given as “unpredictable, intolerable, absolute, and unfathomable” in a way that demands a descriptive use of the “nonpredicative language” often associated with the mystic or the mystical. Marion thinks that employing such ostensible illogic may be necessary to “bring to light the rationality of facts and doctrines that objectifying rationality will not let us touch. In effect, the stakes here involve the limits of rationality, which we intend to push back, if at all possible.” But in entering this mystical territory, Marion says that we must not despair of reason. Rather we need to learn new ways to expand our rational capacities, and routes formerly denigrated as mystical may hold the key. Saturated phenomena, like virginity, need to be approached precisely through the ways they abut the limits of knowledge and reason. Moreover, Marion is scarcely the only one whose recent work gestures towards rehabilitating the relationship between mysticism and philosophy. In \textit{Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History}, Amy Hollywood seeks to reclaim the positive function of mysticism, arguing that a renewed philosophical interest in mysticism reflects a genuine attempt to think philosophically about certain dimensions of human experience like birth, death, suffering—and, we might add, virginity and sexual-erotic love. Hollywood writes that mysticism has to do with experience, if not with knowledge, suggesting a fertile link between phenomenology and mysticism. While a scholarly investigation of the relation between phenomenology, virginity, and mysticism is beyond the scope of this thesis, and admittedly beyond the domain of my own philosophical expertise, I would like to pursue this investigative route in future scholarship. See Marion, “What Do We Mean By ‘Mystic’?” 6; Hollywood.

\textsuperscript{25} Marion, \textit{Being Given} 267. Initially, Marion frames this in keeping with the logic of the call, but his most recent work figures it more simply and yet infinitely more paradoxically as a gesture of love.

\textsuperscript{26} The saturated phenomenon challenges our idea of subjectivity, since it turns the “I” into a witness. “What I see of them, if I see anything of them that \textit{is}, does not result from the constitution I would assign to them in the visible, but from the effect they produce on me. . . . I am no longer the transcendental I but rather the witness, constituted by what happens to him or her . . . the phenomenon that befalls and happens to us reverses the order of invisibility in that it no longer results from my intention but from its own counter-intentionality” (Marion, \textit{In Excess} 113).
phenomenon of virginity. When we begin to describe virginity within traditional categories of experience we get paradoxes, anomalies, impossibilities, and irrationalities, but Marion shows us how to appropriate the recessive, evanescent, and enigmatic nature of virginity as a starting point for understanding its phenomenality. The language that Marion uses to describe saturated phenomena is remarkably similar to the language I have used to introduce the phenomenon of virginity, with its particular mode of appearing, its coming over us as a spontaneous election, its efflorescence. Indeed, saturated is how we feel in love; overcome, overwrought, full with the beloved and the desire this lover arouses with her unique demands and appeals. What happens in sexual-erotic love is that I respond to a call from my beloved—a call that I register in some measure as a physical and genito-erotic desire, but also something more, since it is attuned to Eros. The idea of shattering our care for the ego aptly describes the ontological transformation that results from the virginal efflorescence as the ego is transformed to become the lover. Finally, the metaphysical discomfort that can tempt us to cover over virginity in its phenomenality, as when we deny that there could be any authentic and ethical access to love through the sexual-erotic body, becomes understandable (if not justifiable or forgivable) as the typical egoic desire to make any saturated phenomenon into an object or concept so that it becomes comprehensible and amenable to knowledge. Once we acknowledge virginity in its phenomenality we should be less troubled that it refuses to act like an object of consciousness, because this is not its mode of phenomenalization—it is not to be grasped as an object from the existential horizon of Being, but only under the rules of what we must innovate as an erotic phenomenology.

§4 Erotic Phenomenology

A phenomenology of virginity must be an erotic phenomenology. Erotic phenomenology recognizes erotic attunement and loving as noetic activities or modes of intentionality. Elucidating erotic phenomenology is fledgling and preliminary work, especially, since
philosophy has typically denigrated love as a mere emotion or feeling, failing to recognize it as a genuine perceptual capacity for coming to know or understand the world. It is important to distinguish that the knowing undertaken by erotic phenomenology is not the kind of objective or scientific knowing that seeks to establish certitude of the object, but is akin to the biblical knowing that refers back to love itself—recall that we sometimes say that lovers come to know one another in sexual-erotic congress. Developing a phenomenology of virginity will progress in tandem with working towards illuminating an erotic phenomenology, defending the claim that cultivating erotic attunement and loving as modes of intentionality amounts to proper philosophical work.

Merleau-Ponty was the first phenomenologist to identify sexuality as a specific mode of perception, arguing that “sexual life is one more form of original intentionality . . . which, in the normal subject, endows experience with its degree of vitality and fruitfulness.” Merleau-Ponty sees that perception has an erotic structure and that the objects of the world always have sexual significance. Crediting Freud with reorienting philosophy to the importance of sexual life, Merleau-Ponty argues that erotic desire perceives the world in a way that registers or imbues it with meaning. He notes that the “objective perception is always subtended by a more intimate perception: the visible body is subtended by a sexual schema.” Merleau-Ponty’s commitment to the significance of sexual life flows from his insistence that experience is always inextricably embodied, even while the body itself remains ambiguous in its contrary subjective and objective dimensions (in this sense he is very much, and in some ways more than Sartre, a progenitor of Beauvoir’s work). He concludes: “There is interfusion between sexuality and existence, which means that existence permeates sexuality and vice versa,” summing up his brief discussion with

27 Merleau-Ponty 182.
28 Merleau-Ponty 180.
the claim that sexuality is so much of our existential constitution that to imagine a “sexless man” or “outstripping sex” would be untenable.29

While Merleau-Ponty should be credited with introducing sexuality into the phenomenological domain, and recognizing that we have an erotic intentionality that is integral to our understanding of the world and our healthy functioning therein, his work still founders on several counts. First, he fails to adequately distinguish between the sexual, the erotic, and loving, a distinction I will sharpen in Part Three, “An Ontology of Eros.” Next, his work elevates erotic intentionality, but seems to depict it as nearly devoid of emotional tenor. Even Merleau-Ponty’s well-known analyses of Schneider’s sexual dysfunctions and aphanisis seem bloodless, since he doesn’t discuss erotic attunement in keeping with the wonder, joy, fear, anxiety, and ecstasy that make this dimension of human experience so poignant. Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s erotic intercourses are perpetually described as involving “objects,” and so his work remains very much grounded in a phenomenology of perception, treating erotic intentionality as if it were just another mode of epistemological encounter. He fails to recognize that the most wondrous “object” who arouses the sexual instinct is the other person. This oversight obscures that the sexual relation is first and foremost an ethical encounter, and so the relational, (often) intersubjective, shared, and even symbiotic aspects of erotic life are ignored. Merleau-Ponty fails to see sex as an ethical possibility. What erotic attunement and the capacity to love disclose about us is that we are ethical entities and loving beings. However, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological subject remains too epistemological, a knower and not yet a genuine lover.

How can we fill in some of the gaps in Merleau-Ponty’s preliminary erotic phenomenology to create a more suitable starting point for a phenomenology of virginity? Starting with the subject, we can now ground erotic phenomenology in Marion’s insight that

29 Merleau-Ponty 196, 197–198.
induction into an erotic rationality sees the *subject* transformed into the *lover*. Erotic phenomenology grounds itself in the claim that humans are loving animals and that loving is what distinguishes us and concerns us above and beyond questions of Being or knowing, which are the preoccupations in the first two reductions. As the subject of love, the lover realizes that she is capable and worthy of both giving and receiving love. A phenomenology of givenness expresses this through the lover’s recognition that she is gifted—given her self in this exchange. Identifying the subject of erotic phenomenology as the lover also discloses her way of being in the world and her way of relating to the other beings and things that she encounters in the world. This subject of love is not a knower but a lover, situated in the world and concerned with its meaning-structure insofar as it can provide assurance to the need, more primal than the quest for knowledge, that she is loved.

We can now appreciate that the “object” of erotic phenomenology is never any object at all, since it is always perceived as having a form of otherness that prevents it from being stultified in pure objectality. Even if it is a thing, as opposed to a human other, the object of erotic phenomenology has a selfhood through which it gives itself in and through its erotic appeal. In this sense erotic phenomena are always saturated or excessive, perpetually overflowing intentionality and evading constitution. Even if the object is inanimate, I recognize that it has a givenness that is beyond my grasp.

The erotic object has a foreignness and singularity that provoke a mood of wonder, awe, and astonishment, precipitated by this radical alterity. Wonder, Descartes’ “first passion,” has a fantastic, ethical lining, since it issues an automatic prophylaxis against the drive for mastery. Wonder immediately realizes the impossibility and futility of imposing structures of experience or understanding on the erotic object, since this contravention of its freedom would automatically divest it of its astonishing alien character. Wonder forbids violence even while it sustains almost
unbearable arousal, attraction, and fascination. The attitude or orientation underwriting erotic phenomenology is thus fundamentally distinguished from what motivates the ego in the transcendental reduction, or Dasein in the ontological or existential reduction. It makes an ethical appeal that, even while it draws us near, warns us against doing violence or harm to the erotic other.

Erotic appeal has an ethical or call structure. Again, this is how and why Beauvoir says that eroticism is a movement towards the other. Thus, the way the erotic object appeals to me is more than sensible and my answer is no mere stimulus response. The erotic other sparks a desire in me, felt as innervation of my eroticized body. Erotic perception is embodied perception and it is registered as a desire that is ambiguously felt in my flesh and yet also in my spirit. Erotic attunement is at least quasiethical, since it responds to the other in its otherness and it directs itself to the embodied nature of the other. But erotic attunement has yet to respond to the erotic object. The erotic object awaits my response, and as it implores me to draw near, I now face a choice. The sexual instinct does have an aggressive lining that seeks its own gratification and it is possible for erotic attraction to be cast back to mere sexual need. Eros and wonder block mastery, but I can still override erotic intentionality and fail to moderate or temper my response to the ethical appeal or call. Desire is prone to violence in its instinct to satisfy itself. Erotic attunement knows that by satisfying this instinct I will destroy the erotic object, but I need not listen to Eros’ imploring in the face of my instinctual demands. I still have a choice.

Finally, erotic phenomenology ought to distinguish between erotic attunement and loving, which I have also identified as a noetic activity.30 Responding with love elevates the erotic object to the height of the beloved. This is a deepening of the specificity of the meaning,

30 I qualify naming this intentionality “loving,” acknowledging that the not-quite-perceptual mode that I am trying to explain here remains admittedly a bit dark. Again, working out what it means to say that loving is itself an intentional structure is an ongoing struggle for this project.
value, and significance of the other. Erotic intentionality is a movement of perception, arousal, desire, and attraction, but in order to really perceive the beloved requires a gesture of releasement or opening the self to love, a gesture of ego abdication and un-willing. Erotic intentionality is a mode of perception, a relational mode that issues and is precipitated by a call. How I respond will either cut off or deepen and augment my capacity for erotic perception, my access to the beloved phenomenon, and indeed my capacity to and for love.

Erotic phenomenology does not occur only during the sexual-erotic encounter. We can also hone this perceptual capacity through other modes of perception during which the innervated body is aroused by the ethical appeal of an embodied other. Cuddling and grooming, nursing, other physical ministrations, and perhaps even conversation, can all be forms of cultivating erotic intentionality and modes of intercourse for an erotic phenomenology. Still, a phenomenology of virginity will direct itself specifically to the sexual-erotic relation to better understand how the essential structures and the significance of this particular embodied relation offer a study in erotic phenomenology.

§5 Sexuate Phenomenologies

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of sexuality is guilty of one further, catastrophic omission. His phenomenology fails to acknowledge or take into account sexual difference and how this aspect of facticity shapes and affects our erotic lives. He sees that human sexuality is a fundamental aspect of how we are in the world, but he cannot adequately approach this domain of experience without confronting the messy, lived realities of the sexually differentiated body. Beauvoir redresses this failing most thoroughly and programmatically in *The Second Sex* (although without specifically indicting Merleau-Ponty). A phenomenology of virginity must be

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31 The idea of releasement is borrowed from Heidegger; it will receive full development in Part Five, “Grace and Releasement.”
a sexuate phenomenology that takes sexual difference into account. Some critics argue that a sexuate phenomenology is anathema to the phenomenological enterprise, since the suggestion that virginity may be experienced by sexually differentiated beings in ways that are fundamentally different seems to short-circuit the entire phenomenological enterprise. But a sexuate phenomenology need not spell the ruin of the science of essences, since it can still reveal essential structures that are ultimately shared, regardless of anatomical, biological, social, political, or other differences between sexually differentiated and distinct beings.

A phenomenology of virginity must take sexual difference into account because virginity is experienced through the conduit of the sexual-erotic body, which is always and necessarily sexed in some manner, even if this sexuation does not conform to traditional expectations of gender dualism. Existentialist phenomenology holds that the body is the instrument through which we grasp the world, but the sexuate body is malleable—because becoming men and women, including cultivating and developing our sexual-erotic potential, is an exercise that we take up and work out in culture. That is why Beauvoir’s phenomenology in *The Second Sex* contains both descriptive and prescriptive elements. While part of her project is to describe the lived experience of existing as a woman under patriarchy, she also aims to prescribe not so much *what* women ought to become in order to break the patriarchal cycle, but *that* they ought to become, accepting the possibilities of forging the meaning of their own sexuate existence through concrete political activities (like “doing philosophy”). Our sexuation is malleable to an extent that makes us responsible for how we live this difference.

The exigency of producing sexuate phenomenologies is nowhere more evident than in Beauvoir’s chapter “Sexual Initiation,” in *The Second Sex*. Her study offers a descriptive and cultural critique of sexual initiation under patriarchy, but it also stretches towards a phenomenological analysis and a normative and ethical understanding of virginity. Beauvoir
juxtaposes male and female eroticism, arguing that sexual initiation is “profoundly different” for the two sexes. The transition is said to be easier for a man, because he enjoys an integrity and autonomy in the sexual relationship that readily allies his erotic self with his role as a transcendent, self-forging being. Even the male anatomy, “simple and neat as a finger,” is perceived as easily reconcilable with a semiotics of activity and projected being. Man appropriates the object of his sexual desire as any other instrument available for his use. The virile model of sexuality sees Eros as a conquest, a project of mastery and overcoming, during which the male takes possession of the feminine other as he strives towards transcendence through the sexual act. Beauvoir casts masculine sexual desire as a longing for “domination.” Man seems “in revolt against his carnal state,” denying his corporeality in order to assert a transcendent, virile subjectivity—at the expense of acknowledging both the free subjectivity of his lover and the limits and contingencies of his own embodied existence.

Beauvoir claims that a woman’s eroticism is more complex. In patriarchal regimes the very situation of living in a female body has been socially and historically constructed so that the woman feels alienated in her physicality. The young girl learns her sexuality and her specific femininity as an apprenticeship beginning in early childhood. Much of this education conspires to make her think of her self—including her sexual being—as passive. Sexual initiation is a very decisive moment in a young woman’s training, but Beauvoir argues that the young woman often experiences her defloration as a nonparticipant. She is shown little regard for her will, her pleasure, or sometimes even her consent. Woman’s passive involvement in her virginity’s loss often makes her feel repulsed by the sexual act. She finds herself walled in by material conditions and imaginary constructions that leave her to dwell only with herself, as her body

32 Beauvoir, Second Sex 386.
33 Beauvoir, Second Sex 146.
finds its meaning and purpose immanently, in its natural reproductive capacity or its objective
sexual use for men. Beauvoir’s virgin has trouble appropriating the subject position in Eros, and
rather than a free and transcending project or a generous and ethical intersubjective act, a
woman’s erotic initiation is often perceived as something that happens to her, a fall.

The model of virile masculine sexuality depicted in *The Second Sex* proves particularly
problematic for authentic sexual relations. The masculine subject seeks to overpower the other in
the sexual encounter, which thus remains one-sided, even onanistic. The wonder of asymmetry
that is essential to realizing genuine Eros is blocked by a preoccupation with conquest. Because
man denies his carnality in his quest for transcendence during sex, he bars himself from an
appreciation of the ambiguity of his own embodied existence, and simultaneously from
encountering the other in her humanity, since recognition of this ambiguity is integral to an
authentic sexual-erotic meeting. While the masculine subject avoids metaphysical risk in Eros he
never accesses “authentic erotic reality” in its spiritual and corporeal dimensions, and he remains
uninitiated, "virgin," even infinitely.34

Beauvoir gradually reveals that perhaps we have gone too quickly in assuming that
masculine sexuality leads so automatically to transcendence. Reversing her initial claim, she then
asserts that it is woman who ultimately “lives her love in more genuine fashion.”35 Feminine
sexuality gets it right in that it accepts and even thrives on the ambiguity of the human condition.
Only with acceptance of this metaphysical situation can a woman take up her task as
transcendent being, which is always shaded by carnal contingencies and the fetters of fleshed

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34 This remarkable phrase, “authentic erotic reality,” is actually mistranslated in H. M. Parshley’s English
translation of *Second Sex*, where he renders “genuine erotic reality,” thus unfortunately losing the existential and
ethical significance of Beauvoir’s claim. Beauvoir’s original French: “. . . ce n’est pas réaliser une authentique
expérience érotique” (Beauvoir, *Deuxième Sexe II* 155). Parshley translates: “To give oneself through defiance,
through fear, or through puritanical rationalism is not to experience genuine erotic reality” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*
390).

existence—the exact vagaries masculine sexuality attempts vainly to deny. Beauvoir’s phenomenological description casts woman’s experience of Eros as a “magic spell.” This mystical language can seem initially off-putting, but what it reflects is a wondrous, ethical asymmetry that needs to be maintained in the erotic relationship, which thrives on a mutuality and reciprocity that goes beyond any sense of calculable exchange, since erotic generosity amounts to a gift.36 In the sections where Beauvoir tries to describe the authentic erotic union, she goes well beyond any historical description of women’s lived experience of defloration into new phenomenological territory, challenging the proper of Eros, and the deep meaning of our potentiality as erotic beings. The spell that Eros casts is magic because it defies logic and analysis, knowledge, or determinate measure, engaging a particular orientation of self to other that is both physical and spiritual. In this delicate union, woman feels the ambiguity of her condition and identifies herself as an essential other. This is not the paralyzing thrall of Sartrean enchantment, nor (as we will see) of Sadean play, but a mutual spellbinding that becomes an ethical source in which two bodies reach out in “unlimited transcendence” through the contact this miraculous union engenders.37

While the success of Beauvoir’s work is generated by her recognition of sexual difference, Marion and Lévinas both fail to deliver phenomenologies that properly acknowledge sexual difference, and their works suffer distortion as a result of this myopia. Lévinas’ feminine other, ghostly in her passivity, ends up utterly obscured, erased in favour of the child who really teaches the masculine subject to love. Marion’s lovers seemingly have no sex but his phenomenology has a masculinist, decidedly phallocentric progression and trajectory that may

36 See Beauvoir, Second Sex 728.

37 “The miracle is that to each lover it entrusts, for the moment and in the flesh, a being whose existence reaches out in unlimited transcendence; the possession of this being is no doubt impossible, but at least contact is made in an especially privileged and poignant way” (Beauvoir, Second Sex, 446).
have questionable resonance for women’s experience of sexual-erotic love. Certainly any phenomenology of virginity must progress as a phenomenology that acknowledges the couple as formed by two beings individuated by their sexual difference (and sexual difference is individual enough that it is also a features of couples of the ostensible “same sex”). Honouring sexual difference will consider each of the two with their unique forms of jouissance, their distinct of ways experiencing both body and affect, and their differing ascents to love.

§6 Virginity and Time

The radical significance of erotic phenomenology and, specifically, the phenomenology of virginity, can be demonstrated through a brief discussion of how it interrupts and challenges our basic notions of space and time, those two domains that circumscribe human experience. The natural attitude with respect to these structures is inadequate and even in direct contradiction to what is given to us of virginity in the phenomenological attitude, and within the logic of an erotic phenomenology. Virginity transcends the trajectory of linear time, and a phenomenological account is able to provide much visceral and resonant access to the temporal experience of the sexual-erotic encounter.

The phenomenon of virginity happens in a flash that is both spontaneous and evanescent, but it also has a formative and even scarifying effect that is infinite or eternal. What virginity does not permit is a determinate localization on the horizon of linear time. The desire to fix virginity as a distinct threshold-crossing already betrays the obsession with locating the instant of virginity’s “loss” (itself a misnomer). Virginity never takes place in an instant that would make itself amenable to calculation, either before or after the event, and this unforeseeability is precisely what Marion says accounts for its event structure. What does it mean to suggest that virginity has an event structure? Marion identified the event as a particular
kind of saturated phenomenon, excessive in quantity because of the way it simply happens or occurs. He describes the phenomenon of the event in keeping with three structures:

It is unrepeatable and irreversible in its particularity; it lacks any single cause and is thus radically disjuncted from the idea of causality and so demands an infinite hermeneutic; and finally, it cannot be foreseen, but bursts upon us.\(^{38}\)

When it comes to the event, we cannot quantify or calculate its appearance. It has an unpredictable nature and we could never conjure up or cause its appearance in time. Marion reads numerous phenomena as events—including political and cultural events, birth, death, and friendship—and it seems reasonable that virginity ought also to count as an event in this scheme. Virginity does not appear before us in the mode of an object. It has a way of occurring that seizes us, evoking an election.\(^{39}\) When it comes, it washes over us, indeed it saturates us; floods us as an event that interrupts time. Marion says that the phenomenon, in its “eventmentality,” “comes, does its thing, and leaves on its own.”\(^{40}\) While we cannot facilitate the happening of the event or force the phenomenon of virginity to appear before consciousness, I will argue that there is preparatory work we can do to open ourselves to love, and to welcome the phenomenon of virginity.

We typically think of time as a linear progression that can be measured and calculated with instruments such as clocks and calendars. Love doesn’t care about any of these instruments and in the throes of the sexual-erotic encounter we find that time is ruptured in profound and impossible ways. When we take up a phenomenological attitude, time need not adhere to the

\(^{38}\) Marion, *In Excess* 37–38.

\(^{39}\) Recall that as counterphenomena, saturated phenomena (among which we are now counting virginity as phenomenal event) have a way of calling to us and changing us in the process. When virginity comes to us, this election singles us out and demands a sort of response; when love strikes us, we must respond.

\(^{40}\) Marion, *Being Given* 159–160.
devices that the natural attitude invokes to make time sensible. Phenomenology can address the sense of a transmutation of temporal rhythms, as time expands and contracts, and is interrupted or suspended during the sexual encounter. It can honour descriptions of time standing still, stopping, flashing forwards or backwards, or otherwise mutating—without reducing such claims to mere poetry or folk-nonsense. The temporal experience of sexual initiation actually works to take us beyond and outside linear time, since love finds that the temporal structures of past-present-future have only limited intelligibility. This is how the time of virginity can also point us to infinity and eternity. Virginity’s time is slightly melancholic, tinged with loss and yet impervious to death. With the beloved I am transported to an infinite space, and yet at the same time I come up against a time that is never sufficient to let me express my love or demonstrate it. For lovers, there will never be enough time and yet the promise of the infinite makes natural time helpless in the face of love—its violence is eased, even rendered untenable. Marion says the association of Eros and eternity points to how love can overcome death, defying the radical finitude that seems to mark human existence. He writes that lovers enter an infinite time in the erotic reduction where death has no sway:

The erotic phenomenon, as it arises through the advance that makes the lover make love, paradoxically offers death no hold—precisely because it breaks free from the horizon of being. . . . The erotic phenomenon, as such, has no motive to succumb to death because it does not belong to the horizon of being.

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41 This melancholy is most apparent witnessed in and through the body of the beloved; the aging body which both loses love’s bloom and becomes more precious with the ravages of time. I would like to have written much more extensively on the relation between sexual-erotic love and the coming of age, but circumscribed this for the sake of economy. The theme of age and how it is written on the body is wondrously expressed in Lévinas, Beauvoir, and Marion and I can hopefully attend to its relation to Eros more fully at a later date.

