



Enthymema XXXII 2023

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Abstract – Review of Nicolini, Andrea. *Masochism. A Challenge for Ethics*. Mimesis International, 2022.

Keywords – Masochism; Ethics; Moral Philosophy; Sexuality; Psychoanalysis.

Misia, Martina Elisabetta. "Review of Andrea Nicolini. *Masochism. A Challenge for Ethics* (Mimesis International, 2022)." *Enthymema*, n. XXXII, 2023, pp. 175-179.

<https://doi.org/10.54103/2037-2426/20082>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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The reader who were to approach Andrea Nicolini's new book in search of a definition of the concept of masochism would probably be disappointed: in fact, the distancing from the stereotype that would like to make this notion coincide with that of algophilia is not followed by the author's attempt to formulate a description that proves capable of embracing the infinite variety of forms in which masochism manifests itself, nor to offer reasons for it. The only portrait of the masochist therefore remains the one offered by the cover image, *Masochist* (2004) by Emil Alzamora, a reproduction of a perfectly proportioned but surreally deformed and unnaturally contorted human body, in which the hardness of bronze and the plasticity of drive converge and conflict to give rise to a dislocation that affects not only the anatomical dimension, but also and above all that of thought. In fact, Alzamora's work makes visible the profound ambiguity that characterizes the masochistic subject, whose identity arises from the unresolved relationship between the opposites of pain and pleasure, life and death, good and evil, that is, from the perennial tension between the impulse to form and the impulse to its dissolution. It is precisely this ambiguity that constitutes the starting point of Nicolini's reflection. Through four skillfully articulated chapters, Nicolini shows how masochism imposes itself on philosophical reflection as an unsolvable enigma, a real challenge for ethics because of its link with the death drive. Renouncing the pretense of providing unambiguous and definitive answers about the reasons that drive the masochistic subject to embrace pain and self-destruction, but rather highlighting the relevance that this form of perversion can assume in the field of philosophical thought, the author analyzes those structural divisions of the subject that checkmate ethical thought, adopting for this purpose a "counter-philosophical" perspective that weaves together Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman's *queer theory*.

The author's first goal is to demonstrate the existence of an ontological side of pain, closely connected to the inevitable and radical negativity of human existence and yet inascribable to any semantic reification. By distancing itself from the phenomenological approach – which is credited with having made the fundamental theoretical shift that has enabled Western thought to rid itself of body-soul dualism and the universalistic claims of the traditional cogito, but also with the limit of having ignored the death drive, proving incapable of thinking the subject except as a unity – the author identifies pain as the privileged experience in which human beings sense their structural division, the peculiar moment in which they discover and recognize the impenetrable difference that constitutes them. Nicolini shows how, by embracing a pain that does not ask for redemption and rather takes pleasure upon itself by undermining the subject, masochism embraces this fundamental negativity, renouncing once and for all its domestication and, along with it, the celebration of the power of the cogito.

In doing so, the obligatory comparison is with the ethics of sexuality elaborated by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, respectively, which Nicolini subjects to a careful critical sifting to show how both perspectives reveal their weakness precisely in their

confrontation with the structure of the masochistic subject. In highlighting the socio-cultural dimension of sex – the product of a *dispositif* capable not only of disciplining bodies and the pleasure(s) associated with them, but also of insinuating the idea that in sex lies the secret that reveals the truth of the subject – Foucault identifies psychoanalysis as the culmination of a disciplining process which proposes itself as the supreme form of knowledge of the subject since it is capable of solving its enigma, a *scientia sexualis* which, promising to liberate the repressed desire of the individual through the discovery of its true sex, leads to the creation of an anato-political structure of domination of the human body. The only way to resist the power and domination of the sexual *dispositif* is to experiment with an *ars erotica* aimed at the enhancement of our capacity to experience pleasure(s), of which sadomasochism is the most prominent example as the practice par excellence of liberation from the sexual *dispositif*. By creating new possibilities for pleasure, in fact, the sadomasochistic subject enacts a de-sexualization and de-genitalization of pleasure itself, that is, a cleavage of sexual pleasure from the specificity of sex and its localization in the genitals. In this way, sadomasochism is constituted as a process of remapping and redistribution of the erogenous zones of the body, as a rupture of the monopoly traditionally held by the genitals and thus as a liberation of the body from a socially determined and manipulated desire. To the search for truth, the sadomasochistic subject replaces that of pleasure, in a process that, by dethroning the “monarchy of sex,” proves capable of creating new cultures and, in so doing, of liberating the individual from the categories in which the sexual *dispositif* has forced it. Thus, sadomasochism is constituted as a laboratory experience, a practice of self-transformation that, by altering the relationship between the subject and its truth, dissolves its personal identity, de-subjectifying it and enabling it to free itself from itself.