42 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 193.
§ 7 Virginity and Space

A phenomenology of virginity challenges the way we think about space, the bodies that occupy this space, and the kinds of contact we, as embodied creatures, can have with other bodies. Our bodies are typically understood as closed entities with obdurate borders, figuring us as atomic units moving through space. Such naturalized bodies are imagined enslaved to the empirical and physical laws of space and time. As atomic units, we are trapped in bodies, which, paradoxically, we describe as capable of penetrating other bodies even while remaining eternally discrete. Our bodies are treated as having a thingy existence; little distinction has typically been made between human bodies and other objects in the world. Phenomenology questions this oversight, arguing that in the phenomenological attitude the experience of corporeal being is often lived in ways that seem enigmatically at odds with limitations of empirical laws. The human body seems to have its own rationality. We are, of course, not completely unfettered by spatiotemporal laws, but as the existentialist tradition has demonstrated, we are strangely ambiguous, since our existence is characterized by freedom and contingency. Sexual-erotic bodies in love have a particular way of escaping the governance of empirical laws, since, in the heat of sexual congress, they have the capacity to be taken into the sway, spell, or enchantment of Eros.43

The laws of physics dictate that we are always thwarted in our desire to have meaningful sexual congress with the other. Meeting the other in sexual-erotic love and crossing the border of virginity becomes a humiliating exercise in paradox and frustration. As discrete ego-identities, lovers must remain isolated and distinct, even during ostensible physical penetration. Having ruled out the possibility of a more authentic encounter, our tradition has settled for marking

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43 Beauvoir specifically calls the sexual-erotic encounter an *enchantment* or a *magic spell*. However, following from the foregoing section on erotic phenomenology we need no longer treat this difficult language as sentimental nor necessarily as philosophically precise. For more, see Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 396.
defloration with a superficial physical machination that takes place in space, such as the
aforementioned hymenal rupture, the alleged crossing of a clear empirical border. What the
phenomenological understanding of virginity as initiation into Eros directs us towards is an
experience in which virginity cannot possibly be brought about by a mere configuration of
bodies, since it does not depend on a purely physical transaction.

Adopting the phenomenological attitude, bodies meeting in sexual congress engage in a
relationship that is much more than just a collision of objects in space. Under an erotic rationality
bodies are enlivened by an agency that we still have no better name for than spirit or soul.44 What
happens to the borders of the body in love? What is the spatial phenomenology of virginity? The
idea that sexual-erotic bodies meet in space overlooks the fluid nature of sexual congress. Sex is
not just the rutting of physical bodies against one another, but a liquid exercise. Irigaray
recognizes that sex marks an exchange of bodily fluids, so to properly honour the experience will
require something like a fluid or elemental ontology. Irigaray sees the flesh body as a porous
surface with mucous membranes that permit real and immediate congress and exchange between
lovers. This offers a novel hermeneutics of the body, opening the possibility of a sexual-erotic
meeting that is still more than physical but which is facilitated and lived through the conduit of a
body whose borders have become questionable in this relation. Irigaray is particularly attentive
to how the fluidity of sex forces us to question the ordinary barriers we construct between sexual
partners, offering a mixture of bodies that is in patent defiance of the usual depiction of two
bodies meeting in space. Irigaray links the denigration of the fluid dynamics of sex to a
metaphysical preference for solids and presence that has plagued our tradition, since the
elemental philosophies of the pre-Socratics.

44 The body enlivened by soul is sometimes understood as a fleshly body, a body incarnate. I will develop
this theme in Part Three, especially in “Flesh” and “The Lover’s Touch—Intercourse.” Marion sees the flesh as
another instance of the saturated phenomenon, but the notion that the body can be enlivened with soul is no doubt
much more ancient.
Phenomenologically, sex is liquid, mucky. When I feel the other in the sexual relation I do not just feel his skin and the solid borders of his body. I find his liquidity. The willingness to engage with the fluidity of the other is a significant act of trust. Exchanging fluids is different from any solid touch; it is necessary to acknowledge the aquatic aspect of sexual-erotic congress in any phenomenologically resonant description of virginity, because it is such an integral aspect of the sexual-erotic encounter. The transgression of space marked by the sexual encounter is not experienced as a simple physicoanatomical border-crossing of sexual penetration, but a more profound meeting that somehow facilitates an alchemy through which spatial borders are nullified while maintained.

The phenomenological experience of sexual intercourse sees bodies collocate in contradiction to physical laws that decree that no two bodies can occupy the same place at the same time. Irigaray takes this up with her fluidity ontology, while Marion addresses this experiential reality in his discussion of “crossed flesh.” For Marion, lovers cross their “respective and respected flesh” and this occurs “without confusion or mixing.” And yet he also argues that this crossing can only amount to an “erased phenomenon” because the body remains too “terrestrial.” Marion’s fleshly body runs aground in the heat of sexual-erotic love. Perhaps what Marion misses is simply the elemental nature of sexual-erotic crossing as a liquid and even ethereal process, and perhaps this recognition might yet change everything in ways that he does not allow. Erotic bodies have borders that put us in meaningful contact with one another, rather

45 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 127.

46 See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 135–136, 132.

47 In this respect, Marion’s work makes apparent why a phenomenology of sexual difference is necessary to the investigation of Eros. Marion seems unable to perceive that sex is liquid and fluid, perpetually returning to the solid bodies that either penetrate one another or do not. Given his despair with any genuine bodily congress, he eventually grounds his theory out of the body—in the speech act that he calls the oath. Continuing a critique of Marion’s own phallocentric biases and the damage this does to his account of Eros, including his almost-phobic distrust of the body, will be discussed in the final section.
than keeping us separate or apart. Our bodies are responsive, they arouse one another, and we yearn to break down their limits with the intervention of the erotic desire that attracts bodies to one another. In Part Three, “An Ontology of Eros,” I will examine more closely how our erotic essence and embodiment facilitates the appearance of the phenomenon of virginity.
PART THREE

AN ONTOLOGY OF EROS

§1 Sexuate Being

Humans are sexuate beings. Insofar as we have bodies, they are sexed. This is a natural fact about human bodies, an aspect of our facticity.¹ Someday, perhaps even soon, biotechnologies may make our current sexuation obsolete in terms of either form or function, but for now our sexuate constitution is part of our natural and phenomenological way of being in the world. Sexuate bodies have sex. Our bodies reflect this sexuation through anatomical structures, hormonal make-up, and chromosomal particularities.²

But we also “have sex” insofar as we engage in a congress between bodies, in an activity that we call sex. Sex is a particular sort of bodily intercourse necessary for reproduction. It is also undertaken by humans for pleasure, and as an expression of love. Sexual intercourse is possible for us because of the particular way we are embodied, specifically because of our genital structure. Sexual pleasure is a unique gift for genitalized bodies. Our genality opens a

¹ However, the empirical fact that our bodies are sexuate may be prone to change. In Second Sex, Beauvoir begins her phenomenology of sexual difference by arguing: “In truth, to go for a walk with one’s eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that right now they do most obviously exist” (Beauvoir, Second Sex xxi).

² Our sexuate being is also reflected in stylized behaviours. Distinguishing the ostensibly biological or natural differences in sexuate beings from behaviours recognized as “masculine” or “feminine” is the basis of the sex/gender distinction. This framework reflects an early attempt to differentiate innate sexuate differences from those that are socially constructed or inculcated and conditioned by culture. I will not undertake a sustained treatment of the sex/gender distinction, since I think it was adequately dismantled in Second Sex and offers an overly simplistic framework for thinking about sexual difference.
range of experiences for us that are not available to creatures that are not thus embodied. If we were creatures with nongenitalized bodies, we might know other physical pleasures and we might experience other forms of embodied desire, stimulation, or arousal, but we would not be sexuate nor sexual. Freud’s theory of polymorphous perversity recognizes that the body’s possible erogenous zones are far more diffuse than the anatomically specific sexual-genital organs, but sexual intercourse does demand genitality to distinguish it from other forms of erotic experience. Our sexuate embodiment makes the activity of intersubjective, sexual-genital congress a natural, physical possibility for humans. In saying “sexual intercourse” I am not returning to a normative argument for the supremacy of penetrative heterosexual intercourse, as the history of compulsory heterosexuality has it. Rather, I gesture towards a broader stipulation that sexual congress involves contact of some configuration of sexual-genital organs. Sex is a physical, embodied, sensible experience in addition to any affective tenors it may also demonstrate.

Sexuate creatures experience some sexual instinct or drive. On the level of species this instinct seems necessary in order to foster reproduction and procreation, and so it has been an inescapable aspect of our existence, at least to this point in history. A shared sexual instinct is often called upon as evidence that humans are like animals, or that sex is a lower or animal activity. There is no doubt that humans can and do experience the blind and singular drive of instinctual sexual impulse. Freud defined instinct as an internally generated drive: “An instinct,

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3 The very notion of genitality is poorly understood. In the best of all possible worlds a phenomenology of genitality would precede this work, since a robust phenomenological understanding of our sexuality and genitality seems lacking. While this undertaking is beyond the scope of the current work, I would begin such an investigation starting from the Freudian insight that genitality is something more diffuse than we often consider—that it points not just to a blunt organ structure, but to a stage of development in the human which has a much more complex structure than we ordinarily suppose.

4 As new reproductive technologies make it possible for us to reproduce out of bodies it may be that the sexual instinct has no purpose anymore and exists as a negative and tiresome tension from a point of view that reduces the function of sex to a reproductive teleology.
then, is distinguished from a stimulus by the fact that it arises from sources of stimulation within the body, that it operates as a constant force and that the subject cannot avoid it by flight, as is possible with an external stimulus.”

The Freudian formulation sees that sexual instinct or libido is generated from within, and is experienced as a form of discomfort that demands satisfaction or abatement. The blindness of sexual instinct is what gives it an aggressive and unethical character. As pure, internally derivative need there is nothing other-directed about libido. If it remains at the level of drive then sex seems a solipsistic and onanistic pursuit. Alphonso Lingis describes Freudian libido as unethical, since it is always blind and mute, a slippery oozing-out into the world, gormlessly pushing against foreign surfaces in a constant searching for nothing. He writes: “The libidinal impulse is dismembering rather than integrating, wanton and not purposive, profaning and violating and not issuing in contemplative bliss.”

Amoral, all it desires are surface-effects, to feed its glugging Frankensteinian animus: “Wet inner surface of the lip dragged over the shoulders, ejaculating penis rolling over her breasts, labia rubbing over his nose, two lovers are sea cucumbers turning their organs inside out.”

But human sexuality is also capable of more, since we have a capacity to take up sex as an erotic and loving activity. Virginity helps us to clarify the distinction between sexual instinct and erotic attunement. While the phenomenon of virginity could not take place without sexual intercourse, sexual intercourse alone is not sufficient to convince virginity to manifest itself. This

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5 Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* 128.

6 Lingis 53.

7 Lingis 27–28.

8 Heidegger’s existential analysis in *Being and Time* argues that Dasein has a unique relation to death. Death, and specifically the imminence of my own death, brings to light structures of temporality and finitude that have the potential to transform my way of being-in-the-world and to endow it with meaning. I argue that Dasein has a similarly unique relation to sex. When we take up what Heidegger might call an authentic orientation to the possibilities that sex opens up for us we find sex is every bit and perhaps even more disquieting and anxiety-provoking than death. Sex has the potential to shatter all the borders of my living self, even and especially the mine-ness that Heidegger thought guarantees my being. When we begin to experience sex as an erotic exercise, as more than a sexual instinct-response, we begin to glimpse how this power is operative in the sexual-erotic relation.
leads to the initially counterintuitive conclusion that sexually active and even sexually reproducing individuals may yet to have been given access to the phenomenon of virginity and may thus remain uninitiated into Eros. Virginity only appears when the sexual drive is animated by a desire, arousal, or yearning that is beyond mere instinct, since erotic desire does not well itself up from within the dark confines of my own body, but rather manifests as an arousal that the other provokes in me. This reflects a potential disjunction between a bare and instinctual sexual or libidinal drive and another kind of fecundity that our sexual instinct can point towards, once enlivened by Eros. Once divorced from procreative expectations, we might even imagine that this sexual-erotic capacity could become heightened in its ethical sense. Elevated by erotic attunement, our sexuate nature illuminates possibilities for being or living that extend beyond the demands of instinct and reproduction.

§2 Erotic Being

Humans are erotic beings. This is a phenomenological claim, and our erotic constitution should be distinguished from the natural and empirical fact of our sexuate existence. Our erotic potential takes us beyond a simple sentience, opening a new dimension of perceptual capacity. Erotic attunement reflects a way of being aroused by the world. Erotic arousal isn’t the simple stimulus-response mechanism engendered by the senses; rather, it is a more primordial and spontaneous perceptual structure. And it is more profound and intuitive than any simple

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9 The distinction being made here is between a desire that arises from within me, as a selfish demand to quell or satisfy some internal need all my own, versus the erotic arousal provoked by the other, a desire incited in me when I become erotically attuned to the wondrous appearance of the sexuate other before me.

10 Erotic attunement is a form of noetic activity, an act of consciousness or a mode of intentionality. If we accept that erotic attunement—or even loving!—is a mode of intentionality, then it seems we can take up almost any object in the mode of loving. This should not be understood as a mere emotional response to the object, but rather as a more epistemological approach, although never in an investigative mode that would demand absolute knowledge or mastery of the beloved object. This erotic intentionality is underwritten by an impetus to respond in a nurturing and caring way to the object with which the erotic attunement is now involved in a relational sense that makes it fundamentally different from any pure enjoyment and/or mastery of the object.
emotional response. Erotic perception reveals an intelligent and empathically responsive attunement. When we receive the world erotically, it arouses us and we yearn to respond. The world itself appeals to us as erotic, and creates an intentionality within us as we move towards the world in answer. Existing erotically is a way of dwelling that simultaneously engages those parts of the human that we identify as body, mind, and soul.

When we respond to the world erotically, we see that the world gives itself to us, we are aroused by this world, and we hear its call. In order to respond to the erotic nature of the world we must properly attune ourselves, but it is yet for us to decide how we will answer this ethical appeal. Erotic attunement remains a bit wild. It is quasiethical insofar as when I am erotically attuned to the world I see that there is something else from out there that appeals to me in its unique singularity. It provokes me with this uniqueness and I am captivated by its wonder. At the same time, erotic attunement opens a gap that waits for my response. While it is tempting to consume the desired object, erotic intentionality knows that such a movement must be resisted, since this would destroy the wondrous caller, source of the appeal. This is the egoic impulse to make the desired object, although always an other and nothing less than a saturated phenomenon, conform to my own understanding. But already, in erotic attunement I know that this move would be ruinous. Aroused, I want to respond lovingly to the object. But this is disquieting, since I know that it puts my egoic security at risk. In the sexual encounter enlivened by Eros, the other arouses me in her singularity and it is now for me to respond. Only if I respond in respect of Eros can I open myself up to the possible appearance of the phenomenon of virginity.

At first it might seem that our sexuate nature, which I have identified as part of our facticity, is most fundamental to our being, but erotic disposition and attunement is actually primordial. Derrida addresses the primacy of our erotic being in his essay “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” wherein he credits Heidegger with glimpsing an erotic
dimension that precedes our sexuate being.\textsuperscript{11} Heidegger remains ostensibly mute on the question of \textit{Dasein}'s sexuation; however, Derrida locates a passage in a 1928 Marburg lecture where Heidegger casts our sexuate constitution as a “dispersion,” an “organizing factor,” the factual and concrete manifestation of a more innate erotic disposition or essence.\textsuperscript{12} Derrida argues that \textit{Dasein} has what we might call a primordially erotic constitution, with these dispersal characteristics reflecting the embodied or incarnate manifestation of this propensity.\textsuperscript{13} This erotic constitution reflects a possible way of being-in-the-world, an orientation that is open to us by virtue of our essence as erotic beings. Our erotic nature seems, on this reading, to be part of our fundamental constitution. Sexuate being amounts to how we live this erotic constitution, how we can be erotically, as part of our factual and thrown existence; but Derrida’s Heideggerian reading points to a more elemental way of being sexed. In his article, Derrida uses \textit{sexed} in a two-pronged way.

My decision to distinguish the sexuate nature of bodies from a primordially erotic constitution is an attempt to sharpen the Derridean distinction. On Derrida’s reading \textit{Dasein} may be asexual or sexually neutral and yet retain a fundamentally erotic constitution or at least the capacity to exhibit the same. To quote Derrida at length:

\begin{quote}
If [D]asein as such belongs to neither of the two sexes, that doesn’t mean that its being is deprived of sex. On the contrary, here one must think of a pre-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Derrida takes up this discussion subtending the question of sexual difference. He notes that Heidegger seems to overlook the question of whether \textit{Dasein} is sexed. I will examine sexual difference in Part Three, “The Erotic World,” wherein I argue that metaphysics has constrained sexual difference through the application of a false duality that has limited and distorted how we think about virginity. However, for now my reading of this article will focus on how Derrida’s discussion can shed light on what I distinguish as sexual and erotic being.

\textsuperscript{12} See Derrida, “Geschlecht” 65.

\textsuperscript{13} While I like Derrida’s reading of Heidegger I think that it is perhaps too charitable. Rather than attributing the position Derrida develops as a close reading of Heidegger, I prefer to see this as Derrida using Heidegger to stretch Heidegger beyond the limits of his own thinking, although I also acknowledge that Derrida might not think that this distinction is entirely meaningful or relevant!
differential, rather a pre-dual sexuality—which doesn’t necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated, as we shall later verify. Then, from that sexuality, more originary than the dyad, one may try to think to the bottom of a “positivity” and a “power” that Heidegger is careful not to call sexual, fearing undoubtedly to reintroduce the binary logic that anthropology and metaphysics always assign to the concept of sexuality. Here indeed, it is a matter of the positive and powerful source of every possible “sexuality.”

Derrida erases the existential, fundamental/ontological significance of sexual difference for Heidegger without obliterating a primary erotic way of being in the world. What we call sexuality may be a social construct, something we can study in the philosophies of life, but humans have an erotic potentiality that runs much deeper.15

How is our erotic constitution related to our sexuate being? When the sexual encounter is elevated to the erotic, my erotic perception attunes me to the call of the other through the conduit of the sexual-erotic body. What I feel in and through sexual arousal is now more than a call emanating from some dark region in my own craving body; rather, it is an arousal that comes from the wondrous entity that is the singularly embodied other. Erotic attunement sees me aware of the other in her otherness. It is a pre-ethical attunement; it is not yet fully ethical, since I have not yet, in my erotic attunement, responded to this other. I have opened myself sufficiently to receive this call, but in the erotic moment I can still return to myself. The sexual drive is a

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14 Derrida, “Geschlecht” 60.

15 I read sexuality as something we take up in culture. If sexuate being is natural, and our erotic being is part of a more primordial, phenomenological constitution, then sexuality is the taking up of our sexuate being and its attendant practices to give them meaning in culture. As Foucault might suggest, sexuality is a discursive formation. I resist pushing the Foucauldian line too far, since he would argue that any sexual or erotic being we manifest is really sexuality, a discursive implant, all the way down. I think this position denies the force of our lived experience as sexual-erotic beings, where we know with a knowledge beyond certainty that something of Eros is real.
response to my own internal need, but Eros is a response to the world itself, an awareness of another that amounts to a call first and foremost to love.

Our erotic potential points to a capacity to conduct ourselves as passionate and loving beings. It establishes a way that we can be attuned to the world, but this potentiality needs development and cultivation. There are erotic activities that have nothing to do with sexuality, ecstasies of the flesh which are not sexual, such as the sensual pleasure of feeding, the profound suffering of illness, the erotic sensation (beyond sensibility) of rain on skin. It may in fact turn out that nearly all human activities have a potential to be erotic, since this amounts to a way of dwelling, although we do not exist in this mode all of the time. But like a sense (although our erotic capacity should not properly be confused with a sense), our erotic orientation can be fostered, nurtured, and grown like the perfumer’s nose, the chef’s palate, perhaps even like the psychic’s telepathy?\(^\text{16}\)

Irigaray makes an important distinction between perception and sensibility. She argues that perception goes beyond sensibility because it can perceive the invisible, and because it has an ethical dimension insofar as it always remains aware that we are perceiving something else, something other. She writes: “Perception implies: I am not you, you are irreducible to me. The one who looks and the one who is looked upon cannot be substituted for each other.” She continues:

Perceiving you does not involve losing me or you, as long as I accept this perception is not simply mine. . . . My perception must remain a path towards

\(^{16}\) In this way, I distinguish erotic arousal and attunement from mere sexual arousal. Marion is suspicious of the sexual drive. He thinks that its capacity for “automatic” arousal betrays Eros by short-circuiting its ethical potential, because under the sway of sexual drive the lover is willing to satisfy his urge in and through any sexual partner, now reduced to substitutable love object and no longer perceived nor honoured in an ethical register. See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 164.
you, towards us, an us which is always disunited, distanced, always a ‘two’ irreducible to one.¹⁷

In this sense our erotic perception seems relational, even dialogical. It fosters a sense that we are in an attuned exchange with the world, and most notably with the similarly embodied others whom we encounter through this perceptual capacity. Developing our erotic capacity is consistent with a phenomenology of givenness.

Sexual congress is a way that we can live and cultivate Eros in and through a particular sort of encounter with the other. Virginity marks the event when our sexual practices, deepened by our erotic perceptual intuitions, open an aperture to love. Love is a way of existing in the world and with others that breaks through the confines of ego-identity to make us dwell more reverently.¹⁸ Existing erotically is a unique potentiality for humans, but Eros is a capacity that we can cover over, deny, forget, or possibly even obliterate. Irigaray argues that we have nothing less than a duty to cultivate our sexuate being. She says: “There remains work to complete: a house to build, a love to invent, a spirit to cultivate.”¹⁹ Nurturing our sexual-erotic potential is essential to this task.

§3 Loving Animals

Erotic attunement facilitates our existence as loving beings. As loving beings we subordinate egoic concerns to some beyond in the name of love. Erotic perception teaches us that the world arouses us, calling to us in meaningful ways, and makes us not just duty-bound but

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¹⁷ Irigaray, To Be Two 40, 43.

¹⁸ Could it be that proper sexual-erotic intercourse, elevated with that measure of grace that permits the virginal event to burst forth, teaches us to hallow? And isn’t learning to hallow just how Heidegger counsels that we humans, impoverished in this historical epoch diminished of love, can perhaps cajole divinity to again return to this world?

¹⁹ For Irigaray, taking up this work will always and necessarily include the project of working through and perfecting sexual difference. Irigaray, To Be Two 4.
desirous to respond—even at the expense of our own autonomous existence. Love is self-sacrificing. Through Eros, we find ourselves able to act lovingly. Erotic being is a heightened perceptual capacity, a sensuality beyond sensibility, underwritten by an arousal that is quasiethical. The erotic world calls and responds to us in its own rhythmic ways. Our erotic propensity reveals our condition as loving beings because it shows that we can foster empathic, sympathetic, feeling responses to the objects and others that we encounter in the world. This is why Beauvoir says that “eroticism is a movement towards the Other,” but love is yet more, since it not just recognizes but is devoted to the other in her singularity, even to the point of sacrificing the self for this beloved.20

The proper sexual-erotic encounter takes up sex as ethical work, as a work of love. Sexual-erotic relations are a unique congress demanding more than the knowing inquiry of an objective thing. Erotic attunement makes me aware of a sensual, passionate frisson of energy between lover and beloved. This frisson has an agency, urgency, and responsiveness that demands consideration. The call and the response are generated not just by instinctual need, but also by an ethical exigency to engage the other in a meaningful encounter—even at the expense of my hard-won self. Virginity marks the moment when the physical machinations of sex draw me (via the erotic) beyond myself, and place me in the presence of a love that shatters my singular desires and yet still resists me. In the presence of this love I could never delude myself into thinking that erotic fusion might permit me any fantastic mastery or autarky. Virginity is the instant in which this revelation of love bursts forth from the sexual-erotic encounter through the living conduit of our very human bodies. It reminds us of the potential inherent in each of us to reach beyond the limits of our bodies for the sake of the beloved and for love itself.

20 Beauvoir, Second Sex 446.
Marion distinguishes man as the loving animal: “Man is revealed to himself by the
originary and radical modality of the erotic. Man loves—which is what distinguishes him from
all other finite beings, if not the angels.” Marion thus de-centres Descartes’ classification of the
human as a thinking thing, simultaneously challenging the modern philosophical preoccupation
with metaphysics, epistemology, and questions of being and knowing. Marion finds a thread
within Descartes that dismantles the entire Cartesian edifice. The fundamental Cartesian search
to find the grounds of knowledge and the quest for certainty (beginning with certainty of our own
existence) is immediately toppled by a vanity that demands to know why any of this matters.
Marion says this vanity can only be overcome with the assurance that we are loving—that is, that
we can love and that we are loved. This is why Marion calls for an erotic rationality where
love’s logic supersedes sensibility or even thought, simultaneously demonstrating how and why
with the saturated phenomenon it cannot be a question of knowledge.

Despite Marion’s insistence on the overarching height of the erotic register, he ultimately
seeks a sanitized love that denigrates human sexual-erotic activities, questioning their viability as
a conduit to Eros. He argues for the univocity of love, looking to close the distinction between
agape and Eros, between charity and a concupiscent or carnal love, between divine,
unconditional love and desirous love. In so doing, he covers over the significance of a love that
is specifically sexuate, carnal, and embodied. His tone reiterates the sanitization of the sexual-
erotic relation that has perpetually sidelined the philosophical significance of sexual-erotic

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21 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 7. The gendered language here is in keeping with Marion. I’ve elected to
keep this language, because while I do believe that he intends “man” to stand in for “humanity,” I also read his
gendered language as reflective of the masculine bias that persists in his text.

22 In Marion’s vocabulary, assurance is akin to certainty but it applies to the validation sought in the erotic
reduction as opposed to the certainty required to anchor knowledge.
existence. My study aims to elevate sexual-erotic love in its particularity and specificity, not as an ultimate form of love (for who could purport to be an authority on any such ordering?), but as a singular and unique gift to humans. Rather than trying to blur the multiple ways we can accede to love, we need to examine them in their specificity, including sexual-erotic love. Virginity, the event of an initiation into Eros, marks the occasion of love’s efflorescence through the particular aperture of the eroticized sexuate body. It is this incarnate love, so different from a divine love, which yet teaches us to be respective and responsive to a divinity that is both immanent and transcendent.

§4 The Erotic World

An ontology of Eros claims that we are erotic beings because of our innate capacity to cultivate an erotic attunement to the world. This is because the world itself is an erotic place for us. The idea of an erotic cosmology is not new. Foreshadowing Freud, Empedocles argues that the universe expands and contracts in keeping with the polar forces of Love and Strife—a perpetual process of binding and separating. Eros has been gradually leeched from the philosophical domain, but phenomenology can help reinvigorate philosophy as an erotic discipline, since, from the very beginning, phenomenology has demonstrated an erotic agenda. A phenomenology of givenness sees that we are always in a relational, quasierotic contact with the world despite our best (and not infrequent) attempts to cover up this way of being. Marion expresses the erotic nature of the world with his intimation that all phenomena are saturated to some extent, allowing us to appreciate that all phenomena, indeed the world itself, is in constant pulsating and energetic congress with us. This points to a world that is suddenly much more

23 Marion is heavily influenced by Lévinas, who initially celebrated the ethical potential in Eros, only later to redact and sanitize this initiative in favour of the ethical possibilities of language. Marion, with his emphasis on the oath, ultimately takes a similar path.

24 I am employing the idea of world broadly, in the Heideggerian sense of the place in which we dwell.
alive than the thing-world of empirical science with its regular laws and behaviours. The basic mode of knowing in an erotic world becomes an intercourse, a loving intentionality. While this erotic understanding of the world begins to shine through with the mature Heidegger, it receives its most robust treatment in Irigaray.

4.1 Heidegger

I read Heidegger’s world as profoundly erotic. The mature Heidegger advances a picture of mortals in perpetual congress with a world that they care about and that they are duty-bound to cultivate and nurture. As erotic creatures, we find that we live or dwell in an erotic world, since dwelling is part of our particular mode of living or inhabiting we must learn to foster an erotic attunement. The seeds for this erotic metaphysics are already in being sown in Being and Time, where Heidegger distinguishes Dasein as that Being which demonstrates a singularly caring orientation not just to its own existence, but also to the world without which it could not properly exist. Heidegger recognizes that Dasein is always already thrown into the world and that we take up our worldly existence in a way that demonstrates that our being-in-the-world matters to us. From the very beginning, Dasein is aroused by the world to which it responds with careful concern.

Heidegger’s view that we are erotic beings inhabiting an erotic cosmos is perhaps most evident in his essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking.” In this work, Heidegger brings to light three ways that humans are on earth, three characteristic activities or propensities that define mortals as such. They are: dwelling—an active process, “The way in which you and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is buan, dwelling”; building—linked to dwelling as part and parcel of cultivating and constructing worlds; and thinking—which also amounts to a project of world-building, since it is “inescapable for dwelling,” and must be undertaken “for the sake of
As dwellers on earth, we are perpetually engaged in meaningful intercourses with the world we inhabit. It seems that Heidegger’s dwelling is, in short, the activity of living erotically. Building, dwelling, and thinking ought not to impose on world. These activities involve a releasing and letting go that amounts to a caring and cultivating of the primal oneness of the fourfold (earth, sky, divinities, and mortals) so that the world can open up unto itself. In building and dwelling we safeguard and spare the world, freeing it unto its own essence. Heidegger argues: “Mortals are in the fourfold by dwelling. But the basic character of dwelling is safeguarding.” An erotic metaphysics will remain perpetually attentive to the fact that in arousing me, the world calls for me to open myself for its reception and efflorescence, not to go out and conquer or penetrate it. The world asks me to create a free space for it to present itself, for it to come into Being. There is an exigency to see the flourishing of the world through participating in our essential or characteristic activities, simultaneously working towards perfecting or cultivating our being as erotic, loving entities. Maintaining an erotic attunement to the world fosters a dwelling that is caring, concernful, nurturing, and life-sustaining. When we dwell, orienting ourselves to the world erotically, we care, and eventually we can love. The Heideggerian critique of metaphysics might even be interpreted as castigating philosophy for forgetting that we dwell erotically.

Although written prior to “Building Dwelling Thinking,” we actually glimpse the potentially horrific consequences of forgetting to honour the erotic nature of the world in “The

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26 While Heidegger resists interpreting his own work as a traditional ethics, there does seem to be some veneer of responsibility, care, nurturing, and even duty that also underwrites contemporary ethics, notably the so-called care ethics developed by feminist scholars.

27 Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 352.

28 This fundamental opening of the self is also a necessary gesture for inviting the efflorescence of the phenomenon of virginity.
Question Concerning Technology.” Heidegger argues that in the age of technology, one way of “bringing-forth” or revealing the world reigns supreme. He calls this way of seeing the world as “enframing,” and argues that according to such a world view all the stuff of the world exists as a standing reserve with energy to be harnessed for human use-value. Enframing and challenging forth divest the world of its erotic character, intervening before the world can arouse us, before the world can reach out and call to us on its own terms. In enframing, rather than sparing the world, we want to master it and make it useful to and for us, and this is fundamentally opposed to a phenomenology whose very method demands care and love. If we forget to dwell erotically, then before the world can reveal itself to us it is silenced, which is the very danger of forgetting or obscuring the erotic world.

4.2 Irigaray

Irigaray continues the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics, but in so doing she offers an alternative metaphysics intended as a “positive horizon” for developing human identity, a backdrop of world against which to cultivate and create ourselves. Alison Stone argues that Irigaray’s philosophy of nature offers a viable alternative to the metaphysics of substance.29 Stone reads Irigaray’s essentialism as grounded in a realist ontology and in a sophisticated, innovative cosmology and philosophy of nature in which “nature is permeated at every point by rhythmical duality, and strives for the full realization of this duality.”30 Nature itself is cast as

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29 Irigaray is concerned that the metaphysics of substance is often in direct contradiction to our direct, phenomenological experience of living in the world. She argues that we need to radically transform science, philosophy, and even our ideas about theology and divinity to reflect this alternative metaphysics. For more, see: Irigaray, Ethics of Sexual Difference 18. It needs to be acknowledged that my interpretation of Irigaray is heavily influenced by Stone’s excellent article, “The Sex of Nature: A Reinterpretation of Irigaray’s Metaphysics and Political Thought.” This stance is somewhat radical, since recent interpreters have been more comfortable arguing that Irigaray’s essentialist claims are strategic, even playful and mocking. While no doubt Irigaray employs a playful mimesis as part of her discursive arsenal, I am compelled by Stone’s argument that Irigaray’s essentialist position is a realist stance.

30 Stone 61.
sexuate with this binary polarity ever working towards its own perfectibility in a mutually
symbiotic and rhythmic intercourse that seems very erotically charged (and very reminiscent of
Empedocles). Irigaray’s thought returns to the elemental nature of life, forging a cosmology and
philosophy of nature based on elemental rhythms and fluid dynamics. This intelligence is
diffused throughout nature, evidenced by the seasons, planetary orbits, and other natural cycles.

Irigaray leverages her philosophy of nature to produce a fluid mechanics that overwrites
the current scientific model that privileges solid and present bodies. In her reading, our bodies are
not mechanical entities out there in space; nor are they solid, impenetrable units. They are bound
by a porous skin that constantly responds to stimulations, sensations, rhythms, and signals that
they receive from the outside world. This fluid ontology supports genuine and meaningful erotic
congress between bodies. Our bodies are in constant states of exchange and flux with others,
and this perpetual erotic congress proves just how we interpret and experience the world. Stone
explains:

The contact that the bodily fluids make with the exterior is basically perceptual,
consisting in an activity of making sense of what is outside. . . . Irigaray
distinguishes mere sensation from perception which is “mediated” by “thought,”
thereby pointing to the active, interpretive, nature of perception. Bodily fluids
engage in an ongoing activity of making sense of, or interpreting, their

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31 This is further supported by Irigaray’s works on mucus. Mucus is an important trope in Irigaray’s
tends to offer a more phenomenologically resonant description of what it is like to inhabit a feminine body. She
argues that the mucous membranes are surfaces of the body that are in constant, intimate contact with the world.
When we think about erotic congress, the mucous membranes permit meaningful immediate and direct physical
contact with the body of the beloved, who remains forever barred to us on a traditional reading. Although mucus
permits genuine contact with the other, real comingling and mixture, it does not perceive such contact as absolute
fusion, which would be a potentially dangerous subsuming of difference that contemporary philosophy is keen on
protecting.
The spontaneous way in which the rhythms of bodily fluids evolve indicates that these fluids think, passionately.32

In this erotic schema, intercourse between bodies is perpetual, profound, and real—even the most primary experience of being in the world. Sometimes Irigaray appears to go so far as to eroticize not just human bodies, but the entire universe. This is no naïve animism, but a claim about our perceptual capacities and a human capacity to dwell in a world that can disclose itself to us in a way that is erotic. It’s not just because the world is erotic, but because we are erotic too that the world is given to us in this way.

Irigaray’s work is important because it moves from an erotic ontology to mandating Eros as an ethical demand. A world that we perceive as erotic provokes and stimulates us in a way that demands an ethical reply. Underwriting her metaphysics is the belief that the cosmos seeks to realize harmony or happiness through its rhythmic intercourses, and she is firm in warning of the catastrophic destruction that has issued (and will issue) from our failure to acknowledge the fundamentally erotic nature of the world. Humans are depicted as having a responsibility or a call to work out our elemental rhythms through realizing sexual difference in culture itself. Irigaray permits us to argue that sex is a conscious affirmation of how we are in the world, a way of exploring the world’s erotic nature. Figuring the world as an erotic place asserts the importance of fostering systems and relations that facilitate erotic communication and relations with the world and among its human inhabitants. Heidegger and Irigaray both offer phenomenologically sophisticated arguments highlighting the erotic nature of the world and the possibility that Eros can offer a model for philosophy to think about metaphysics and ontology as well as ethics.

32 Stone 67–68.
4.3 Dwelling in Love

Sex, taken up erotically, is a special form of nurturing our potential as mortals and it can help us in taking up the custodial task of cultivating and caring for the world. Virginity is the event that reveals our ethico-erotic potential, available to us through the aperture of the sexuate body. Existing erotically attunes us to a responsibility to cultivate the world, but it also lets us cultivate our own essential development as nurturing, caring, and loving entities. We can develop our erotic potential through our sexuate nature and through sexuality itself as a cultural and social project. Although the erotic revelation is ephemeral, it can have reverberations that transform our notion of our place in the world and the way we are with one another. In and through Eros we find a new way of existing, the wisdom inherent in which should continue to resonate in everyday life even after the virginal efflorescence has faded. Sex is not the only activity that can open us up to dwelling more erotically but it is one of the most visceral and compelling. In the sexual encounter I can offer the shelter of my body as a home for the other. Inviting her to dwell in me, I open a space within myself where the other can feel nurtured and sustained.33 This is a place for her to grow in her potential as a loving being, in and through our bodily congress and with the beyond that facilitates virginity’s efflorescence. Perhaps it is not wrong to suggest that when the virginal event comes, even if just for an instant, the divinities gather too?

§5 My Beloved

Virginity is symbiotically provoked. It is an intersubjective and relational phenomenon engendered by a couple’s participation in the act of sexual-erotic love. Like language, it is impossible to imagine that virginity could offer itself to an isolated individual. The beloved is the

33 Heidegger defines space as “a place that is freed for settlement and lodging” (Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 356).
other who opens me up to the possibility of witnessing the phenomenon of virginity. If there is no beloved, virginity will not appear. I can engage in the sex act with a partner who is not beloved, but the other must accede to the height of the beloved for virginity to appear.

The beloved achieves a higher rank than any mere object of sexual pleasure, and even more than any other sexual partner whom I may treat with ethical responsibility and respect without loving. In this way the beloved is more than the ethical other who commands me to act in conformity with the ethical law. The beloved engenders a love that is singular and sacrificial, responding to the most individuating, nonsubstitutable aspects of this other. The entire economy of desire is challenged in this singular relation, since I do not desire anything of utility or calculable worth. The beloved is a specific kind of sexual partner, one who arouses me and to whom I respond with an eroticized sexual desire for love. I want more from my beloved than the instinctual release of sex or even the reciprocal fulfillment of some quasicontractual sexual encounter.

Developing my sexual-erotic potential involves agency or will, a generous opening of my self to the beloved. In this congress with the beloved I put myself in metaphysical and existential jeopardy. When I offer myself to the beloved in erotic passion I must will myself to be truly vulnerable to this other. Beauvoir says that each partner, “in the midst of the carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live out in their several fashions the strange ambiguity of existence made body.” In love, I freely open my own borders, even wishing that I could facilitate my own utter penetrability whereas I know this is actually impossible. Love transcends the ego because it yearns to rend itself so that the soul itself may be with the beloved. The force of sexual-erotic love comes from the fact that it involves such risk. Beauvoir

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34 Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 728.
characterizes the sexual relation as “fraught with difficulty and danger”—but without opening oneself to the dangers of this activity virginity will never appear in its unique phenomenality.  

Sex involves putting the body itself at risk and so both partners must be similarly embodied. Still, the other remains strange and foreign to me in the particularity of her flesh and this is how she arouses me. Her foreignness is part of what provokes me, what inspires the awe that precipitates my erotic response. The beloved provokes a sense of wonder in me, compelling me to offer myself to her with my vulnerable body, bare and exposed, willing to break myself open and sacrifice myself to her. If the ego seeks to know and possess the other, I, the lover, move towards the beloved with a very different intention; but love makes me willing to yield. This voluntary submission, experienced as physical and embodied, recognizes that in opening myself to the beloved during the act of eroticized sexual love I offer more than my body. I also give over my ego-self to the inevitable transformation that occurs with an election to love.

That my beloved must be similarly embodied rules out several types of sexual interactions as incapable of precipitating the phenomenon of virginity. This does not invalidate any of these as possible, even pleasurable or meaningful sexual experiences in their own right, but they are not among the sexual-erotic relations that cultivate virginity, mostly because they cannot be loving relations, since the partners in these disqualified encounters could not approach each other on suitably ethical grounds.

First, because virginity is symbiotically provoked, masturbation cannot bring about the phenomenon. I can learn a great deal about the functional possibilities of bodies through onanistic activity, but I cannot open myself to the existential risk that the sexual-erotic relation involves if I encounter only myself. In short, I do not meet the loving threshold of one willing to

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subordinate my ego-self for the other in love, and I cannot learn the ethico-erotic lesson that comes from putting my own flesh and indeed my own being at risk.

Secondly, intercourse with other animal species will not bring about a proper initiation into Eros. Humans can have pleasurable—or exploitative—sexual relations with other forms of organic life, but animals do not share our erotic orientation to the world and so we cannot engage with them at the level of existential and metaphysical risk that makes sex so poignant for humans. Animals do not experience love in the same manner as humans and they cannot offer themselves as a proper beloved.

Thirdly, virginity as a phenomenon cannot occur when a human enjoys sexual intercourse with a technological prosthetic (i.e. a computer, or a prosthetic or virtual body or body part). The prosthetic is not a fleshly, incarnate body and although I may gain sexual pleasure through this simulacrum-partner, it cannot respond to me by putting its own flesh at risk and it can never experience the event of virginity so it cannot partner with me to provoke virginity.

Finally, intercourse can only take on the proper tenor to invite the phenomenon of virginity if it is voluntary and consenting. This perhaps also raises the question of whether both partners must be “in love” in order for the phenomenon of virginity to manifest. Insofar as both partners must put themselves at risk in the sexual-erotic relation it seems that if just one partner makes an erotic gift of herself while the other holds back, virginity itself will recognize that this

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36 Animals do not experience the world erotically, since they do not *dwell* in the same way as we humans. They may no doubt have other perceptual capacities from which we are similarly barred, but however else they perceive the world these different forms of life are not erotic on the same terms as the human, nor in a way that gives humans phenomenological access.

37 Beauvoir recognizes that the sexual act must be voluntary and consenting for it to be satisfying for both partners. In *Second Sex*, she argues that the man’s masterful attitude and sense of entitlement often robs the sex act of its erotic character. However: “The difficulties of the first experience are readily overcome if love or desire evokes the full consent of both partners; the delight the lovers give and take in mutual recognition of their freedom is what lends strength and dignity to physical passion.” Mutual consent is integral to the successful erotic relationship (not just the “difficulties of the first time”)—love that is one-sided turns out to be no love at all. See Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 444.
is an improper time to show itself; a sad consequence for those willing to love but who yet find themselves with partners who are, for whatever reason, unwilling or incapable of doing so.  

While the phenomenon of virginity will not manifest itself without the presence of a beloved this by no means necessitates that every sexual encounter must be realized as a form of love. Nor does it necessarily follow that the other or partner that I engage in such unloving intercourses is mistreated or abused, since we can approach each other ethically to foster mutually beneficial and even enjoyable sexual-erotic unions that do not involve love. But in the presence of the beloved, sex is raised to a singular ethical height. This requires nothing on her part, so much as it does my willingness to open myself to see the other as potentially beloved. Learning to see and to treat the other as beloved is a necessary step in coming to sexual-erotic love (but not a necessary step in having sex). It is also recognizable as a stage in the development of the ego, since Marion saw that in order to enter an erotic rationality it is important for the ego to understand the demands of renouncing itself in the name of love. Perhaps the biggest barrier to accepting the other as beloved is my willingness (or not) to shatter my ego, to subject myself to such inevitable ruin—for falling in love changes everything. This reveals the paradox inherent in the question of how any other ever rises to the height of the beloved, since love is simultaneously provoked in me through a measure of grace that I can never effect, even while it is necessary for me to work at opening myself to this benefaction of love that is never guaranteed.

§6 Flesh

Sex is an embodied relation during which I meet the other in her flesh.  

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38 I believe this is the general idea that Marion intends when he argues that no one falls in love “involuntarily” and that the lover must “ratify” love or “surrender” to its force. This is precisely how and why coming to love can be conceived as a labour—the subject of the next section of this work. See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 94.

39 Flesh is a theological concept, but the term has also been taken up by philosophy, and notably by phenomenology. The phenomenological appropriation of flesh as a philosophical concept underscores the capacity
bodies have a different phenomenological existence from other material bodies and even from the living bodies of other animal life. Flesh needs a body, but the fleshly body distinguishes itself, since it is incarnated with spirit or soul. In this sense, each flesh is unique. This is why Marion argues that the flesh individuates me: “the taking of flesh is where I am taken . . . recaptured by and as my self. . . . The taking of flesh accomplishes facticity.” My individuation, my ipseity, depends on the flesh that I can never escape or “shirk” without losing myself in the process. Flesh works in and through the body, but it is invisible. Marion identifies flesh as a saturated phenomenon, since my own flesh and the flesh of the other remain mysterious to me in their excessive nature.

Flesh is the organ of erotic arousal and perception; it is the vehicle through which I am able to encounter the beloved in the sexual-erotic act. Flesh has a unique perceptual capacity: “only flesh spiritualizes—in other words, renders visible the bodies of the world that would remain, without it, in the night of the unseen.” Flesh has an intuitive dimension that remains mysterious to even the most rigorous empirical sciences or metaphysics. This is perhaps because flesh is not interested in knowing or being known; flesh is ultimately interested in loving. The arousal of erotic and desiring flesh is more than instinct; it is an activity of the soul, yearning to move towards the beloved in a way that is meaningful and responsive. Flesh becomes an organ of this expression for capturing the ambiguous experience of inhabiting a body that seems both free and contingent, which is no doubt vulnerable to physical processes, but which is also experienced as enlivened by a spiritual aspect that goes beyond mere the mere thinking of the mind. In the theological literature, flesh is often associated with sin, since it is the flesh that desires, sometimes wanting to the point of making the soul yield to temptation.

Do animals have flesh? I leave this question open. It would sometimes seem that animals are prone to what we understand as suffering or even love, but I am skeptical that what animals (and this problem is compounded by the difficulty of accounting for very difference species of animal life) “experience” in these situations has the phenomenological character necessary argue that animals have a fleshly existence like that of the human. A treatise on the flesh of animals deserves to be just that, and is beyond the scope of this work.

Marion, In Excess 96.

Specifically, Marion argues that the flesh is saturated in terms of the Kantian category of relation.

Marion, In Excess 89.
of eroticization, perceiving what is given in its very givenness. In the flesh, that instrument of erotic perception, we perceive with a synaesthetic impetus, since flesh engages body, mind, and soul. Until all these dimensions are engaged we are not fully erotic and we do not feel in the flesh. If we let one or more of these particular aspects take over how we are attuned to the world, we lose our erotic constitution. Reducing ourselves to the purely physical we become brute, instinct-driven creatures. If we become too cognitive, we become calculating machines. And if we immolate and deny our bodies in a misguided attempt to become pure soul, we betray our fleshly existence, since we cannot disjoint soul from its incarnation as flesh while we exist as human.

My flesh experiences pleasure and pain, but it also registers these stimulations in the intensified and meaning-filled modes of enjoyment, ecstasy, and suffering. In the flesh, we can experience sexual enjoyment which turns out to be more than just a sensible pleasure, since what I attempt to reach when I meet the other in sexual-erotic love isn’t only the body of the beloved but her flesh; I want to gain access to her precisely in and through the veneration of her body but in order to facilitate some congress with her spirit or soul. Flesh has certain obdurate qualities, like other things of the world, but when we meet another flesh it does not signal or respond like any mere thing. Flesh offers more than the obstinate resistance of bodies, since it has the capacity to “open itself” and “make room for me” or to “yield.”44 While flesh is in some sense unreachable, ungraspable, and invisible, it also has a special ability to reach beyond itself. It is in and through the flesh that we recognize the erotic nature of the world and it is only insofar as we have and are flesh that we can, in any phenomenological and erotic sense, “touch” or have any form of intercourse with alterity. When we feel sexual-erotic arousal in our flesh, this is a response to more than the mute body of the other; it is sparked by the uniqueness of the other in

44 See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 118.
the flesh. This ought to be distinguished from a more hydraulic sexual tension that I feel in my body, a need as uncomplicated as the physical hunger that only wants for nourishment without care for the enjoyment of food. Flesh is integral to the sexual-erotic relationship, first of all because it is flesh that is aroused by sexual desire. For virginity to manifest itself I must approach the other in her flesh as opposed to merely attempting to use her sexuate body for my own pleasure or gratification.

Flesh’s propensity for intuitive and spontaneous arousal causes anxiety for Marion, who fears that we thus become the “the automaton of my automatic flesh.” He accuses flesh of a blind capriciousness, becoming innervated and aroused automatically, and dying in its enthusiasm with similar rapidity. Flesh cannot be trusted, since it is not free. Marion says: “I eroticize myself and I climax by abandoning myself to the automatic eroticization of my flesh by the flesh of the other, above all, by doing nothing, by allowing everything to be done in me without me.” Marion is concerned that if I move towards the other in blind obedience to my flesh then I can lose sight of the other in her person, reducing her to a mere object that aroused my automatic flesh. I thus risk “disincarnating” the other, “petrifying” her by robbing her of her flesh—a movement that Marion calls, quite simply, “hate,” and which has the effect of disincarnating me as much as the other. In hate, I become a “cadaver.”

If flesh maintains our erotic nature and our capacity to love, then disincarnating ourselves risks making us something other than what we are through a denial of our humanity. Becoming disincarnate we disrobe ourselves of our flesh and become little more than things. Abdicating our capacity to exist as loving beings, we desert our fleshly selves. If we stop perceiving the other in the flesh, particularly in the sexual encounter, then we stop loving, since we fail to perceive the

45 Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 140.

other in her singularity, and this individuating capacity is a necessary dimension of love. Disincarnating ourselves permits us to treat the body of the other as devoid of animation or soul. Such a soulless, unerotic being is without love, without value, except perhaps as commodity, allowing us a glimpse into how disincarnation tacitly sanctions unimaginable violence. Violence is generated when we objectify the sexual-erotic body. All too often, sex does become violence because it is possible for us to sever ourselves from erotic attunement, refusing to see the sexual partner as a human other, viewing her as a pleasure-object instead. Our vulnerability to succumb to the temptation to objectify erotic bodies may be constitutional, since we have an inborn unwillingness to abdicate the hard-won ego, an absolutely necessary stage in coming to love and the ethico-erotic intercourse that facilitates this ascent.47

While we can violate the flesh of another, we also have an intelligence that somehow knows better. Our flesh can register a loving touch, and insofar as we are embodied we seek assurance that our bodies are desirable, that they are not repulsive. Our bodies are in need of constant care and nurturing including the ministration that we understand as sexual gratification and satisfaction, which yet becomes paradoxically frustrating and empty without a, sincerely felt love. Beauvoir explains that the couple involved in sexual relations remains unsatisfied when the bodies are not given to one another in love. She writes: “it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspect as bodies, not as persons.”48 She knows that erotic bodies seek the individuating affection and singular recognition of love and that without this aspect sex is often deeply unsatisfying. In

47 The very real effects of the violence of sexual objectification are evident in our culture where sexual bodies, and particularly women’s bodies, are often cast as objects in the media, especially in pornography. The fascination with plastic surgeries that alter the sexual features of bodies also reflects a perverse desire to replace the flesh with some more easily controlled prosthesis.

48 Beauvoir, Second Sex 444. This discussion comes up in Beauvoir’s critique of married life, since she thinks that the contractual nature of marriage means that married lovers take their conjugal relations as an obligation stripped of ethico-erotic meaning and thus of, sincere joy or fulfillment.
this way it does not seem that flesh is automatically aroused, and perhaps Marion’s confusion stems from a failure to adequately distinguish the sensible and the erotic body, although it is admittedly difficult, probably impossible, to entirely dissociate the two.

Beauvoir embraces and even revels in the “delights and danger” and the “infinite mystery of the flesh.” She sees that the erotic body poses an opportunity to create new relational possibilities among fleshly beings. This is not a matter of taming its processes, but learning to give ourselves over to our erotic bodies to embrace a new form of freedom that comes with the gifting and giving of flesh in sexual-erotic love. Beauvoir thus appropriates the body, even in its aging and suffering flesh, to point towards our need for erotic love as an act of existential resistance, and as a teaching tool for living the ambiguous nature of flesh—that leaky, saturated, porous phenomenon. She writes:

In both sexes is played out the drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death; they have the same essential need for one another, and they gain from their liberty the same glory.

A phenomenology of virginity needs to appropriate this fragile nature of the flesh and to encourage and instruct lovers on how to reach one another precisely in the flesh during the act of sexual-erotic love. No longer reading sexual arousal as a threat or indignity that we have to suffer, we can nurture it as an opportunity to practise the generous and self-sacrificing act of love that offers my flesh as a gift to my beloved. Flesh is not just where we suffer but also what

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49 Beauvoir, Second Sex 143,151.

50 Beauvoir, Second Sex 728.

51 Marion depicts the body’s automatic arousal as a “threat” and something that I have to “suffer” or endure, thus sharply distinguishing his distrust of the flesh from Beauvoir’s and Irigaray’s attempts to valorize the erotic body. See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 153–154.
permits us to joy, to enjoy—and perhaps part of the project of becoming an ethical being, even a loving being, is that of training the body and the flesh as the apparatus of erotic and loving attunement and not just sensibility.

§7 The Lover’s Touch—Intercourse

Phenomenology has worked hard to rehabilitate the sense of touch, and yet at the last moment it often resists any genuine contact between bodies. Virginity is precipitated by a particular kind of touch that we call sexual intercourse. This involves a collocation of bodies realized as both a physical and a spiritual encounter. Sexual intercourse is embodied and affective, and only lovers who put themselves at risk in this unique exchange provoke virginity.

Lévinas describes the touch that reaches beyond the sensible body of the other as the caress: “The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact.”52 This acknowledges that the caress seeks the invisible, which is why what is caressed is “not touched, properly speaking.” The caress seems a mode in which we might reach (if not touch) the flesh, precisely in its invisibility. But Lévinas’ idea of the caress founders, never quite able to make contact with that which it seeks. Interestingly, Lévinas’ touch ends up mired in the mystery of the beloved’s untouchable virginity and femininity.53 He veers off into abstraction, to infinity, and the caress is lost in an “impersonal dream” and a “vertiginous depth.” Perhaps what Lévinas fails to see is that the caress isn’t just a matter of seeking contact, which still seems to rap on a surface, but of intercourse and admixture. As it is, when he comes to the virgin he resists the muckiness of the feminine other and despairs at the impossibility of her foreign penetration instead of submitting to the mystery and wonder of genuine erotic contact.

52 Lévinas, Time and the Other 89.
53 See Lévinas, Totality and Infinity 257–259.
Marion says Lévinas’ caress remains “superficial,” since it does little more than achieve a less groping contact than the traditional, possessive model of touch. He thus denies that the caress is sufficient to ground an ethically significant contact with the other. Marion abandons the figure of the caress for the idea of crossed flesh, a phenomenon whereby two lovers can finally meet unrestricted by “worldly spatiality.” With this crossed flesh, Marion attempts to find a way in which lovers’ flesh achieves a dimension of reciprocal feeling, even to the point of “indistinction.” And yet Marion’s general distrust of the body infects his thinking on crossed flesh because he is unable to divest the flesh itself of its deceitful, automatic, and capricious nature. Insofar as I do experience the flesh of the other, our crossing of flesh is a negative transaction wherein I ultimately recognize only the impenetrability of the other who enlivens my flesh. Marion writes: “the other gives me what she does not have—my very flesh. And I give her what I do not have—her very flesh.” There is a reciprocal exchange of flesh, but not a genuine meeting. Marion’s lovers remain separated insofar as their crossed flesh precipitates an enjoyment and pleasure that is ultimately starkly individuating. His crossing remains almost as frustrating and barren as Lévinas’ caress. Marion’s erotic intercourse cannot facilitate an authentic or intimate mingling of these fleshes that merely “cross.” Marion rejects the idea that we could become one flesh except in and through the child, arguing: “Two ipse are never the same flesh, neither do they have the same flesh.” Rather, it turns out that the carnal union proves the distance that inevitably remains between two lovers, demonstrating that “the flesh of the other remains absolutely inaccessible to me.”

Virginity requires intercourse between erotic bodies, but how can phenomenology

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54 See Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 119–120 for Marion’s discussion of Lévinas and the caress.

55 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 120.

56 Marion, In Excess 98.
account for this meeting, since neither caress nor crossed flesh permit any genuine contact? The fluid dynamics underwriting Irigaray’s porous bodies allow for a very different story about how bodies meet in sexual congress, permitting authentic spatiotemporal collocation and intermixture between lovers’ bodies. Irigaray’s theory describes an intercourse that goes beyond the physical borders of the body while yet preserving the two lovers for themselves. This safeguards the ethicality of the sexual-erotic encounter but it also offers a phenomenologically resonant if slightly disquieting description of sex as a fundamentally liquid interaction, which reflects the reality that sexual intercourse is a fluid mixture of persons and that part of the contact made during intercourse is just this liquid exchange. Intercourse is more than a manipulation of solid body parts or organs. Sex is about transgressing bodily borders, not just touching the surface of the other, but moving inside the other. This changes everything. The lover’s touch isn’t just a surface caress but the intermixture of intercourse. Marion sees that flesh yields to make room for the other, but the dwelling that happens during sexual intercourse isn’t just a physical occupation, since the liquid intermingling of eroticized bodies allows for a much less invasive and yet much more replete contact.

Sex is a form of physical and spiritual admixture with the beloved and a phenomenology of sex that refuses intermixture stops short of recognizing our lived experience of sexual-erotic love. Virginity involves an authentic sharing of flesh. This sharing is different from Marion’s crossing of flesh because it evidences a phenomenological experience during which lovers really do unite while yet resisting the fusion that would obscure their unique ipseities in some totalizing one. Phenomenology has typically resisted endorsing any perceived fusion in sex for fear of denying or subsuming individuals in an unethical fashion, but the Irigarayan sharing of flesh

57 Irigaray’s rewriting of the feminine body in the service of a fluid ontology invokes such disquieting figures as angels, mucus, and “two lips” to illustrate how it is possible for beings to collocate, mix, and touch in ways that are real and genuine while yet retaining their individuality.
finds a middle path that circumvents the dangers of a fusion model while honouring the alterity of the other and the authentic experience of meeting this other through sexual-erotic bodies during intercourse. Sharing means that both partake of the same resource but without either abdicating the “me” in the relation. The sharing of flesh accomplishes what Beauvoir calls an erotic generosity. Sharing makes us partners in a single project while at the same time recognizing and defending that sharing requires (at least) two. I need not abdicate myself entirely for us to symbiotically and mutually enjoy a shared resource. In sexual-erotic love we share flesh mutually enlivened and provoked by our erotic generosity, but because we each recognize that the joy generated and sustained by us is provoked by the two, subsuming one or the other in the relation becomes undesirable to either. Sharing flesh honours the phenomenological experience of two becoming one, but still protects a union that is only sustained in and through “two.”

The idea of sharing flesh also moves from an ontology of Eros to an ethics.

In the sharing of flesh I experience a willingness to open myself to the beloved and in this way sexual intercourse becomes not a matter of automatization (I can say no!) but a free act of erotic generosity. If phenomenology has been frightened of the fusion model of sex it might be because there is something here of which to be afraid. In the sharing of flesh I willingly open myself to the beloved and also to the phenomenon of virginity. Sharing flesh can never be automatic because it requires conscious activity and ethical work; an opening of the self that is a labour. When I open myself to love I do invite a sort of alchemy with the beloved. Love changes me in ways that I can never anticipate and which I can never stop, since those who have been beloved to me continue to reverberate and work within me throughout the course of my life. This does not mean that I become one with the beloved, but it means that I open myself to an

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58 This model of sharing an erotic resource is reminiscent of Irigaray’s placental model, wherein the mother and child establish an erotic relationship that is quasiethical and mutually respectful of the existence of both parties.
ontological transformation, the extent of which I will never know—because love changes me infinitely.

§8 The Look of Love—The Synaesthetic Face

Phenomenology has argued that the face is what individuates any ipseity the most. The face looks at me with absolute singularity and individuality. It is personalized. And yet sexual-erotic love complicates the face. The face is so important to a phenomenology of the other because it is the face that most clearly calls to me, which most earnestly and unavoidably beseeches me not just to ethics, but to the demands of love. Lévinas argues that the face offers an ethical confrontation, since it presents nothing less than a “moral summons.”59 Face to face with the other, I am entangled in a confrontation with the infinity that is manifest in this face, with its endless needs and demands.60 The face recognizes the infinity in us, since it cannot be contained or comprehended. The way the face looks at me inaugurates an ethical plea or call. The face is cast as a revelation. It resists possession through both recognizing and denying my power in acknowledging the violence I could do to this other behind the face. The face implores me with its demand: “thou shalt not kill,” since only murder can obliterate the face. During the face-to-face encounter the other appeals to me in “its destitution and nudity,” and the simultaneous confrontation with my own power and its terrifying potential stirs the ethical impetus in me: goodness. The way the other calls to me “does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing goodness.” Thus Lévinas leverages the face to intertwine freedom, responsibility, and goodness in the experience of an election that transcends being itself to reveal the exigency of ethics.61

59 Lévinas, Totality and Infinity 196.
60 See Lévinas, Totality and Infinity 196.
61 Lévinas, Totality and Infinity 200.
This infinite or excessive quality is what inspires Marion to include the face among saturated phenomena. Marion explains how when we look at the face, and specifically the empty pupils of the other’s eyes, we find that: “in the face of the other person we see precisely the point at which all visible spectacle happens to be impossible, where there is nothing to see, where intuition can give nothing [of the] visible.” He describes the face as an icon through which we see a manifestation of the other, and like Lévinas he thinks that the person behind the face issues a call to me, which is heard in the form of an injunction that obligates me and makes me responsible. Nevertheless, I never quite know what this face says to me, in part because it has an infinity of meanings, and is always saturated in advance with these excessive demands. This is why Marion thinks that the face requires an “infinite hermeneutic,” an interpretive act that he fabulously says we can take up precisely by loving the other. Face to face with the other I understand that I cannot manipulate the beholder of this face as any other instrument or tool. In the face of the other, Marion thinks we see the most “extreme figure” of Husserlian flesh insofar as Husserl recognizes flesh as “the organ of the spirit.”

The call has been typically figured as the ethical command “thou shalt not kill,” but Marion leverages Lévinas’ own admission that the transcendence of the face might be accomplished in and through something other than this ethical edict. Marion suggests that the call could be issued or formulated in other registers, including as the erotic edict: “love me!” He writes:

These injunctions would impose themselves just as strongly, no doubt. They could not do so if, indeed, the injunction were not addressing a call to an authority

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62 Marion, In Excess 115.
63 And is this not also a figuration of loving as a mode of intentionality! See Marion, In Excess 126–127.
64 Marion, In Excess 119.
that could hear them. But this call could not resound in this way, sometimes in silence, if it did not proceed from a particular phenomenon, the face, because more than any other phenomenon, it must appear under the form, not of an object spectacle, but of a call.  

While the ethical command prohibiting murder evokes a phenomenology of distance, a cease and desist in the approach to the other (a “do not touch me,” as Marion puts it), the erotic “love me!” is profoundly different. If the face is capable of manifesting an erotic call that says “love me!” then in the sexual-erotic register this is anything but a prohibition of approach and touch. What the erotic call implores is an invasion by the other, a “come to me!,” an invitation to rupture me. It demands the ruin of love, inviting an intercourse that is potentially if not inevitably transformative. This call to love is more than the ethical command, since it is a singular invitation to engage in a relation that is beyond logic or reason. The erotic call does not ask me to abide by a universal ethical command but to undertake an engagement that is meaningful in a singular and inexpressible way for the couple.

Irigaray says: “Lovers’ faces live not only the face but in the whole body.”  The urgency of the face, the exigency of its demand for recognition and the desperation of its call can be felt in and through the body of the beloved in sexual-erotic love. The lover’s touch, its gentle, imploring nature, can communicate the same supraethical demand to the one properly attuned as

65 Marion, *In Excess* 118.


67 Irigaray knows that “In love, the gaze often remains fascination, enchantment, occasionally rape and possession. Why is it that the other who looks at me during or after loving can injure me? He looks at an object not at a subject. . . . Perhaps loving each other requires that we look at the invisible together, that we abandon the sight of it to the breath of the heart, of the soul, that we preserve it in its carnality, without staring upon it fixedly as a target.” But, for the virginal efflorescence to unfold, one must recognize that the act of love involves an other who is more than object, even perhaps more than flesh. No doubt it is possible to look at the other who is the object of sexual desire as object, as a physical body that I want for my use, but this is not how I see the beloved and so insofar as virginity is an intercourse with the beloved I must undertake to see my beloved through love’s own optics. See Irigaray, *To Be Two* 42.
the face. The look of an eroticized love is two things (that are not easily separated): it is
desirous and it is ethical. When I look at my beloved I do not just see her, I am drawn to her. I
feel attracted to her. This look pulls me nearer to her through the lure of her face and her flesh.
This blurring of the face with the rest of the erotogenic body during sexual-erotic love is a form
of synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is a state in which the stimulation of one sensation evokes the felt
experience of another—in which one might hear colour or taste a sound. The sexual-erotic
encounter raised to the loving height that cajoles the phenomenon of virginity to appear is
synaesthetic insofar as the body becomes diffuse with erotic attunement and intentionality—the
face appears in flesh, and I see, hear, or feel my lover’s exigency and faithfulness in a way that
goes beyond the confines of her usual expression in language. In the synaesthetic eroticization
of the body and the face I can feel that my beloved loves me in and through the sexual-erotic
touch. And I can hear the call of her body and what it arouses as an injunction, a call, a
provocation or election—to the goodness in me.

§9 A Note on Orgasm

Orgasm is among the most intense physical sensations a human can experience. This
intensity can be misleading and orgasm should not be confused with the phenomenon of sexual
initiation, which has no necessary relation to orgasm. Orgasm can be a happy by-product of

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68 This assertion is a stark contrast to a phenomenological lineage (evidenced in Lévinas and Marion) which
argues that the fullest expression of love can only come though speech. The synaesthetic thesis argues that I can feel
love as profoundly and definitively in the lover’s touch as I can hear it through her words.

69 The look of love lets me “see” my beloved in a different register—as if the eyes had a capacity for vision
that is more that sight. When I look at my beloved I see more than his physical appearance. My look seeks. It has a
way of traversing distance and interrupting time. These optics permit me to see my lover in his past (I feel I am able
to view him as a child), I see our future (I imagine him in old age), but I also imagine that I see things in him that
those who do not love him are unable to see or appreciate. When I look at my lover and he looks back at me I
believe that he reveals things with his look and I disclose things with mine: “I trust you.” This points to the
sacrificial impetus of love and how the look of love opens me to you, it invites you to me. There is mutual regard.
And when we fall out of love with someone we see them differently. In love: “I only have eyes for you”—”you’re
the only one in the room.” I only have eyes for you insofar as you are all I see, but also insofar as I recognize that
my eyes are for loving, for you (my beloved).
virginity, but it is not the event of virginity. Were it so, virginity would be much easier to identify as a phenomenon; but the fact that orgasm can occur with masturbation, in the violent act of rape, or even spontaneously (astonishingly, even cadavers can have orgasms), it becomes readily apparent that orgasm is not a sufficient barometer of sexual initiation. Still, orgasm is such a fantastic aspect of human sexuality that it is worth pausing to consider its relation, if any, to virginity.

Marion and Beauvoir each offer a phenomenology of the orgasm, but the tenor and conclusions of their work are starkly different. Marion positions orgasm or climax as a break in the sexual encounter, a “running-aground,” hitting bottom, or descent into a “void” that brings a necessary end to the sexual encounter, whence “the crossing of flesh has struck its shoal.” The crossing of flesh can only be temporary, and with climax the “erotic conversation” “concludes” as the participants in the sexual encounter return abruptly to themselves (although for Marion they never entirely depart themselves during sex). Isolated as ever, they are skeptical of their meeting as soon as they find themselves driven apart, even subsequently “scorning” sexual-erotic love. Marion counts orgasm as a purely natural phenomenon, even animal in its simplicity. He writes that orgasm is:

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\ldots \text{the only miracle that the poorest human condition can definitely experience—}
\]
\[
\text{for it requires neither talent, nor apprenticeship, but simply a bit of naturalness—}
\]
\[
\text{nevertheless [it] leaves nothing to see, nothing to say, and carries away everything}
\]
\[
\text{with it, even its memory. Thus it does not accede to the rank of saturated}
\]
\[
\text{phenomenon and remains a simple erased phenomenon.}
\]
What does it mean to relegate orgasm to the class of erased phenomena? Marion refers to the erased phenomenon in just three places in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, always in reference to the climax or orgasm, but it is difficult to discern exactly what he means with this figuration. There is no question that he sees the erased phenomenon as lower than the saturated phenomenon. It seems to extinguish itself or burn itself out, exhaust itself, and in its wake it offers nothing stable, no memory or trace. Marion distinguishes the erased phenomenon from the saturated phenomenon, since it leaves or offers nothing to interpret, indicating that it is based on void or lack and not on the excess that can make the saturated phenomenon seem mysterious. Marion’s climax is:

. . . an erased phenomenon, where the excess of intuition over the concept does indeed invade all of the horizon of manifestation, but withdraws itself and disappears immediately, so that nothing upon this beach without waves remains to explain, to comprehend, and to put into evidence. Of eroticization, this erased phenomenon, one can say nothing, even to oneself, even from lover to lover, the words are lacking.\(^73\)

Nothing profound or interesting seems to stick with us after orgasm and we can only reduce the act that led to the erased phenomenon as a play of bodies, giving the subsequent interpretation of sexual-erotic congress and orgasm itself a pornographic character.

Much of Marion’s distrust of orgasm turns on his diagnosis of the flesh as automatic and passive and he ultimately seeks to secure Eros in a chaste love.\(^74\) Although he finds that I do

\(^73\) Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 144. Given Marion’s very limited treatment of erased phenomena, it is difficult to discern whether Marion thinks that perhaps he has discovered another new class of phenomena with this figure. It is also difficult to tell what else might count as an erased phenomenon, although at one point he compares the erased phenomenon to a dream, indicating that he thinks dreams can also vanish, and lack character.

\(^74\) Lévinas’ work has a similarly troubled relationship with Eros. His early work attempts to figure Eros as a productive path to ethics, but he eventually abandons this route, to secure ethics in speech and language.
climax through the other (since it is in the crossing of the flesh that the other is able to give me 
my flesh and I do orgasm in the flesh), when the orgasm concludes the erotic transaction we both 
end up radically individuated. It seems as if climax works like a particle accelerator to shoot us 
off into our respective bits, separating us with cosmic force: “Indescribable and instantaneous, 
iclimax remains abstract, and thus anonymous; in and of itself, it bears upon no one.” Orgasm 
thus becomes impersonal, and it seems that any other who could at least temporarily give me my 
flesh through eroticizing my body could serve as an erotic partner. Eroticization doesn’t reach 
anyone in the first person so it allows any body, any clone, to substitute for the lover. When the 
“white lightning of the orgasm” “blurs” us and “jumbles us together” then no person can 
appear—“Eroticization, the spell of sexual erotic love, lowers and naturalizes the person, making 
of the lover an object, even a cadaver.” This eventually leaves Marion to remedy the deceits of 
the body with recourse to the oath, which he thinks can reach the lover freely and in person. The 
sexual-erotic body, automatically responsive, stupid even in its unwitting arousal, could be 
counted on for nothing if it were not for the free eroticization of the oath:

If her speech does not confirm it, if mine does not acknowledge it, then 
eroticization alone will be able to do nothing; and even our crossed speech will be 
incapable of anything, if it does not ratify the oath, which is thus confirmed as 
more originary than eroticization.

Orgasm becomes an experience that is, in the end, “heartbreaking.” Orgasm is strictly a 
play of physical bodies, and a violent play. Sex remains a death-dealing power and it requires a

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75 Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 153.

76 Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 154–155.

77 Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 153.

78 “Who, in the white lightning of orgasm, can claim to have experienced (let us not say seen) any person 
unsubstitutable as such? Who can assure (or assure oneself) that a person is distinguished there as such, and 
manifested therein his or her individuality? . . . Without a doubt, no one can claim here the status of a person. On the
logocentric sanitization in order to be a redemptive activity. Turning away from the sexual-erotic body, Marion ultimately seeks to secure love through recourse to language—a return to logos, and the paternal Law.79 Orgasm attests to the unreliability of sexual-erotic love, which Marion tries eventually to re-appropriate although he is never really able reclaim that embodied love here so debased. His wondrous phenomenology remains tethered to a patriarchal heritage in its neglect of sexual difference and its suspicion of the eroticized flesh. He distrusts our sexuate desire and does not see it as a productive route for training ourselves in ethics. Marion ultimately concludes that “in free eroticism, chastity [is] the erotic virtue par excellence.”80 This sanitization of love through speech is dangerous. Sexual-erotic love cannot just be captured in speech, but must be lived through the human body. To argue otherwise is to deny what we are.

Beauvoir offers a very different picture of orgasm, using women’s sexual pleasure as an indicator of the interminability of Eros. Her work emerges as a sharp contrast to Marion’s overly phallocentric and masculinist reading of the sexual-erotic encounter wherein orgasm puts a sudden stop to the crossing of the flesh. She argues that for men, sex is like “an arrow.” His sexual excitation rises but then dies suddenly with the orgasm. But listen to how different she thinks sexual pleasure is for the woman in love:

Feminine sex radiates throughout the whole body; it is not always centered in the genital organs. . . . Because no definite term is set out, woman’s sex feeling

contrary, I have always, if for only an instant, and even in the greatest outbursts, experienced the residual and heartbreaking gap between the other and I, the simple double of a more awful gap—that between my own flesh and my own person. I await the denials” (Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 157).

79 Irigaray explicitly indicts language as a technological danger and as a strategy for taming reality. She says the risk posed by techne is real and can be blamed in part on language. “Language—the logos, as it is called—has been considered a technical means for taming existing reality, for creating ideal models which would be preferable to reality itself.” That is, to the reality of sexual difference and sexuate being. In order to escape the neuter-alizing dangers of technology, Irigaray says we must “hold on firmly to our incarnation and to the real and present relations between us: woman and man, women and men” (Irigaray, To Be Two 107).

80 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 183.
extends out toward infinity; it is often nervous or cardiac fatigue or psychic satiety that limits woman’s erotic possibilities, rather than a specific gratification; even when overwhelmed, exhausted, she may never find full deliverance.81

Further, Beauvoir says men are wrong and violent to impose their own sexual rhythms on women, since feminine eroticism is so very different.82 This is damning criticism for Marion’s analysis, since he seems to pay absolutely no attention to how the erotic phenomenon and the crossing of flesh might be experienced in phenomenologically distinct ways by the two sexes. As such, his philosophical analysis could well be construed as just the kind of violence that Beauvoir accuses phallocratic thinkers of exercising when they take their own sexual needs, desires, and pleasures as absolute.

Beauvoir’s feminine jouissance (and how readily should we equate this with male orgasm?) proves infinite, interminable. There is no need for this intercourse to run aground save for the sheer exhaustion and thus active, if reluctant, termination by the lovers themselves. While for Marion the crossing of flesh is finite, Beauvoir shows how a love that is infinite can be disclosed, if never exactly realized, through the incarnate and loving body in the throes of the sexual-erotic encounter. Moreover, Beauvoir does not talk about the arousal of the flesh as if it is automatic, since she stresses repeatedly that women need to actively learn to come into their erotic being. Developing our erotic being, specifically through its sexual capacities, turns out to be an existential project—a labour of love. Beauvoir shows us the exigency of training the erotic body to love and how orgasm is a sort of epiphenomenon and not the conclusion of love.83 I see

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81 Beauvoir, Second Sex 395–396.

82 Beauvoir, Second Sex 396.

83 It must be acknowledged that orgasm is more than an epiphenomenon insofar as male ejaculation, which typically accompanies the male orgasm, is necessary for the procreation of the species. This is not so for the female orgasm (although there is some evidence that orgasm in females can help facilitate conception), pointing again to the importance of having a phenomenology of sexual-erotic being that pays close attention to sexual difference.
no barriers, except those philosophy creates for itself, in casting the orgasm as a loving gift from one partner to the other; a genuine manifestation of erotic generosity.
PART FOUR

THE LABOUR OF LOVE

§1 Chastity and Virginity

In his work on the history of sexuality and the use of pleasure, Michel Foucault gestures towards a distinction between feminine virginity and a virile model of sexual chastity.¹ The general picture that emerges suggests that men’s chastity is something gained or earned—a discipline or practice—while women’s virginity is something lost. Chastity is a gradual process of restraining and perfecting the libido, while virginity is presented as a state most perfect at birth and from which the world causes women to gradually and inevitably fall. We can find counterexamples to this, such as medieval nuns who appropriated their virginity as an opportunity to pursue a life more independent and intellectual than the servitude of wifehood; but virginity has more often been a moral and intellectual prison for women, underwritten by the commodifying of their sex. Playing on the distinction between chastity and virginity, Foucault recognizes that sexuality is imposed in different ways on men and women and also that it is implemented differently at specific junctures in history.² Of course Foucault can be of only limited use to a phenomenology of virginity, especially, since he would no doubt find the project

¹ This distinction coalesces, as several essays and interviews from Foucault’s so-called ethical period are read together. Of most significance are “The Battle for Chastity,” “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” and “Sexuality and Solitude,” all found in Foucault, Ethics.

² We should not be too strict about applying chastity/virginity as exclusively male/female traits. Foucault notes that even while what he calls the Greco-Roman form of chastity is a “virile” model, “a woman who was temperate was as virile to herself as a man”—although this was probably a rare occurrence given social structures. (Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” 274.)
misguided, if not downright absurd. In the Foucauldian picture there can be no phenomenon or phenomenology of virginity, only an experience of virginity as discursively constituted. Still, Foucault can help us understand some of the uses and abuses of virginity while awakening us to past understandings of virginity that may yet hold important insights for providing access to the phenomenon of virginity.

Foucault attempts to draw distinctions and associations between Greek virility, which was often perfected in and through a form of continence with respect to the use of pleasure, and Christian chastity, which aimed at partitioning the individual from the inherently polluting effects of libido insofar as this was possible for humans. He argues that Greek virility is underwritten by a concern with domination that plays out in the preoccupation with penetration, represented as a gesture of mastery, overcoming, and the appropriation of pleasure. The source anxiety in the Christian sexual paradigm is erection, and governance of an instinct or impurity that seems to well up from within. Both approaches ultimately reflect an erotics of care and concern for the self, although Foucault sees a shift from an aesthetics of existence which uses disciplinary techniques to forge a self to a set of ascetic practices designed to root out the hidden truth of the self (giving the Christian era its particular flavour for confession). What remains consistent within both technics is a focus on libido, sexuality, and mastery; thus, the disciplinary

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3 Foucault distances himself from phenomenology on several occasions. First, he says that he feels genealogy has been necessary, to help move away from the “fabricat[ed]” phenomenological subject. In his view, genealogy offers “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendent in relation to the field of events or runs in an empty sameness through the course of history” (Foucault, “Truth and Power” 118). Secondly, Foucault says he is not interested in “lived experience, the domain of phenomenological investigation,” but rather what he calls the “unliveable” or “that which can’t be lived through.” He thus calls his own work “desubjectification.” He writes: “. . . phenomenology attempts to recapture the meaning of everyday experience in order to redirect the sense in which the subject that I am is indeed responsible, in its transcendental functions, for founding that experience together with its meanings. . . . In Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, experience has the function of wrenching the subject from self, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation.” This is precisely why he is interested in what he calls “limit-experiences” (Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault” 241). I wonder whether and to what extent Foucault might be interested in exploring virginity as a limit experience, especially figured as an experience that shatters the subject, although this thinking admittedly progresses along very different lines from Foucault’s genealogical work.
practices associated with both regimes retain a masculine, virile character. This means that neither regime shows much concern for creating an erotics focusing on reciprocal or mutual pleasures, and inscription and reinscription of some form of mastery and domination remains imperative. Foucault’s own project becomes, in part, a search for “an ethics of acts and their pleasures which would be able to take into account the pleasure of the other,” thus calling for an eradication of virile sexuality. While Foucault is sometimes cast as glorifying the Greek era, he actually comments that the Greek ethics of sexual pleasure were “quite disgusting” with their obsessions with penetration and “a kind of threat of being dispossessed of our own energy, and so on.”

Foucault argues that chastity amounts to an ascesis, an exercise of working on the self, a process of self-formation through the process of disciplining the libido and taming sexual desire. He sees “the battle for chastity” as reflecting a form of ethical work, of becoming or discovering a “pure” self, cultivated through the implementation of techniques directed and applied to the self. Chaste men worked on perfecting their chastity and so too their alleged virtue. The model of feminine virginity is different, since Foucault suggests that virginity is associated with purity and integrity. This state is allegedly manifest and displayed uniquely by the feminine body, and likely most perfect at birth. Virginity is depicted as an original state of innocence or sexual purity from which woman falls away during defloration or through gradual fleshly corruption. And yet this model of the feminine body as a pure vessel also makes it prone, possibly destined, for violation and penetration, especially in a society where women’s function is reproduction. Virginity is thus, in a way, against nature. This is probably and paradoxically why virginity, in its perverse transgression and transcendence of this nature, becomes such an ambivalent state or

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4 Foucault continues: “Is the pleasure of the other something that can be integrated into our pleasure, without reference either to law, to marriage, to I don’t know what?” (Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” 258.)
condition. In the model of feminine integrity, virginity is a passive state. The juxtaposition of chastity and virginity and their sex-specific formulations (which should be read as instructive but not absolute) reflect a lingering juxtaposition of masculine and feminine understandings and applications of virginity, but both interpretations, while flawed, also carry insight for better understanding virginity as phenomenon.

The idea that chastity involves work is critical to a phenomenological analysis. The “battle for chastity” reflects that virginity is not automatically won nor affected through any simple physical abstention, since chastity is also perceived as a matter of mind and/or will. Chastity requires cultivation and maintenance through perpetual vigil. And yet Foucault sees that masculine chastity offers a poor basis for sexual ethics, since it subverts attention from sexual-erotic interaction with the other in its obsessive tracking of the movements of one’s own libidinal desires. He writes: “The whole essence of the fight for chastity is that it aims at a target which has nothing to do with actions or relationships; it concerns a different reality than that of a sexual connection between two individuals.”

Sexual instinct or libido is cast as a dark and predatory force, a succubus, and the ultimate objective is its transcendence and eradication. In the battle for chastity there is little appreciation of the pleasures of sex, and still less for its ethical potential. The focus is on the aggressive aspect of sexual drive to the complete exclusion of any hope of cultivating an ethics of Eros. Foucault sees that dangerous desire is located precisely in the body and its flesh, giving an “ontological particularity” to the neurotic obsession with chastity. The problem is one of pollution, and we begin to see a thematic reappearance of a fundamental antagonism between philosophy, knowledge, and “thinking” activities on the one hand, and embodied and especially sexual activities on the other. There is the continuing threat that

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5 Foucault, “Battle for Chastity” 189.
6 Foucault, “Battle for Chastity” 187.
engaging or even thinking about the urgings of Eros distracts from the contemplating activities of
the mind, as if the erotic body and the rational mind are not only discontinuous but actually at
odds. The sexuate body is the enemy of thinking persons, and knowledge goes hand in hand with
the purification of bodily desires. This is how and why both chastity and virginity mandate some
renunciation of the world. While chastity sees that wrestling with libido is work, the only
successful outcome of this labour can be the wholesale overcoming and mastery of this corrosive
force.

With its overarching aim of complete and total eradication of libidinal desire, the virile
pursuit of chastity goes too far in seeking to overcome sexual nature. There is a confusion here
between managing sexual aggression and cultivating erotic potential, intentionality, and
attunement. Reduced to the sexual drive and in absence of erotic intentionality, sexuality can be
nothing but a violent threat. This myopia sees the battle for chastity foreclosing sexual-erotic
potential, even aspiring to transcend embodiment and sexuality as much as this is possible for
humans. Granted, there are different forms of chastity, and chastity is not always a complete
turning away from Eros (we sometimes talk sensibly about forms of sexual chastity operative
within the bonds of marriage), but chastity does seek to circumscribe our erotic desires in
keeping with a rational fixation aimed at mastery and overcoming. In Cassian’s chaste ideal, for
example, the work of procreation becomes a task akin to brickmaking or any other trade.7
Seeking to master sexuality, chastity can foreclose erotic attunement as a perceptual mode of
adapting and responding to the world. In a strange turn, this would actually bar the phenomenon
of virginity from showing itself, since cultivating erotic attunement is necessary for
understanding sexual-erotic love as an ethical relation and confrontation with the other. Chastity
gets it half right, since it sees that cultivating a relationship with Eros involves work, but in

7 See Foucault, “Battle for Chastity” 190.
seeking to negate or overcome libido, masculine chastity contravenes ethics just where it seeks to realize ethicality. It turns out that virile chastity actually subverts virginity rather than achieving an imagined virginal purity. Chastity works towards releasement, but it actually ends up reinscribing a gesture of mastery and it fails to recognize that we cannot control love nor bring about the phenomenon of virginity in this manner. This model still treats virginal chastity as something taken or won, and loses sight of its givenness.

But if the alternative formulation of virginity is a model of perfect integrity then this too goes astray. The feminine model treats virginity as a passive condition, ignoring that the sexuate body requires labour and training in order to be responsive to love. Virginity does not reflect the barren purity of a body that has barred itself from love, but is granted to the lover who has realized Eros’ ethical height in taking on the risk of opening the self to the beloved. Virginity is not about integrity, but about a fundamental un- or dis-integrity and a rejection of the dream of wholeness, autarky, absoluteness, or mastery. Imagining virginity as a passive form of divinely bestowed perfection fails to reflect that sexual-erotic love does require some ascesis. The phenomenon of virginity is not something that can be realized in and through any formal discipline or practice, even though such labour is necessary to prepare for its self-showing. Feminine virginity reflects that virginity is given by and through a gesture that is out of our hands; virginity does involve a form of passivity, but we have to be cautious that while respecting the given nature of virginity we don’t assume a passivity that abdicates responsibility for fostering conditions under which virginity might be inclined to show itself. We have to be careful about exonerating a feminine understanding of virginity from taking an active role in cultivating our erotic being and enjoying Eros. Recognizing givenness ought not give way to quietism.
Foucault shows us that love can be a labour and that we may need to practise loving in order to do it better; love requires work. But pretensions of mastery that underwrite the male model of chastity make the mistake of thinking that we can control the phenomenon of virginity in ways that obscure and even deny the phenomenon in its givenness. The purity that chastity pursues is a barren chastity, a closing off not just from sexual desire, but from erotic attunement and from love itself.

Finally, however, the distinction between chastity and virginity is intriguing because it evidences some thinking that there can be more than one approach to virginity, and that virginity may be lived and experienced differently in and through bodies that are sexed as male and female or gendered as masculine or feminine (insofar as this distinction is useful). While it is important to conduct a gendered phenomenology that takes account of the different ways that sexually distinct bodies ascend to love, and the unique challenges that might be involved in training bodies that are differently sexed in the service of Eros, virginity is ultimately given to both sexes as essentially the same phenomenon, if not in the same ways—it is a human experience. Re-establishing virginity as an experience that is shared by erotic beings regardless of sexual difference is important for affirming sexual-erotic love as a relation that is reciprocal, generous, and not based on the dynamics of domination, hierarchy, and power that have informed the traditional hermeneutics of sex and the social construction of virginity. Understanding how we have conceptualized virginity using a gendered politics (and understanding the strengths and failures of this approach) is an important aspect of the erotic reduction and demonstrates the fruitful relation between phenomenology and critique.

§2 The Labour of Love

We don’t often think that we have to work at virginity. The idea of chastity awakens a muddled and obscured recognition that virginity is something that requires labour. As the
phenomenal event of coming to love through the sexual-erotic body, virginity is not automatically given the first time we engage in the mechanical activity of sex. We need to learn to use our bodies to express love. Still, why should virginity involve work and what is the specific form of this labour of love?

2.1 Potentiality

Virginity requires work because our erotic potential is just that, a capacity that needs to be nurtured and developed in order be fully realized. This recognizes the earlier claim that we humans exist as sexuate beings and that for us, it is possible to develop libidinous desires in the service of ethics. While there is often recognition that the sexual instinct needs to be tempered or moderated in the use of pleasure, it is seldom acknowledged that we must also cultivate a secondary (although perhaps more primordial) erotic attunement in order to elevate the sexual instinct to an ethical height through erotic intentionality. Directing the instinct in this way is more than a form of Freudian sublimation, which merely reroutes libidinal energy in an ostensibly productive direction in the service of culture; for example, through technical, scientific, or artistic productions. Erotic attunement helps develop libidinal desire to foster goodness itself. This libidinal redirection is no mere civilizing force, since Eros is radically singularizing and our beloved can sometimes make demands that actually run counter to social conventions and edicts of civil or phallic law. Erotic attunement is aroused by the call of the other and its response engenders a relational congress that gives the sexual relation a dimension beyond the urge of libidinal need. It recognizes a form of sexual demand that is other-directed, in which as a relational exercise sex can become an ethical practice—an act of love that is not just for our own pleasure.

Freud is correct to see that libido is malleable. We can direct and redirect it for various uses. Libidinal energy can be harnessed for multiple purposes, but virginity will only manifest
itself when we use the sexual instinct in keeping with its potential for erotic attunement and the ethical direction of Eros. Our culture has traditionally worried too much about this sort of instinctual overcoming or renunciation, at the expense of cultivating erotic attunement, and there has been too much focus on the use of pleasure as opposed to fostering an ethical erotics. We have tended to cultivate libido in the service of the reproductive function, as a means of release, or sometimes even to assent to aggressive tendencies. Lacking sufficient structures to train erotic attunement in the service of sexual erotic love, we have endorsed an erotics of patriarchal overcoming and the kind of virile chastity or barren virginity outlined in the previous discussion. Still, it seems that we retain a lingering intuition that inherent in sexuality is the potential for something more. If sexual gratification were the aim, then it would be easiest to facilitate this for myself. And yet the sexual drive remains desirous of an other. It perpetually seeks the presence and comfort of some other, even if it can not quite recognize the demand to treat the other as more than object, in an ethical life. The outward-directed impetus underlying libidinal desire suggests that libido searches for something more than immediate gratification—perhaps the assurance, as Marion suggests, of love. This reveals a peculiar intuition that sex is not something that I can adequately undertake on my own and that with the other there is potential that it can do more than fulfill my most meagre needs.

2.2 Ascesis

The work involved in welcoming the phenomenon of virginity is akin to ascesis. Reinvigorating this ancient Greek idea, Foucault understands ascesis as a form of ethical work on the self. Disciplining the body through the application of various techniques, ascesis is a process of self-training and sometimes associated with the aesthetic project of fashioning of the self (although ascesis could also be undertaken in keeping with different agendas). Training the body to love, that is, in the use of our sexual-erotic potential, does involve work. We can direct
our ethical attunement towards the world in many ways; it is not restricted to an arousal that
desires in the mode of a sexual-erotic drive. Cultivating erotic attunement to create an ethical
reception for the phenomenon of virginity means that we need to train our sexuate bodies in the
use of Eros. The sexualized body is a complex instrument. Libidinal instincts are strong and
often aggressive. It takes a certain process of learning, a familiarization with the sexual-erotic
body, before we can be effective in using our sexuate bodies for reciprocally enjoyable and
ethical intercourses. This belies the idea that the first instance of sexual intercourse would be a
likely time for virginity to show itself. Bodies newly attuning themselves to their sexual-erotic
potential very seldom know how to love, since this is not an instinct or drive like the libidinal
urge. Learning to temper the libidinal instincts and their accompanying affects is not easy.
Moreover, this process of coming to love also requires a tempering of the affects, for I do not
feel libidinal desire as a genital impulse only; it coils itself in and around my heart and I must
learn to treat the other ethically and to manage the confusing cyclone of affectivity that comes
with sexual arousal and with being in love. Acknowledging this reality, it seems ridiculous to
assume that a body could know how to love from the very first instance of sexual intercourse.
Initiation into sexual-erotic being, the virginal efflorescence, or virginity’s phenomenal
manifestation, is by no means an automatic feature of human existence. Sexual maturation is a

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8 Some cultures do recognize the necessity of training the sexuate body in its manifold sexual uses, in their
development of *ars erotica*, but across various cultures these arts show more and less consideration of ethics versus
pleasures. A full discussion of the uses and abuses of the *ars erotica* vis-à-vis the phenomenon of virginity and/or
the aims of pleasure/love are beyond the scope of this study. Note that Irigaray’s recent work sometimes calls on
yogic traditions as reflecting a consciousness of the possibilities for cultivating the eroticized body in the service of
ethics.

9 Laura Carpenter’s recent sociological study indicates that our society may be increasingly responsive to
viewing virginity as a “process” of coming to sexual initiation. Carpenter interviewed 61 individuals on their “first
time” or their continuing virginal status (for those who still identified as virgins). She found that many individuals
had actually come to regard the first time they had sex as part of a process, often associated with a gradual path of
becoming men and women (thus, of developing their gendered sexual identities), but certainly not an absolutely
definitive moment in the passage to sexual maturity. Carpenter also found these “processors” were typically more
favourably adjusted to their sexuality, even endorsing this approach for sex educators. For more, see esp. Carpenter
198.
process that involves more than physiological bloom. It also demands a mental, emotional, and spiritual education so that we can moderate the wildness of the sexual instincts. While our bodies belong to us and we cannot do without them, our bodily processes often seem mysterious and confusing; my sexual urges and desires can seem strange and foreign to me. Learning to use the gift that is my eroticized body is a process that takes years to develop. Most sexual beginnings are awkward, fumbling, experimental, and sometimes even violent in their uncertainties.

Erotic ascesis should not just amount to training the body or disciplining the will or instinct to either foster or resist forms of sexual pleasure. Ascesis might also be applied to techniques for cultivating erotic attunement and a more ethical sexual relation with the other. Foucault’s ethics are concerned with the self’s relation to itself. In various regimes of truth, power, and knowledge, the disciplines of the self may differ, in keeping with the aim of forging different kinds of selves or discovering/creating different aspects of the self (for example, the Christian regime was interested in using confession to root out the “truth” about oneself). Foucault overlooks that asceses have too often been about disciplining the self and engendering some desired use of others, but the view that persons are discursive all the way down gives him little impetus to question whether ascesis could be useful for fostering the kind of ethical project inherent in the present work. To develop a phenomenology of virginity, ascesis must amount to a work on the self in order to receive the other. Unlike the Foucauldian picture, the work of virginity isn’t just undertaken as an artistic project for myself; rather, it is taken up in response to the ethical call that I receive as an arousal of my flesh that seems to come from the beloved.

10 Beauvoir offers a striking example of how a body can remain virginal and yet sexually initiate, in a passage from Second Sex where she denigrates the sexual liberality of certain American college girls who rid themselves of their virginity as soon as possible, to flee the anxieties of authentic sexual-erotic entanglements, by pursuing frivolous affairs and liaisons. Slightly ambivalent about such behaviour insofar as she thinks that sexual experimentation is critical for learning how to use the body as an instrument of love, she expresses some reservations about these “deflowered virgins,” who are sexually initiate to the act and yet remain unknowing of the full potential inherent in Eros. She argues that their fumblings lack the erotic authenticity to initiate them into proper sexual-erotic love despite their physical accomplishments. See Beauvoir, Second Sex 390.
Being a good lover takes practice, but this isn’t just about training in a technical sort of proficiency. It is about learning to use the gift of my sexuate desire and managing the adventure of being libidinous in the name of Eros and ethics. The work involved in facilitating the initiation into Eros is a strange, inverted kind of ascesis. It is actually a form of releasement or opening myself to the other and to love; a curious form of un-working. Foucauldian ascesis is ordinarily understood as a form of self-mastery, but the work of preparing for virginity is a conscious abdication of mastery; a renunciation of the will and of the ego-self which is yet difficult enough that it does require a conscious un-willing.11

2.3 Kenosis

The particular form of *ascesis* involved in inviting the phenomenon of virginity can be cast as an erotic *kenosis* (the Greek word for *emptiness*).12 Kenosis, a concept borrowed from Christian theology, has been put to use by a number of contemporary thinkers outside a strictly religious framework. Christian theology adapts kenosis to make sense of the incarnation of Christ—Christ emptied himself of his divine powers to take the fleshly form of a man. Kenosis is associated with an abdication of power, a letting go. The labour of love, the preparatory work involved in making way for the phenomenon of virginity, is a way of opening and emptying the self for love. Kenosis is also sometimes evoked as a devotional practice for humans who attempt to clear or abdicate themselves in hope of receiving a form of divine grace in and through this sacrifice. It is a process of opening and clearing the self and thus a strangely inverted act of

11 This is consonant with the Heideggerian idea of releasement, discussed in the next section.

12 Marion makes a brief reference to erotic kenosis in *The Erotic Phenomenon*. Marion’s erotic kenosis, mentioned only once in this text, seems to be the process through which the sex organs, those stupid body parts, become flesh. When these parts are “submerged” in flesh during this “erotic kenosis” they become more than body. Marion says that the sexual organs should remain impervious to eroticization but somehow through this “erotic kenosis,” “emplacement in flesh includes them.” They open themselves in this spell. See Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon* 124–125. I take the idea of erotic kenosis in a different direction, but owe Marion the original thinking of its very possibility.
giving. What kenosis offers is a space within the self, a place of reception, so it amounts to a certain gesture of hospitality and welcoming, but without quite knowing in advance what is being invited or welcomed.

In the sexual-erotic relation heightened to the act of love, kenosis becomes a technique, an ascesis for welcoming the beloved. It is an act of generosity to invite the beloved into my body and in so doing, I clear more than a physical space for her. I also offer a spiritual space, since I do not know what she will bring nor how I will be called upon to accommodate her. This ethics thus amounts to a form of sacrifice and it is motivated by a hope that is quite possibly irrational in any traditional schema. As a kenotic act, the labour of love becomes a training in opening the self to the beloved, but simultaneously a prayer for the phenomenon of virginity to reveal itself, because I know that I cannot simply undertake any series of exercises to facilitate virginity’s appearance. It has an event structure that comes and goes (or “happens”) on its own terms. Without wanting to reinscribe theology within this form of kenosis, it must be admitted (and indeed this is why the figure seems particularly suitable) that in preparing for the reception of the phenomenon of virginity the lover must admit that the relation might not beget love and that this is out of her hands despite her best work.

The focus shifts here from mastery to opening, and this involves an abdication of the ego-self in preparation for the possibility of something else that may be created between us. Erotic kenosis reflects the gifting or giving of the self in love; a willingness to find space in myself to invite the ruin that love might bring. In love, I open my own borders, demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice myself to make room for the other, perhaps even begging the other to “come in.” Heightened by an erotic sensibility, sexuate desire does not want the other in a possessive way, but invites the other to invade me. An erotic kenosis clears the way for the beloved, but also for the phenomenon of virginity itself, for a love between us that is not entirely
created by either of us. We open ourselves to sexual-erotic love and for virginity, since we hope that in sharing flesh we can find a route to love.

The phenomenon of virginity, like any other phenomenon, and seemingly more shy than many, will only show itself on its own terms. Because of this, preparing for the phenomenon of virginity becomes akin to a devotional practice, perhaps a form of meditation or prayer. It turns out that if there is a mood associated with virginity, it is hope. I wait for virginity like Derrida says we wait for the *arrivant*—preparing for its reception with a hope beyond hope. The paradox of the labour of love is that I try to empty myself and abdicate my ego so that I can give what I do not have to give. I cannot give the other my virginity any more than I can take his, but still I try to give what can only give itself—by preparing and waiting for what will only come in its own time (and maybe not at all). For Derrida, the *arrivant* is:

\[\ldots\text{he or she who comes, coming to be where s/he was not expected, where one was awaiting him or her without waiting for him or her, without expecting it, without knowing what or whom to expect, what or whom I am waiting for—and such is hospitality itself, hospitality towards the event. One does not expect the event of whatever, of whoever comes, arrives, and crosses the threshold—the immigrant, the emigrant, the guest, or the stranger.}\]

We might call this Derrida-identified awaiting *maternal*, insofar as it is a pregnant waiting, an anticipation of an event so wondrous as to be impossible on any logical terms—an event that comes about only in its own time, but in the interim is nurtured in its very possibility with an acceptance of passivity, responsibility, helplessness, and love. Kenosis reveals a

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13 Derrida, *Aporias* 33. The particular limit Derrida is discussing in this essay is the limit of death, and thus how one waits for death. I think there is striking similarity here to how we wait for certain other experiences, perhaps how we prepare for the child, but also how we wait for love (understood in terms of “falling in love” but also in terms of the initiation to sexual-erotic love which is similarly experienced as a possession of body and spirit/soul that elects us from beyond).
sacrificial impetus underwriting love and a willingness to put ourselves in existential risk for a chance to build something good with the other.

§3 Virginity and Risk

Undertaking the labour of love necessary to invite the phenomenon of virginity is risky business. In opening myself to love I put my ego-self in existential jeopardy, knowing that love always and inevitably transforms us in ways we can never anticipate nor control. Sexual-erotic love is an embodied relation through which we can find the “assurance” that Marion says the eroticized ego craves because it needs to know that it is loved. In his essential description of humans as loving animals, he recognizes that it will never be enough for us to exist as a “certified object” or a “certifying ego,” nor even a being as such. I want more, and without the assurance that I am loved all the “knowledge” in the world will not be sufficient to surmount the anxiety that says all is meaningless.\(^\text{14}\) As loving beings, as ethical beings who love and who find our only reason for being in love, the eroticized ego requires this assurance. I know that I cannot assure myself that I am loved in the same way that the knowing ego can certify its own existence from within its solipsistic coil; hence, I seek evidence of something or someone beyond that can signify to me the possibility, if not the immediate assurance, that I am loved. The phenomenology of givenness recognizes that phenomena that impose themselves upon me in their saturated and excessive being exercise a counter-intentionality that provokes my recognition that I am given and gifted. “The world cannot be phenomenalized except by giving itself to me and by making me its gifted.”\(^\text{15}\) The ego thus gives up its fantasies of mastery and autarky to accept something outside and beyond that is at least potentially capable of assuring me that I am loved. But the tradeoff is that I put my ego-self at risk, since I recognize a vulnerability

\(^{14}\) Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 22.

\(^{15}\) Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 26.
to this other, part of which is felt as the exigency of the responsibility to respond to this other. I find myself only by putting myself at risk. Love always comes at the cost of a certain existential and metaphysical jeopardy.

In the sexual-erotic relation, that intersubjective and embodied activity that hopes to precipitate the phenomenon of virginity, I find a path to the assurance, in and through my carnal communications and relations with the other, that I am loved; that I am a loving being capable of giving and receiving love. But in order to open this possibility I have to put myself at risk. This is not just a physical risk. It is a threat to my ego too, since I know that once I invite the other in, love will change me in ways that I cannot anticipate, control, or undo. Opening the self to love compromises my freedom while putting me in a position of awesome and awful responsibility to the beloved, whose wellbeing I can never guarantee despite my sincerest promises. Marion compares love to a wounding or scarification: “All that I did, said, and experienced through love within the radicalized erotic reduction has marked me like a permanent scar, and has imposed upon me a new form.”16 Given the possibility, the inevitability, of this transformation, there is no denying that the erotic reduction involves significant risk. Love is terrifying. When love comes over me it tears me asunder, ripping me from my egoic moorings and rupturing the comforting solipsism of the self as sovereign subject. Elected to love, I do not yet know who I am and I cannot know, since when I gift myself in the erotic relation I also lose myself in the process.

And yet the phenomenon of virginity demands that the lovers take the risk of opening themselves up in such an act of generous sacrifice, since love cannot do its work unless individuals do open themselves to transformation and change.17 Virginity necessarily involves a

16 Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 188.

17 Beauvoir also recognizes that an element of risk is essential to realize what she calls authentic sexual initiation. Any truly ethical sexual-erotic relation puts me in a hopeless entanglement with the beloved, and simultaneously exposes the ambiguity of the human condition as subject and object, free being and contingent being. The perilous opening of the self to the other in an act of erotic generosity is the very foundation of ethics, and sexual
relational intercourse with the beloved. The ego is hard won, and it has a natural tendency to
insulate and protect itself from foreign invasions that could compromise its imagined mastery
and control. Marion sometimes fails to recognize that there can be a comforting solipsism in the
autarky of the self-certifying ego that remains master of its domain, even to the extent that this
seems an inherent recalcitrance to admitting erotic phenomena. Similarly, our philosophical
inheritance has often tried to divest sex of its risky character, through attempts to naturalize and
hence tame the sexual body by making it adhere to scientific laws, or sometimes through
attempts to abject sexuality from the realm of philosophically relevant human experience. But
the existential risk involved in opening the self to Eros is ultimately a possibility, since it points
to the sexual-erotic relation as a site for transformation and regeneration, creating or manifesting
something between two that bespeaks a new potential engendered by the couple in their
symbiotic existence.

Insofar as the phenomenon of virginity demands putting ourselves at risk for love, it
approaches an ethics of sacrifice, but there are good reasons to be cautious of a phenomenology
of virginity that moves in this direction.

§4 Virgin Sacrifice

Sacrifice is a strategy for restoring order through the ritual containment or wholesale
destruction of something that either offends law, or for appeasing a system that has somehow
become infected, imbalanced, or disordered. It becomes an essential intellectual and political
response for a regime that is anxious and intolerant of ambivalence and ambiguity. Virgins are
prone to sacrifice because they exist in perpetual defiance of the contradictory and puritanical

initiation remains barred for lovers who fail to expose themselves to such risk, since the erotic act remains in bad
faith and only superficially erotic in the truest sense. “To give oneself through defiance, through fear, or through
puritanical rationalism is not to experience genuine erotic reality; only a substitute without much risk or savor is thus
obtained” (Beauvoir, Second Sex 390).
ideal grafted upon them. Sacrifice and ritual purgation emerge as management strategies for
dangerous individuals, those who pose a perceived threat to the health and integrity of the
community.

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas relates pollution fears to trepidation about persons
and things that exist in marginal or transitional states: “Danger lies in transitional states, simply
because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. The person who must pass
from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.” Such ambiguous or
“interstitial” persons are associated with mysterious and fearsome powers. Douglas cites the
unborn child as an example of an interstitial being, one who occupies a precarious social and
ontological status because of its precarious nature of existence. She also identifies the virgin as a
marginal or transitional figure, and the virgin in question is decidedly feminine. We have already
seen that Douglas connects the problem of sexual difference to pollution fears and that women
are frequently allied with nature and its ambiguous and occult forces, primarily due to the
procreative capacities that allegedly put them in a close and troubling relation with the fringes of
mortality. In a sense, this makes women perpetually interstitial, and they become the frequent
target of hygienic and purification projects designed to diminish the danger of their ambiguity.
The drive for purity leads to situations that are often confusing and even contradictory:

The quest for purity is pursued by rejection. It follows that when purity is not a
symbol but something lived, it must be poor and barren. It is part of our condition
that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and
dead as a stone when we get it.20

18 Douglas 119.
19 See Douglas, especially the chapter on “Powers and Dangers.”
20 Douglas 199.
Virgins are both revered and feared in their essential purity. The virgin threatens to erode or corrupt the pure, even when called upon to represent its most resplendent incarnate example. Faced with this ambiguous being, sacrifice emerges as a ritual strategy to contain her strange power.

Virginity is especially ambiguous because it is structured such that its value comes from its impossibility, since what is desired is simultaneously its purity (impossible in the material and the concrete) and its destruction (which lies at the fantastic core of overcoming or mastering the virgin as a personage). The virgin gets her identity from the infectious crossing yet to come, making her an interstitial person from her very inception. She is suspended in a transitional state, making her a paradoxical creature. She is full of potential, most notably procreative and erotic potential, but if not controlled her supernatural powers are viewed as extremely threatening. What is desired is an impossible transformation which can only be read as dangerous, unleashing powers that require strict management and control, and yet which can never be so contained, for the problem of virginity sees unleashed forces as ethereal, and as diffuse as life and death. The allegedly ambiguous nature of their constitution makes virgins prone to disrupt the system and thus vulnerable to blame or sacrifice when disorder erupts. Corollary hygienic projects reflect a human desire to master the unknown, even if their rituals are transparent in their futility.

Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic work leverages Douglas’ anthropological study on purity and danger to shed light on our cultural and constitutional anxieties about femininity and sexuality. Kristeva asserts that purification rituals, through their various sociohistorical permutations, share in a universal project of protecting the individual and the social body from the perpetual threat of the maternal authority. The mother is site of ambiguity, since she both provides the oneness we long for throughout all of our individually incarnate lives, but which we also fear, because surrendering to her enveloping fold means that we can no longer maintain the
ego-identity or subjectivity that we work so hard to win. Kristeva rewrites the Freudian schema to give the semiotic maternal authority its rightful place alongside the symbolic law of the father (the superego). The semiotic is a “system of meaning” that is prior to and exists as a “precondition” to language and its laws. It is not dependent upon words, “linguistic signs or the symbolic order they found.” The semiotic is essential in helping us to “map the body” and hence to form an ego-identity or self.  

Kristeva identifies abjection as a prenarcissistic stage of development wherein the not-yet ego gives birth to the self, in a process that is messy and regressive, since the child is in perpetual and real danger of being engulfed (again) by the maternal authority from whom it is wondrously and terrifyingly breaking free. The pure/impure distinction is the fundamental logical apparatus in this formative activity. I map the inside and outside of “me” based on this distinction, charting my self through a “logic of exclusion.” Abjection perpetually threatens the ego, notably in our confrontations with bodily excretions like blood, pus, and excrement. What we abject from the body is associated with waste, toxicity, and impurity. Kristeva’s story offers an explanation for why the feminine is considered fundamentally impure, why women are so frightening, and why abjection or sacrifice becomes a suitable response to the feminine threat. Fear of the feminine comes from a universal relation with the maternal entity or other which we all experience by virtue of our entrance into this world. The feminine is not a thing, since it lacks an *eidos*. Rather, it has a more spectral identity. Women, the feminine, are shunted often off into the impure because, paradoxically, it was woman who first engendered my individual self, while all the time threatening its evaporation into some vertiginous madness, cessation, or death. But Kristeva also gestures towards the source of the deep anxieties we may feel about sex itself. If the mother or what we are calling maternal

authority endangers the subject by threatening those borders that protect and ensure ego-identity, then perhaps the sexual or erotic encounter becomes dangerous for the same reason. Kristeva seems to nod towards the significance of erotics, as an “other” kind of “ecstatic” encounter with the “feminine,” but she does not develop its significance.\textsuperscript{22} Sex, intercourse, is a reintroduction into this confusing world of intermixture, an impure mingling with the other, which we recall on the most primal level as a terrifying threat to the narcissistic ego and to ego-identity. Not only do we fear the maternal authority, but we also fear the lover. Virginity, whether understood in the traditional model as a first-time entry into sexual knowledge, or in the phenomenological model as a coming to love, does manifest the danger that Kristeva identifies, since it offers a real and material threat to my autarky and my ego. But perhaps the real trouble is not so much this threat, but the absence in our culture of ways to think about, communicate, and live this experience as something other than a fall into madness, a colonization, or infection of my person. The psychoanalytic story can have only an uneasy alliance with a phenomenological reading of virginity, but what emerges from Kristeva that can be of use to a phenomenology of virginity is the confirmation that there is something about sex that defies language and law.

Derrida and Ricoeur both associate the philosophical quest for knowledge with purification projects, identifying knowledge itself as a purifying force. However, the saturated phenomenon is not amenable to knowledge. Marion does not think that this necessarily makes saturated phenomena irrational or even beyond the limits of philosophical investigation, but a different kind of treatment is required, and perhaps a descriptive approach that has some consciousness of the semiotic, explaining in part, if not quite justifying, the unusual language

\textsuperscript{22} Kristeva writes: “I shall set aside in this essay a different version of the confrontation with the feminine, one that, going beyond abjection and fright, is enunciated as ‘ecstatic’.” She quotes Freud and Mallarmé, who “both point to another manner of coming to terms with the unnameable. That kind of confrontation appears, where our civilization is concerned, only in a few rare flashes of writing. Celine’s laughter, beyond horror, also comes close to it, perhaps” (Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror} 59).
needed to provide a phenomenological description that reaches towards the evanescent and enigmatic phenomenon of virginity. This also explains the impetus to cast virginity outside the borders of proper philosophical or phenomenological investigation, since it will not make itself hospitable to knowledge. Studies in saturated phenomena “obstinately want to bring to light the rationality of facts and doctrines that objectifying rationality will not let us touch.”\textsuperscript{23} For Marion, this means pushing back the limits of reason, but never despairing of rationality. Instead, we need to acknowledge that erotic phenomena need their own rationality, and perhaps their own language. Still, we need to face the material reality that the interstitial, abject, or saturated (however it is coded) is often sacrificed in an attempt to protect the borders of philosophy, law, or morality. This comes to light in two different respects in an analysis of virginity.

4.1 Material Sacrifice

What counts as virgin sacrifice might not immediately be obvious, but I read virgin sacrifice to include a broad range of governmental and disciplinary tactics that circumscribe comportments (typically, women’s comportments) in the name of virginity and purity. These legislations and rituals are allegedly invoked to keep the larger community safe from polluting and corrupting dangers associated, whether through logical entanglement, occult association, or both, with feminine sexuality. While its roots may lie in archaic or mythic fears, feminine sexuality is still regarded with some confusion and it retains a legacy that casts feminine allure and desire as a poison and danger that can threaten to destabilize the community and bring disorder. There is no doubt that our culture continues to have significant fear of women and their relation to sex. What I read as contemporary virgin sacrifice continues to endorse (although perhaps not consciously) the idea that purgation, punishment, or containment rituals can act as

\textsuperscript{23} Marion, “What Do We Mean by ‘Mystic’?” 6.
either prophylaxis or redemptive and cleansing agent against infectious threats that feminine sexuality poses to the community. Our understanding of virgin sacrifice thus ought to be expanded to recognize a spectrum of “terrorisms” that serve to sever women from their sexual autonomy and circumscribe their movements in keeping with the needs—practical and imaginary—of the patriarchal economy.\(^{24}\) In this reading, we can count among instances of “virgin sacrifice” such atrocities as rape-based genocidal projects, strictures on contraception and reproductive technologies, restrictions on access to medical technologies (such as the HPV vaccine), sexual assaults on virgin babies as a prophylaxis versus HIV, abstinence movements restricting sexual education, female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings, and various other violences perpetuated in the name of purity. The very idea of virgin sacrifice becomes integral to this system, since women are charged with imaginary dangers that call for women’s strict management and control, even their legitimate destruction, if this facilitates the sustenance of patriarchal culture.

4.2 Psychological Sacrifice

Psychoanalysis has always argued that individuals must undergo a symbolic castration in order to enter into culture. Freud and Lacan typically figure this castration as occurring quite early in the life of the individual, but perhaps patriarchal culture demands that women undergo another castration, in the symbolic act understood as defloration. In order to renounce their virginity in masculine culture—or perhaps to realize or incarnate it—women must agree to give up their particularly feminine form of jouissance, submitting to a sexual initiation that takes place on patriarchal terms and that amounts to an abdication of feminine sexuality. With this initiation feminine sexuality is taken almost entirely off the map in favour of a patriarchal effigy

\(^{24}\) These terrorisms are what Derrida would call the “reality-effects”; that is, the material violences that flow from our philosophical system.
of the same. Irigaray substantiates the idea that the virgin must submit to culture as part of coming into the symbolic order: “In order to become a woman, the virgin girl must submit to a culture, particularly a culture of love, that to her represents Hades. She must forget her childhood, her mother; she must forget herself as she was in her relationship to Aphrodite’s philotes.”\textsuperscript{25} This secondary castration demands a public and political, imaginary and symbolic renunciation of woman’s right to her own sexual-erotic existence. Some of the fears associated with defloration that come through in Freud’s “The Taboo of Virginity”\textsuperscript{26} might be accounted for in new ways if it were noted that women’s sexual initiation is not just physical, but a violent severance from the very possibility for pleasure, enjoyment, and perhaps also from love. Perhaps the psychoanalytic theory of feminine sexuality and its attendant developmental theory ought to be rewritten: perhaps woman’s final stage of development culminates in virginity lost and the symbolic castration at which point she is allowed to enter culture, but only as a mutilated creature.

This castration might be recognized as a form of genital mutilation, since it often fundamentally impairs the healthy functioning of female geniternity, understood as the system that regulates our sexual-erotic desire. Admitting herself deflowered or initiated through the first act of heterosexual intercourse, women often unwittingly reify masculine interpretations of the act and meaning of sex, and of her sex, since the ritual feeds into the notion that her sexuality derives from an intercourse that can only be instituted with the intervention of the phallus, but also which ties her sexuality to the mother function. In and through this initiation, woman must accept the material realities of the apprenticeship that Beauvoir described earlier; otherwise she is no woman at all. She is denied a sex, a sexuality, an erotic life, and sometimes a full

\textsuperscript{25} Irigaray, \textit{Thinking the Difference} 110.

\textsuperscript{26} Freud, \textit{On Sexuality} 261–283.
personhood insofar as her desires are effectively abjected from the system. Beauvoir’s writing on lesbians, prostitutes, and intellectual women illustrates strategies she thinks women have employed for avoiding this castrating form of sexual initiation, but in taking up these forms of life, such women often condemn themselves to living quite literally outside or on the margins, taking up subject positions that our culture finds suspicious, often repulsive.

A phenomenology of virginity ought to recognize that authentic initiation into Eros cannot be a castrating submission to culture and its laws. This study is willing to recognize and even validate what seems to be an innate anxiety of human sexuality and the strangeness of this relation, but it won’t ground these fears in the “madness” of sex. The enigma of the phenomenon of virginity reflects the intrinsically saturated character that makes Eros and its act inhospitable to human knowledge. A phenomenology of virginity will not sanction irrational acts or violent and sacrificial behaviours undertaken to mitigate these anxieties and fears.

§5 Another Sacrifice

Can sacrifice have a place in the phenomenological rewriting of virginity? Sacrifice is typically read as a purifying gesture that directs itself towards the annihilation or expiation of some wrong or evil that has penetrated an otherwise pure host, leading to its corruption or rot. Such sacrifice intends to restore a disordered community or system to an originary and lawful state after some contravention. Sacrifice becomes purification and purgation, cleansing and catharsis. But in this paradigm, sacrifice also frequently becomes a figure of mastery and overcoming, a strategy implemented or inflicted on the other in the name of reclaiming or reasserting some mythic ideal. We have already gestured towards a way in which virginity may involve a form of sacrifice that does not entail the reinscription of mastery as part of its foundation; a sense in which sacrifice may be motivated by an ethics of generosity and which
does not perceive sacrifice as tantamount to annihilation or expiation, or as a response to some pollutant or evil.

Derrida raises the possibility of an ethics of sacrifice, suggesting that the most singularly ethical act for any individual is to make a sacrifice of self, to give or gift oneself wholly for the other. Derrida reads this through the figure of death: “It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.” This gives sacrifice, whether of self or other, its terrible weight. But does it follow that death has to represent the ultimate sacrifice in an ethics of sacrifice or donation? Can we risk a transformation as potentially seismic as death, but which will not effect my total annihilation? Can there be a profound sacrifice and gifting of the self from which I return, but changed in a way that evidences an encounter perhaps as transformative as death? An example of a sacrifice of self that doesn’t involve annihilation, while yet undertaking the risk of ruin and leaving the self forever transformed in the process, may be the maternal relation. We might even sharpen the differences that I am trying to draw between expiating sacrifice and ethical or erotic sacrifice, by distinguishing paternal and maternal sacrifice. What I call paternal sacrifice is typically figured as the sacrifice of something other in order to restore law (father), whereas maternal sacrifice is fundamentally “mad” in a traditional, rational schema, since it offers itself not in the name of reason, law, or even morality, but in the name of love, willingly transgressing reason and law to meet love’s demands. For example, the gestation of a child is an occurrence that takes place in defiance of many of our spatial, temporal and even “biological” laws. Maternal sacrifice seeks to make room for the other even at the

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27 Derrida, Gift of Death 40. My reading of sacrifice is influenced by Derrida’s work in this text.

28 For this thought I am indebted to Irigaray’s work on the placental relation, notably in “On the Maternal Order.”
expense of the self, but it also knows that “two” can quite literally exist as both two and one at the same time and in the same place.

The gifting of the self that takes place in sexual-erotic love, and notably in the particular act of sexual-erotic intercourse, might also amount to just such an ethical sacrifice, lending credence to the claim that sexual-erotic love can act as a basis for a broader ethics. When Derrida invokes the figure of death, he asserts that it gains its poignancy from the way it emphasizes the radical singularity and unsubstitutability of the individual. Love is also a radically individuating relation. In the sexual-erotic relation that opens the possibility of the efflorescence of the phenomenon of virginity, the other is the beloved, and we distinguish the beloved from any other sexual partner because of the extent to which, through a heightened and cultivated erotic intentionality, she is approached in her absolute singularity. This is accessible to me in part in and through her unique embodiment, which she opens herself to invite me to share and explore in a profound way. The sacrifice of self in love, necessary for the manifestation of the phenomenon of virginity, differs from the expiating sacrifice, with its ethics of purification and return. This sacrifice is not a response to some perceived evil or stain, so it is not undertaken as an apology or atonement and it need not be an expulsive gesture. Moreover, the target of this sacrifice is not some scapegoat or other who has become a sign or symbol at the expense of his particular humanity. The sacrifice involves the willing and generous gifting of oneself.

This form of sacrifice is underwritten by a fundamentally different disposition than the sacrifice of purification and expiation, bringing it closer to an exercise of faith or an expression of hope. Here I am attempting to distinguish a sacrifice that is about the restoration of some originary order or law, and a form of sacrifice that is a generous opening of the self to something other than law. When I gift my flesh to the other in the act of sexual-erotic love I make a sacrifice that is not intended to return me to any originary condition (even to or as myself); rather
I invite a mystery that opens onto ruin, since I cannot anticipate how love will change me. Sacrifice is about a willingness to give or gift the self; to abdicate the self for the benefit or perhaps even the survival of someone or something else. Sacrificing myself for love—the fundamental gesture in opening myself body and soul to the beloved in the act of sexual-erotic love—I put my ego-self at risk in contaminating it with the other.

As a generous gifting of the self, the virginal sacrifice offers a space for regeneration and creation. The rejuvenation that occurs with the efflorescence of the phenomenon of virginity is the kind of sensible transcendence that Irigaray calls “horizontal,” for it does not take us beyond our terrestrial being, but occurs immanently, within and between us. It results in the creation of a space between us, through which we are both revitalized and made anew. In the kenotic work of opening the self to love we demonstrate a willingness to make a sacrifice of self that, quite contrary to the gesture of an expiating purification, actually invites ruin in the hope of inviting not return to the same, but an experience that is fundamentally foreign, different, or other. With this gesture I submit to being thrust into fundamentally foreign territory, a domain beyond my current experience that is as yet fundamentally unknown—even unknowable—to me.29 Ethical sacrifice abdicates pretensions of mastery with this recognition.

Sacrificing the self for the beloved is an opening of self that breaks down borders and challenges law in the name of a more fundamental justice. This opening does not care for the self, and yet it is not entirely self-sacrificing, since it does not believe that “two” cannot co-exist—even in their fundamental difference—but that the loving relation can be effected and sustained. The self in love tends to burn brighter than selves that do not know love, demonstrating that love is enlivening, creative, nurturing. Seeing that it is worth the risk to try to

\[29\] The journey at stake here reminds me of Lévinas’ juxtaposition of the voyage of Odysseus and his return home with the Abrahamic journey, which goes out into the totally foreign world without any pretension of returning to some originary home.
love, I donate and release myself in the hope of a greater love. If we can rehabilitate the sexual-erotic as an ethical domain, rather than an exercise of invasion, corruption, and ruin that puts us in danger of madness or death, then we can prepare for its reception with a different disposition.

Elevating the generous nature of this act does nothing to negate the fearsome nature of sex itself. Identifying virginity as a saturated phenomenon does not demystify it in some respects, since it does not offer to make the experience sensible or explicable. If anything, it validates our fears; we cannot know what will happen when the virginal efflorescence takes place, but instead of suggesting that this means that the phenomenon of virginity is intrinsically occult, it sees that our failure to know about this phenomenon is integral to its evanescent and enigmatic phenomenality and not to a fundamentally irrational structure. That virginity overflows us does not mean that it cannot give or appeal in keeping with a higher rationality as yet indistinct to us. Finally, even if I am willing to make the sacrifice of self for love, whether or not the phenomenon of virginity will gift itself is out of my hands. While we have made some steps in outlining the work that must be undertaken in preparation for the reception of the phenomenon of virginity, we still do not have any formula that can necessarily provoke virginity or even cajole it to appear. Virginity, it turns out, ultimately relies on an element of givenness that is beyond either of the lovers and it will burst upon us only when it is ready to show itself in a gesture of grace.
PART FIVE

GRACE AND RELEASEMENT

§1 Charis

The Greek word charis is usually translated as charm or grace, but in ancient poetry and mythology charis receives a substantial existence as a divine liquid that causes one to become charming, beguiling—sexy.\(^1\) Charis occurs naturally in youth, illuminating nubile radiance and making charis tantamount to a sort of sap or life force, a youthful elixir that gradually dries up as the flower loses its bloom. This fluid is allegedly responsible for the virgin’s enticing powers. In her excellent study on charis, The Age of Grace, Bonnie MacLachlan notes: “Particular radiance was associated with young girls and boys at their flourishing prime (their hora), when the attractiveness of the opposite sex, the operation of charis, would result in the bearing of children.”\(^2\) In special circumstances the divinities periodically gifted or bestowed charis on mortals to endow them with this virginal allure. Anointed with charis the individual appears bedazzling and the charis-beauty arouses an astonishment and attraction that is irresistible. Athena pours charis over Odysseus to help him seduce Nausicaa, to win over the Phaeacians,

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\(^1\) We ought to be cautious of the substantial formulation of charis, since grounding virginal potency in an allegedly material reality tends to corroborate a case for legislating and managing persons who possess this substance or quality. In the modern interpretation we might imagine charis-allure affixed to something like a pheromone or perhaps to a bit of DNA that might code for such a thing.

\(^2\) The hora approximates a stage of virginity; a period of nubility. Charis is associated with youthfulness. Indeed the youngest Charite is Radiance, a quality itself associated with youth in the Greek imagination. See Bonnie MacLachlan 38–39 and 57–59 for discussions of charis and the association with youth. I struggle with the way that sexuality and virginity are so often tied to youthfulness. Beauvoir does a good job in breaking this circuit with her suggestion that authentic erotic reality involves some maturity. She also argues that episodic sexual pleasure ought to be a part of every human life, seemingly regardless of age. The fixation on youthful bodies does a disservice that short-circuits our sexual-erotic potential, which can be developed throughout life. When mature lovers abandon carnal connections they find a powerful bond broken or compromised.
and eventually to sway a stubborn Penelope. Pandora, meanwhile, is said to have been dripping with the stuff.³

MacLachlan distinguishes several kinds or uses of charis in her study. In addition to naturally occurring erotic charis, the sort that arouses sexual and erotic attraction, she notes that for the ancient Greeks charis also had a social function. Charis was frequently conferred by a group of nympthic goddesses called the Charites. The Charites helped foster love between individuals (notably, between the sexes), and they are associated with joy, blessedness, and fertility, appearing often at marriage festivals or the rites of youth. MacLachlan characterizes the Charites as “pleasure-bestowing divinities,” and they were able to use pleasure as a positive social force for binding people, since they saw that its continuing circulation contributed to a harmonious and more amiable society.⁴ It does not seem that the Charites circulated love per se (surprisingly, MacLachlan does not invoke Eros in her study), but they lubricated society to make it function more beautifully, to abound with goodness, and to cultivate the kinds of relationships between individuals and society that we recognize as ethical or loving. Charis thus became responsible for fostering affable human relations, but also for perpetuating a favourable relation between humans and the divine, since it is depicted, in part, as a divine gift.

The capacity to bind is reflected in charis’ social function as well as its erotic form. This power flows from the sense of wonder that charis precipitates: “Wonder and awe issue from the charis of good behaviour, just as a beautiful women or man radiates charis and provokes astonishment.”⁵ Charis incites the awe and delight of the other who then seeks to respond in

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³ These examples are all taken from MacLachlan’s Age of Grace, especially chapter 2. My chapter is thoroughly indebted to her work.
⁴ MacLachlan 5.
⁵ MacLachlan 148. The idea that charis precipitates and is precipitated by a certain marvel recalls the role that wonder plays in Irigarayan ethics.
kind. It is a beauty that moves its beholder with a benevolent seduction that elects, since: “The power of charis resides in its unerring ability to provoke a response.”\textsuperscript{6} Charis-beauty arouses a response that in turn instigates an economy of charis, where beauty and pleasure are maintained in a perpetual exchange and flow. The operation described here is not unlike the structure I have described with respect to erotic intentionality. A sense of wonder provoked by the erotic body of the other arouses me and provokes me to respond to this nascent call. If I respond with an erotic attunement then the other is engaged in a fashion that heightens the erotic intentionality shared between us. This becomes the motor of love (and sexual-erotic love is one way that we can express this attraction or eventually realize its full potential, the virginal efflorescence). Charis arouses us not only physically but also erotically insofar as we want not just to be near the beloved and the beautiful, but also to do well in this nearness. It seems that charis makes us hospitable to love. MacLachlan sometimes describes charis as a “softening agent” that makes individuals or groups responsive to splendour.\textsuperscript{7} While charis isn’t Eros or love, it points to an economy similar to the Eros I have been invoking in terms of its structure of binding and arousal, and because of its ability to sustain felicity and sociality.

MacLachlan cautions that a danger can arise from neglecting charis and its function in society. This danger presages the perils that our age faces in overlooking the importance of Eros in facilitating harmonious ethical relations. Socially, charis was perpetuated through an increasingly secular economy of gift-giving and exchange of pleasure, making an element of reciprocity integral to its continued functioning. MacLachlan calls ancient Greece the “age of grace” due to the centrality of charis-circulation in the social economy. Examples of the exchange of charis could include honouring athletic or civic outstandingness, the flow of

\textsuperscript{6} MacLachlan 37.

\textsuperscript{7} MacLachlan 33.
kindnesses between friends or marital partners, or the goodwill fostered by social graces exhibited at a good party. Breaches in this system could lead to disharmony, since “the departure of charis or the Charites is associated with a fracture in society, human or divine.” Charis was originally understood as a divine gift, but what began as a blessed benefaction became corrupted when the charis-economy was commandeered by humans and implemented as a pragmatic system concerned with a circulation of civic loyalties, political power and favour, and material profit (now also thus including the pleasures of vengeance, spite, or pride). Charis was once perceived as a celestial gift of the stuff of love, but a secularized version eventually covered over charis’ divine origins, subverting its potency in favour of a base system of exchange. As humans took responsibility for institutionalizing and civilizing pleasure, the divinity of charis was forgotten, obscured, and perhaps eventually lost altogether. The Charites were deposed and the world became less beautiful. With this bastardization of charis there was an ethical schism, a fall from grace.

Erotic charis has an ephemeral nature associated with youth, but we might say that all charis has an evanescent nature—indeed, MacLachlan says that charis is not a “durable phenomenon.” It needs renewed circulation because it has a fleeting quality that demands ongoing labour to keep its vigour and its importance alive. In short, charis begets charis. This speaks to an exigency to perpetually tend, nurture, and renew the bonds of affection that maintain social harmony and love between individuals. But there is also a need to maintain

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8 MacLachlan 121.

9 See MacLachlan 124–126 for more on the secularization of charis.

10 MacLachlan 148. MacLachlan argues that the transient nature of charis contributes to its poignancy. But what is also remarkable in this turn of phrase is that MacLachlan specifically refers to charis (along with aidos) as a phenomenon. Of course her argument is not framed in the language of philosophical phenomenology, but this turn of phrase remains remarkable.
recognition of charis’ divine and gifted origins; there is something about charis and the goodness it fosters that comes from beyond.

§2 Grace and Releasement

2.1 Grace

The ancient notion of charis recognizes that there is something divinely bestowed that instigates attraction between lovers. MacLachlan’s study also sees that when the divine aspect of charis (grace) is neglected, social relations suffer. What can a phenomenology of virginity take from this story? It turns out that grace is integral to the phenomenology of virginity. I have described virginity as the event of coming to love through the sexual-erotic body. This experience is made possible by the sexuate constitution of our bodies, but also through our capacity to cultivate the libidinal instinct with erotic attunement so that sexual intercourse becomes an ethical relation. The work involved in heightening this capacity is a labour of love but, because virginity ultimately gives itself, there must be yet another element at work here.

To say that virginity appears with or from grace is to acknowledge the givenness of the phenomenon of virginity. As a saturated phenomenon, virginity has an excessive nature that overflows intuition and defies conceptualization or signification. This points to its counter-intentional structure and the recognition that virginity imposes itself on me (or rather, since it is always a shared phenomenon, on us). I cannot impose myself on this phenomenon, willing or desiring it to appear within the horizon of my autonomous grasp. The phenomenon of virginity offers itself to the couple, but it is more than the total of their mutual work, desire, or will. A phenomenology of virginity needs to accommodate the experience that the phenomenon of virginity comes over us like a foreign invasion that involves more than just the couple. It is not only the frisson between lovers that effects some virginal alchemy; there is a simultaneous
encounter with something beyond either of the two lovers but which works between in and
through them. In Christian theology, grace is associated with God’s giving or bestowing on
humans some favour as an act of love. The phenomenon of virginity happens like a form of
grace, since this gift intervenes of its own accord and from elsewhere. Without wanting to import
the notion of divinity attached to a traditional Godhead, I do want to maintain the significance of
divinity as a recognition of how saturated phenomena like virginity seem to give themselves
from beyond; they have a force and power that is exterior, and indeed greater than oneself. ¹¹
Moreover, an act of grace is typically considered as a gift or a benefaction. A phenomenology of
virginity (any study in saturated phenomenology) needs to develop a vocabulary to capture the
gifted and the enigmatic nature of the way virginity (and other saturated phenomena) appear to
us.¹² Grace helps explain the wondrous anticausal impetus of virginity’s bursting forth,
simultaneously capturing the sense of passivity but also blessedness we feel in the face of this
saturated phenomenon.

To say that virginity appears with a measure of grace acknowledges its given and gifted
quality and the way that it intervenes—from a beyond, from an infinite horizon (in this respect
perhaps no horizon at all) that overflows the confines of our rational mind. To say that virginity

11 Irigaray cautions that preserving some horizon of divinity is integral to human flourishing, since it helps
orient a relation to the infinite and our own finite nature: “Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous,
sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society, has ever been established without the help of the divine.” This
does not mean that she endorses the philosophical reinscription of some ontotheological God—in fact, Irigaray is
very critical of the God of monotheistic religion. Rather, I read her as asserting the need to preserve divinity as an
acknowledgement of the way we experience the world as saturated and given, of the place of the infinite in our
human experience. See Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies 62.

12 Phenomenology remains anxious about the place of divinity in the philosophical enterprise. Marion’s
phenomenology of givenness is often castigated for ostensibly importing an element of divinity because the
recognition of givenness seems to spark the question of who or what gives, which harks back to God. Marion does
speak often of God in his own work (and especially in Erotic Phenomenon, where God’s love is explicitly invoked
as the most perfect love), but he insists that a phenomenology of givenness need not fall back on an ontotheological
God to ground itself. Commentator Robyn Horner suggests that Derrida may offer a way out of this theological
conundrum, with his reading of the gift in keeping with an ethics of the impossible. This problem with the
phenomenology of givenness is something that I need to consider in greater depth in future work. See Horner 142–
146.
happens with a measure of grace recognizes the limits of human reason, but without insisting that the phenomenon is irrational. Admitting that an understanding or knowledge of virginity (and other saturated phenomena) is beyond our grasp necessitates not just recognition of the limits of human reason; it also demands an abdication of fantasies of mastery and an acknowledgement of the limits of our *power*. This capacity to defuse pretensions of power and mastery is one of the most positive underpinnings of a phenomenology of givenness, underwriting its potential for instigating a new thinking of philosophical and phenomenological ethics.

2.2 Releasement

Virginity—falling in love—bursts upon us as an invasion, demanding an abdication of power and will. This returns us to the question of how we can prepare to receive virginity, since it only gives itself in its own time. How do we prepare to receive any phenomenon that is bestowed with grace? How do we think about phenomena in their givenness even prior to their giving? One possible route for preparing to receive the phenomenon of virginity is expressed in the Heideggerian notion of *releasement*. Heidegger discusses releasement in his work on thinking; he sees releasement as integral to meditative or contemplative thinking. Meditative thinking is itself a form of releasement and openness, contrasted to the calculative thinking that “plans and investigates” and “computes,” based on economic possibilities. Heidegger sees releasement as a task of renouncing will: “So far as we can wean ourselves from willing, we contribute to the awakening of releasement.” Releasement is figured as opening and waiting. It is “difficult” and yet it straddles the division between activity and passivity, a challenging form of thought beyond representation, which

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13 Heidegger, “Memorial Address” 46.
resists the mind’s desire to impose its forms of experience on everything that it brings into consciousness. Releasement goes beyond knowledge of an object, and so beyond the limits of traditional thought. In order to contemplate the phenomenon of virginity (and in order to receive it!) will require an act of releasement, acknowledging that virginity will never be amenable to traditional, objectivizing forms of description, classification, or signification. It seems that releasement involves the kind of nonthinking thought that is important in the erotic reduction, since Heidegger indicates that it is undertaken with a “thinking heart.”

However, Heidegger also thinks that releasement is effected from “somewhere else,” evoking the idea of grace. Releasement, even while it is conscious work, is ultimately undertaken to facilitate an opening of thought that is out of my hands. Sometimes the best we can do is “prepare to release.” Meditative thinking requires a strange combination of active letting go that is reminiscent of the way we prepare for the phenomenon of virginity. This is challenging, even though Heidegger argues that we are meditative beings by nature. We need to work at this kind of opening of the self: “Yet releasement towards things and openness to the mystery never happen of themselves. They do not befall us accidentally. Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking.” So too the releasing, the opening of self and ego involved in welcoming the phenomenon of virginity, is laborious and painful. The ethical work that I have characterized as necessary preparation for virginity is undertaken even while the individual acknowledges that ultimately the phenomenon will reveal itself only in its own time and its own will. This is a hopeful and faithful making-room in the self for love, but without expectation and without knowing or even having pretensions of knowing what may give itself to us.

14 Heidegger, “Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking” 82.
15 Heidegger, “Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking” 60.
16 Heidegger, “Memorial Address” 56.
Finally, for Heidegger “thinking is not inactivity,” and he rejects the “metaphysical”
distinction between thinking and praxis.\textsuperscript{17} This has interesting implications for the phenomenon
of virginity, since virginity always reveals itself in and through an active and embodied practice.
We don’t just think about virginity: we live it, through the innervated and eroticized body. The
phenomenon is precipitated by an active gifting of my body that is an exercise in releasement
and opening. If, in very general terms, the reduction (to givenness) effects a clearing or
bracketing of the presumed or known, then the embodied practice of clearing a space in myself
or opening myself to the beloved may be a path to reducing my self to find my self anew, in its
most essential structures; to reveal my essence as a loving animal.

§3 Efflorescence

Then Cronos’ son took his wife in his arms. Underneath them divine Earth made
fresh flowers grow—dew-covered clover, crocuses, and hyacinths, lush and soft,
to hold the lovers off the ground. They lay together there covered with a cloud, a
lovely golden mist, from which fell glistening dew.

—Homer’s \textit{Iliad}, Book XIV

Can we do any more to describe the experience of virginity’s appearing, the palpable
manifesting of virginity’s eventing? Virginity happens in a manner that I call efflorescence. In
“The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger distinguishes three modes of \textit{poiesis} or
bringing-forth. First, he contrasts the production of tools, instruments, and technical objects from
the creation or production of artistic works. But Heidegger also illuminates a third form of
\textit{poiesis} that he distinguishes as higher than the other two. This is \textit{physis}, the mode of bringing-

\textsuperscript{17} “Thinking is not inactivity but is in itself the action which stands in dialogue with the world mission. It
seems to me that the distinction, which stems from metaphysics, between thinking and praxis, and the representation
of some kind of transmission between the two, blocks the way to an insight into what I understand by thinking”
forth, manifestation, or givenness that characterizes the flowering of the natural world.

Heidegger writes:

Not only handicraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, poiesis. Physis also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, poiesis. Physis is indeed poiesis in the highest sense. For what presences by means of physis has the irruption belonging to bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself (en heautoi). In contrast, what is brought forth by the artisan or the artist, e.g., the silver chalice, as the irruption belonging to the bringing forth, not in itself, but in another (en alloi), in the craftsman or artist.¹⁸

Heidegger describes a natural spontaneity in bringing-forth that is physis as distinct from human production, whether practical or artistic. Physis evidences a bringing-forth of pure givenness. It is a revealing to and from itself beyond mere production or reproduction. The phenomenon of virginity irrupts within us with the primordial spontaneity of physis, differentiating it from any phenomenon that we can manufacture or produce of our own accord.¹⁹

This is why it is apt to describe the experience of coming to love through the sexual-erotic body as a flowering, a blossoming: efflorescence. In showing itself, virginity is felt as a dehiscence, a rapturous, rupturing blooming from within. As gifted, manifest only by the benevolence of grace, the phenomenon of virginity releases itself in this joyous irruption.


¹⁹ It should be noted that we can and do in fact “manufacture” virginity. We produce virginity in the hermeneutic violence that leads us to graft a specific meaning onto the word or concept, but there is also a literal sense in which we have been actively working to manufacture virginity not just through concept and language, but through technics including virgin testing, chastity devices, hymen restoration, FGM, and other violences that seek to technologize and master virginity at the expense of its phenomenality.
Heidegger describes bringing-forth as a way of unconcealing or revealing. However, *poiesis* also occasions a kind of transformation, as one thing becomes another or mutates to become a new kind of thing. Thus Heidegger cites the transmutation of a bug to a butterfly or even the melting of snow as examples of *poiesis*. What is the change that comes about with the efflorescence of virginity, and what does it unconceal or reveal about us? With the efflorescence of virginity, the couple comes to love through the sexual-erotic act and in this instant there is a bursting forth of an ethico-erotic revelation that changes everything. The manifestation of virginity reveals or gives to us not just some abstract idea of love, but it affirms for us that loving is part of our very constitution and that love works in and through us. It reveals that we are loving entities, and provides the assurance that Marion’s loving animals seek to make it all worthwhile. Realizing the possibility for goodness and love that is within me, virginity’s efflorescence beholds a “fullness of manifestation,” giving me to myself as a loving entity.

The transformation that comes about with the induction to love paradoxically releases me to and from myself in a movement of shattering my ego while simultaneously revealing that my ego was not the sum total of what defines me; perhaps it even exists as an impediment to my recognition of myself as a loving entity who exists intersubjectively, in perpetual intercourse with an erotic world that gives and gifts me to myself through our erotic interactions. The bursting effect of the virginal efflorescence may be why it is so often confused with orgasm, that

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20 This transformation is sometimes cast as a threshold-crossing; an uncanny association with traditional metaphors of coming to virginity.

21 The Oxford English Dictionary literally defines efflorescence as a “fullness of manifestation,” echoing the Heideggerian reading that this blooming sees a higher, richer, or fuller way of showing or even being itself. Efflorescence has a sense of manifesting worked into its very meaning-structure.

22 The significance of the virginal revelation is not just about sex. The phenomenon of virginity is stunning evidence of a genuine ethical confrontation with the other and evidence of the creative power that exists in relational congresses, of what we can build between-two. This lesson can act as a model for the positive effects of opening myself and exhibiting generosity of spirit in the larger world. I do not just act alone, I am not the sole architect of my lonely projects (as existentialism has sometimes had it). I can also build with the other through our joint works. Eros can provide a lesson in the creativity and fecundity that Irigaray thinks we have yet to explore between-two.
“white lightning” that has a similarly physical phenomenology but which does not effect its
detonating frisson on my soul. Virginity turns out to be a sort of dehiscence, a spilling of
contents as the ego is spontaneously rent to release itself, showing me my higher self, my self
which is unbounded by egoic concerns. With this coming to love the ego cannot contain itself; it
abdicates its dreadful and yet comforting solipsism with the invasion of the beloved other.
Virginity thus also has a structure of releasement in the experience of a primordial releasing of
the ego-self in the act of erotic generosity. Dehiscence can indicate a bursting or splitting on
natural or sutured lines. If the formation of the ego means creating lines around myself, a natural
shell to keep me unto myself, then virginity sees the cracking of these lines, the opening of a
wound that makes me flow into the world. It seems that the formation of the ego is tantamount to
creating a cocoon for the self where it can begin to grow and know its world, perhaps a
protective coating so that its senses don’t overwhelm it from the very beginning. But once this
rupture has taken place, the wound is perpetual. “Wound dehiscence” is a medical phenomenon
that recognizes the spontaneous disintegration of the bond from a natural wound (perhaps the
tearing along a scar line, recalling that Marion explicitly invokes the scarifying nature of love).
This reminds us that a wound that was once closed is vulnerable to being opened and reopened,
just as virginity is not a one-time splitting, but an encounter of rupture that can occur repeatedly.
The physis that takes place with virginity’s efflorescence is intractable, and will leave me forever
vulnerable to seeking reassurance of what I am. Love splits my ego-self at its very seams and this
wound is interminable.

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23 Marion figures this in the transformation of the subject from Dasein to l’adonne; that is, from the
ontological subject to the lover or beloved. With this particular act of releasement the initiation into Eros sees the
ontological transformation that marks the progression Marion distinguishes as a movement to the third reduction:
erotic rationality.
§4 Evanescence

Virginity bursts upon us. And then it’s gone. If virginity appears with such striking force then why do we have so much trouble recognizing this phenomenon? If virginity is such a visceral event, why is there such skepticism about its phenomenal existence? Phrased differently, why are we so unwilling to believe in love? The reason for this is at least threefold. First, our philosophical inheritance has conspired to block the appearance of virginity, insofar as it has trouble recognizing or admitting saturated phenomena because of their paradoxical and excessive nature. As long as the philosophical tradition associated phenomena with objectality or even with Being, it was difficult to recognize virginity in its phenomenality. Marion’s phenomenology of givenness provides a method for moving beyond this inheritance, but there may still be lingering resistance to the notion of saturated phenomena.

Secondly, we have demonstrated that the ego has a certain seemingly innate resistance to virginity, since virginity’s efflorescence is ruinous to egoic autarky. The ego may attempt to defend itself by repressing, denying, or refusing virginity in its phenomenality. The ego has an inherent aversion to its own destruction and a propensity for mastery even while it yearns for love, giving this formation a rather melancholic structure. We have trouble giving up the comforting solipsism of the knowing ego, and undertaking the risks of love makes overwhelming demands. While ultimately counterproductive, we can make some sense of why the ego would refuse to recognize virginity.

But there is also another reason why we might fail to recognize or even believe in the phenomenon of virginity. It seems that the structure of virginity itself conspires to keep itself invisible, since it has a phenomenality that proves intrinsically evanescent.24 This may be a

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24 The evanescent nature of the phenomenon of virginity is foreshadowed in Lévinas and Marion, who both acknowledge something transitory about sexual-erotic love. Lévinas reflects virginity’s evanescence in the figure of the feminine who recedes from the light and who proves inhospitable to comprehension or penetration. Marion
necessary aspect of its constitution, since the force of virginity’s invasion is overwhelming. We have repeatedly described virginity as wondrous, awesome, astonishing, dazzling, and it is all the more intolerable, since it is lived not just as an intellectual paradox, but also through the physical and spiritual body; in the flesh. Marion writes that: “Bedazzlement begins when perception crosses its tolerable maximum.” Indeed, virginity is unbearable and this insight helps us understand its fundamentally recessive nature. It recedes because, just as we cannot live in the anxiety of death at all times, neither can we live in the ecstasy of virginity. Even thinking about the phenomenon of virginity is challenging because of its excessive and enigmatic nature. We can scarcely hold it in the mind for an instant let alone within the confines of the body.

The psychoanalytic concept of jouissance captures the idea of an encounter that is too much for the organism to bear. Sex is often associated with pleasure and figured as a pleasure-seeking and even hedonistic activity, but the pleasure of sex has a particular cast that deserves further consideration. Sexual pleasure has a dimension of suffering. The very physical sensations are exhausting. Part of the palliative nature of sex is the palpable release of physical and energetic tension. It tears me from myself and this is wondrous and painful. Virginity is an ecstatic experience; it literally drives me outside of myself. Virginity is saturated not only insofar as its concept exceeds our grasp, but it is literally too much for me to bear in and through the burden of my eroticized body. I can receive it and live it, but I cannot hold the beloved or virginity within the parameters of my living self for more than a rapturous instant. As such, the phenomenon of virginity recedes almost immediately after its own visitation. It is a paradox to

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argues that suspension is a necessary part of the erotic encounter, which is finite and must stop at some point. He sees that the erotic experience becomes doubtful as soon as we move out of the erotic reduction (and it seems that we can’t always function in this domain; it is as if we swim in and out of this register of understanding). When eroticization ceases I become prone to forget. And, he writes, “I may doubt in general the phenomenon of the other, from the moment that the erotic reduction is lacking.” Marion thus likens eroticization to anxiety, since “once the wave has passed, I tell myself that, after all, it was nothing” (Marion, Erotic Phenomenon 137).

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25 Marion, Being Given 206.
live through ecstasy, since its outward motion propels me beyond my existence and incarnation. Beauvoir appropriates the suffering of sexual-erotic love to argue that its unique, nearly unbearable pain gives Eros its particular and poignant nature. She writes:

Pain is normally a part of the erotic frenzy; bodies that delight to be bodies for the joy they give each other, seek to find each other, to unite, to confront each other in every possible manner. There is in erotic love a tearing away from the self, transport, ecstasy; suffering also tears through the limits of the ego, it is a transcendenec, a paroxysm.26

Beauvoir characterizes erotic love as among the ultimate acts of freedom, since it sees me risk myself in a visceral confrontation with the ambiguity of human existence experienced through the generous and sacrificial sharing of flesh with an other. But she also knows that this confrontation is difficult to endure and this is why she casts the meeting as a paroxysm.

Evanescence may be an aspect of all saturated phenomena, since it reflects their paradoxical and enigmatic nature, and their unwillingness to be held within the confines of the mind. Some saturated phenomena may be evanescent in themselves, but they leave discernable traces. The face, a death, the flesh, a statue—while these phenomena all share an enigmatic and somewhat evanescent phenomenology that makes them available for only limited (or infinite) phenomenological description, they all leave recognizable traces in their wake. Virginity is particularly troubling because it leaves few visible traces; its scars etched primarily on the equally invisible phenomenon that is the heart. The evanescent nature of virginity (and all saturated phenomena) makes it inhospitable to knowledge, since it is never going to be something that I can grasp with my rational mind, nor is it something that will be receptive to conceptualization, representation, or signification. This is why saturated phenomena have an

26 Beauvoir, Second Sex 398.
unattainable burden of proof according to the parameters of traditional philosophy. As opposed to an object of knowledge, virginity becomes a phenomenon that we can affirm only negatively or obliquely, necessitating, perhaps, faith or belief (both of which demand perpetual renewal) rather than certainty. This makes some saturated phenomena, like virginity, prone to doubt and even obscurcation or forgetfulness if we don’t renew our commitment to them. Virginity’s evanescence may not just indicate its recessive nature, but also in its ghostly capacity to be eradicated quite entirely if permitted to hide in the shadows of “forget.”

§5 Falling Out of Love—The Problem with Technology

It is possible to imagine a future where we humans might outstrip our sexuate nature. And it is even more plausible and infinitely more dangerous to imagine that we could forget, cover over, abdicate, or obliterate our erotic constitution. This threat is particularly significant at this juncture in human history. We are at a historic crossroads with respect to sex, where philosophy can no longer evade questions about the significance of our sexual-erotic existence. Until very recently, sexual congress has been necessary for the reproduction of our species. Technology is rapidly challenging this fact, and already sexual intercourse is inessential to human reproduction. As we continue to develop technologies for conceiving and growing humans outside of maternal bodies, sexual reproduction may find itself entirely obsolete. This statement is value neutral, for while we might argue for preserving the erotic experience of pregnancy and childbirth we can argue with equitable rationality for gestating children outside of human bodies. After all, childbirth is messy, dangerous, and in many ways inefficient. Thus we find ourselves suddenly facing the question: if sex is no longer necessary for reproduction, should we give up sexual activity altogether? Aside from its reproductive utility, is there any reason to save sex? Perhaps not, especially given the violent history of how sex has been
appropriated as a tool of war, genocide, assault, and domination. What would be the consequence should we outstrip our sexual being—and possibly our erotic being too?

Heidegger cautions that in the epoch that culminates in the age of technology we mortals may perhaps foreclose bringing-forth—that is, the ways that the world is revealed or reveals itself—so that the only bringing-forth that remains is a system that Heidegger calls “enframing.” In enframing, the contents of the world appear in terms of their potential use-value. They are set upon or ordered as a “standing reserve” so that their energy can be channelled for future use. In such a regime sex becomes disordered too. It may be reduced to the instrument of human procreation, and humans appear as if destined to be reproductive vessels, tools for producing more human labour, an army itself of little value aside from its utility as a standing reserve to be harnessed in the name of yet more technological progress. Such an understanding of Eros, now reduced to mere sex, also serves to divide the sexes into determinant roles, with women in particular set upon in the most literal and brutal fashion. Alternatively, sex may become a commodity to be exchanged based on its market value as pleasure-provider, entertainment, or labour. In either dystopia, what is obscured is the divine and ethical potential that can be accessed through sexual-erotic relations in favour of a hollow mechanical activity of economic and technological begetting.

What emerges under the sway of enframing is a particular vision of the human who comes to identify, not first and foremost as an ethical or loving being, but as a technological entity. The understanding of virginity as coming to love with a divine aspect is covered over in a system that refuses any such “beyond” as mystical or magical thinking. We become socially useful, productive, and reproductive beings; labouring bodies conforming to universal laws that demand everything make itself transparent or present to us, intelligible and known, so that nothing lies in a range inaccessible to human understanding and governance. What gets lost is a
sense of ourselves as ethical beings, beings that not only do and be and make, but which receive and honour, cultivate, nurture, and love. Heidegger warns: “Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God, for representational thinking, can lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance.”\(^27\) Divinity retreats from the world and the fourfold is ruptured, perhaps irreparably. This, in short, is what Heidegger cautions as “the most precipitous fall.”\(^28\)

In the Heideggerian technological dystopia the world is progressively robbed of its erotic character, simultaneously divesting humans of our capacity to recognize and develop ourselves as erotic and loving beings. Bereft of Eros, the world is transformed, and we are transformed too, but also impoverished. Enframing, with its focus on mastery and utility, and its intolerance for other modes of bringing-forth, subverts our thinking about Eros. Subjected to a program where value is based on calculable utility, the phenomenon of virginity becomes more difficult to access, replaced by a blunt interpretation of sexual initiation as a mechanical process. A philosophy that doesn’t want to think about love may eventually refuse love altogether.

Perhaps the most startling claim in “The Question Concerning Technology” is the warning that, under the sway of technology, human essence may find itself forever mutated and that indeed human essence is malleable and even corruptible. Heidegger cautions that if we fail to honour our essence (for example, I would say, our essential possibilities for existing as erotic and loving beings), then we can cover over, obscure, or perhaps even obliterate our own inmost possibilities.\(^29\) Under the sway of enframing, Heidegger argues that:

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\(^27\) Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 331.

\(^28\) Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 332.

\(^29\) For Heidegger, the essence of the human still seems located in our capacity to think; however, as discussed in the last section, in Heidegger’s interpretation the highest form of thinking as meditative challenges what it means to be a thinking thing. Insofar as I think his world does reflect a certain erotic structure, so too I think the Heideggerian understanding of thinking has a somewhat erotic structure.
Man stands so decisively in subservience to on [sic] the challenging-forth of enframing that he does not grasp enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, in terms of his essence, in a realm where he is addressed, so that he can never encounter only himself.30

If we forget that the world speaks to us in multiple voices we may obscure that the world is understandable in myriad ways—including through the loving intentionality of Eros. Heidegger gestures towards making ourselves responsive to a “poetic revealing” that he thinks is a more “primal” and potentially more profound way of bringing-forth than the enframing that now threatens to take over everything.31 In addition to the poetic, is it possible that the erotic is itself a distinct register for teaching us how to dwell more ethically in the world? If we can cultivate a poetic way of revealing, so too perhaps we could cultivate an erotic mode of revealing. This is the hope of an erotic phenomenology, and what erotic phenomenology discloses about virginity. Sexual-erotic love helps to cultivate an erotic mode of bringing-forth, underwritten by an ethical impetus that can provide a way of revealing the world that is positive, hopeful, and freedom enhancing, and which has the capacity to offer a world very different from the one revealed by enframing.

§6 Virginity and the Saving Power—A Defence of Eros

At the end of “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger suggests that inherent in technological thinking is a “saving power.” To cultivate this saving power Heidegger urges us

30 Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 332.

31 For more, see Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 340.
to take up those “little things” that will teach us to dwell more poetically. While Heidegger calls for a more poetic dwelling, what is really needed is a more ethical form of dwelling. Poetic dwelling may or may not facilitate a more ethical society, but there is no question that cultivating an erotic form of dwelling has the potential to do so, since Eros is founded on a response to the other. Sex is an activity that can help foster a deep engagement and commitment among individuals when enlivened by an erotic intentionality. Perhaps one of the “little things” we can do to spare ourselves is to explore the untapped value inherent in the act of sexual-erotic love. Questioning and exploring sex, that strange embodied activity, may offer a path to save us. A phenomenology of virginity can help facilitate this work, since it pauses to question the essential structures of sexual initiation, revealing that our sexuate existence is underwritten by an ethical attunement that offers a unique way of being or dwelling in the world. Our culture has few structures for understanding, fostering, or training us in the ethical use of our sexual-erotic drives. To learn or relearn a regenerative and productive outlet for this instinct we need to begin to question and illuminate the path to higher and untapped creative uses for our sexual energies. We can learn to dwell more erotically, which also means to dwell more ethically, since erotic attunement fosters a singular and ethical relation to the other based on generosity, shared undertakings, creativity, and joy.

Insofar as it can teach us to dwell erotically, sex has the potential to spare or save us; perhaps quite literally in the sense of helping to heal some of the wounds that see us destroying the planet, but also, in the Heideggerian sense of awakening us to our essence, now recognized as that of the loving animal. Sexual-erotic love offers a special form of nurturing the spirit.

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32 Note that “to save” is “to fetch something home to its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its proper appearing” (Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 333).

33 Heidegger says that “Real sparing is something positive and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence, when we return it specifically to its essential being, when we ‘free’ it in the proper sense of the word into a preserve of peace. . . . The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing” (Heidegger,
Through sex we grow not just as new individuals (for sex is not primarily about reproduction); rather, we grow ourselves as loving beings. In our “precarious age,” sex turns out to be just the kind of work we must undertake to “bring dwelling into the fullness of its essence.”34 Dwelling erotically, I become aware of the other, and, in listening and responding to the other’s calls the erotic relation becomes an ethical, caring, and concernful symbiosis. Sexual-erotic love offers a largely unexplored foundational model upon which to base broader human social relations. Once we learn to use our bodies to respond to the needs and demands of the lover, we can implement this outside of the bedroom. It is not just our lover to whom we respond with an erotic intentionality; we can apply this intentionality to our other intercourses in the world. We can deepen our perception of the world through erotic attunement.

At this historical point, when we finally see the possibility of outstripping our sexuality, we are also put in the unique position to question, perhaps for the first time in human history, the meaning of our sexual-erotic constitution. As technology threatens to foreclose sex, love intervenes with the claim that sex is higher than reproductive teleology has imagined. No longer blinded by a procreative exigency, we can appreciate Irigaray’s claim that the sexual-erotic relation holds promise of eminent fecundity and creativity and that it is possible to grow a genuine sexuate love here on earth. Saving sex proves to be one of the “little things” that we can do to cultivate our highest potential as mortals. This helps make sense of the claim that sex may prove our “salvation.”35 In one of his final interviews, Heidegger expresses despair for

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34 Heidegger asks about the state of dwelling in our “precarious age,” addressing what he sees as the contemporary problem of a homelessness that can only be mended by learning to build and dwell properly. Dwelling properly, we answer the mortal “summons” to bring dwelling into the fullness of its essence, which must also be the work of securing the fourfold. See Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 363.

35 “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age. . . . Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through” (Irigaray, “Sexual Difference” 5).
humanity’s future, remarking that: “only a God can save us.” He does think that philosophy can offer some palliative, but he recognizes that this will be a slow process:

Philosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world. This is not only true of philosophy, but of all merely human thought and endeavour. Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering (Untergang); for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder.36

Could it be that the particular God that can save us now is Eros? To the question of whether sex is obsolete we should answer No, and see that we are just now beginning to glimpse an erotic rationality, a higher stage of culture that honours love’s logos.

§7 Virginity and Philosophy

And so it turns out that there are two sexual initiations at stake. First, I have attempted to elucidate the phenomenon of virginity, now understood as the event of coming to love through the sexual-erotic body. The difficulty of understanding or even acknowledging virginity in its unique phenomenality points towards the second and perhaps even greater exigency underwriting this work, which is a call for phenomenology to initiate philosophy into the way of love. This is an appeal for philosophy to return to its roots as an erotic discipline and an amorous pursuit.

7.1 Virginity

The phenomenology of virginity has been a study in saturated phenomenology, thus based on a phenomenology of givenness. It also contributes to a larger philosophical project that

attempts to make sense of our erotic existence and the ways in which this essential constitution situates us in the world. From the very outset, a phenomenology of virginity appeared a somewhat dubious undertaking due to the excessive nature of the phenomenon of virginity, its evanescence, and the general lack of a culture of love that might help bring context to this work. In the end, however, we have been able to make great strides in working towards a description of this enigmatic phenomenon, validating the very enterprise of saturated phenomenology. We can now offer:

* Virginity is the experience of a phenomenal event that occurs during a sexual intercourse with a similarly embodied beloved who (not “that”) opens me up to a relational experience of my own giftedness (not “existence”) as a loving entity, and to some transcendent congress with the beyond.

A phenomenology of virginity does justice to our sexuate and embodied existence, recognizing that our sexuate bodies and libidinal instincts, so long maligned as merely animal, can be trained and cultivated in the service of ethics. Both processes are slow and difficult, but the benefits are rich, since erotic phenomenology offers not just a new understanding of our own ethico-erotic being, but also a positive horizon for developing a broader ethics of Eros. Sexual-erotic love could serve as a foundation for a culture and politics based on the strengths and virtues that can be fostered through sexual-erotic love and practised in erotic congress: generosity, labour, sharing, creativity, joy, and a positive form of sacrifice. While it is still not entirely clear how an ethics of Eros might evolve, my project contributes to and endorses the further philosophical investigation of this new model of social and political living.

7.2 Philosophy

Philosophy has not done well with love. Phenomenology offers a route for philosophy to return to the erotic. A phenomenology of givenness is especially attractive in its capacity to
illuminate the links between phenomenology, ethics, and Eros. A recognition of the world as gifted and given is fundamentally erotic, since it casts us in perpetual intercourse with a universe that is, if not animate, still teeming with some sort of vitality that is not quite about Being or life as traditionally conceived. A phenomenology of givenness awakens us to the erotic nature of the world and to our erotic relationship with the world. It rediscovers that the objects and things of philosophical investigation are first and foremost phenomena that give themselves, and so it reconceives the project of a philosophical knowing in keeping with the limits of human reason, now appropriated as a starting point for engaging with the world rather than an impediment to knowing and mastery.

The phenomenology of givenness also transforms our understanding of the subject, since it reveals me to myself as gifted and given, as a being that is and can love. Repositioning philosophy’s knowing subject as the loving animal is one of Marion’s most astonishing contributions to phenomenology, and it is bursting with the potential to reorient the philosophical and phenomenological enterprise quite entirely, since philosophy must, in this light, be a primarily ethical endeavour. The focus on love transforms ethics too, since the radical singularity that love demands pushes beyond universal ethics in a way that is dizzying, disorienting, and still only dimly understood.

As loving animals, humans are given in bodies that are undeniably sexuate and sexual, desiring, aroused, innervated, and attuned to the wondrous nature of the ever-imploring world. The work on virginity and erotic phenomenology demonstrates that this erotic attunement is a perceptional capacity, a mode of intentionality that can be trained as a mode of knowing. Love draws me towards the world and I respond. Knowledge itself is also reconsidered in keeping with a phenomenology of givenness. Phenomenology can recognize love as more than just a random virtue. Love is a way of knowing but it does not offer knowledge, as such. Love is worth
cultivating not just as some abstract mood or good feeling, but as a way of engaging and understanding the world, but always in the service of ethics, since it is an outward movement towards some other. As a mode of moving towards the other, responding and engaging the other, love discovers, but in a way that is beyond knowledge. Love is interested and attracted by radical otherness, perpetually drawn to the mystery, wonder, and excess of what appeals to me in its incessant strangeness. Erotic intentionality provides a positive light in which to approach saturated phenomena and somehow grow our perpetually nascent appreciation, if not our understanding of them. In this way an erotic phenomenology can expand the scope of thinking itself, and the limits of knowledge. As an attempt to contribute to the cultivation of our erotic potential, this phenomenology of virginity it is nothing less than a work of love.


—. “Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking.” Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* 58–90.


—“Memorial Address.” Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* 43–56. Print.