It is precisely in the way of enacting this process that Nicolini identifies the limit of the Foucauldian ethical proposal: in elaborating a perspective that leads the individual to its own de-subjectification, Foucault seems unable to give up the assumption of a strong subjectivity, capable of moderating the forces that stimulate sexual activity. Thus the French philosopher’s thought oscillates between a de-subjectivized art of living and the subject’s need to remain master of himself, a contradiction that shows how what truly de-subjectifies the individual does not reside in the voluntary pursuit of pleasures, but rather in a fall into the abysses of drives, that is, *jouissance*. Nicolini’s reading thus reveals how, despite the attempted resistance to psychoanalysis, what emerges from the Foucauldian attempt to emancipate from the psychization of sex is resolved in the theorization of a subject who experiences de-subjectification precisely through drives, that is, through those forces that psychoanalysis recognizes as underlying human sexuality and which only are capable of undermining the individual’s velleity to sovereignty over itself.

If Foucault rejects psychoanalysis in an attempt to avoid the coercive and pathologizing implications of desire, Deleuze and Guattari seek to liberate the latter concept from the Oedipus complex by means of what they call “schizo-analysis.” Driven by the need to understand and manage the unconscious, the psychoanalytic discipline would in fact have trapped desire in a series of rigid interpretive structures, which by territorializing its flows and necessarily referring it to the Oedipus complex deny its productive capacity. In the view of the two French philosophers, in fact, desire does not follow patterns or rules, but spreads in every direction, embracing everything it encounters in its path and thus composing itself of a multiplicity of accidental flows that contribute to determining its schizophrenic nature. The ethical-political objective of the desiring revolution promoted by Deleuze and Guattari is thus the liberation of the productive forces that emerge from the unconscious through the construction of machines capable of creating a new unconscious, in which the innocent force of desire is finally freed from the structures that imprison it and exploit its energy.

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These revolutionary machines, capable of bringing desire back to its zero degree, that is to a dimension of non-compromise with the world, of non-perversion and therefore of innocence, would be nothing but tools for elaborating new ways of being in the world, among which stands out the Body Without Organs, an infinite practice of becoming which, following the movement of desire, encompasses everything while belonging to nothing and is configured as a flow of mobile and variable intensities, the enemy of the organism as a unitary structure of body organization. By breaking the existing connections between organs and their functions, the Body Without Organs would be able to give them unusual intensities, thus freeing the body from the prison of the organism and giving it new and unexpected possibilities of expression. It is precisely masochism that takes on a special relevance in Deleuze and Guattari's discourse: far from constituting a mere source of pleasure, it represents an eminent example of the flow that the subject must follow in order to constitute an interrupted process of desire, a program of creation that allows the subject to establish new relationships with the parts of the body, which cease to perform predetermined functions in order to become sites of unexpected intensities. The masochistic subject thus uses the intensity of pain to create a Body Without Organs by which to live in the uninterrupted flow of desire, without interrupting it with pleasure, but rather delaying the latter as much as possible. The dangers inherent in this process are obvious to Deleuze and Guattari themselves: how far can the subject go without running the risk of damaging its own body or even destroying it? It is precisely from this unresolved question that Nicolini articulates his critique of the two philosophers' perspective, which returns to organicism and to a subject responsible for dosing the forces of desire just as, through the construction of the Body Without Organs, it would like to emancipate itself from it.

The program of liberating the forces of desire by means of a subject capable of losing itself in its multiple productions thus and paradoxically ends in the realization of the necessity of a return to a subject who must fight against the Body Without Organs that it itself has helped to construct, against those intensities that are uncontrollable as expressions of the death drive. Nicolini also emphasizes how masochism, far from being a choice that can be made by the subject voluntarily and consciously, constitutes an inevitable process, the very condition of the structure of human desire, which cannot in any way avoid an encounter with the death drive. If the subject always and necessarily experiences a desire that expresses itself in a pleasure linked to pain, it is because this encounter is inescapable and gives birth to the unconscious itself. Taking up the lesson of Jacques Lacan, the author thus distances himself from the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, showing how the perspective they elaborated proves incapable of understanding the static nature of the masochistic *fantasme*, which cannot be modified through an act of will since it possesses a rigid structure that connects the subject to drives. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari's program seems to be manageable, amenable to modification by the subject, whose Body Without Organs, however, follows intensities that do not depend on it as the eminent expression of the death drive. The French philosophers thus claim to transform something that is beyond the control of the subject into something manageable and even useful, while avoiding considering that drives are not under its control because they speak the language of the unconscious.

Finally, Nicolini addresses the question concerning the intimate connection between violence and humanity. Taking his cue from the Durkheimian concept of effervescence, an internal force within the subject capable of obliterating its self-control and will, Nicolini retraces the interpretation offered by René Girard to propose a reflection that challenges the thinking of both scholars: if Girard, in fact, has the merit of identifying the origin of the sacred precisely in the channeling, by a social group, of effervescence against a single and alien subject with respect to its community, Nicolini emphasizes how the archetypal statute of violence represents a simplification of the origin of religion and culture, whose complexity cannot be reduced

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to a single concept. Not only that, Nicolini highlights how, in Girard's thought, violence seems to produce pleasure only when perpetrated against a subject other and external than the one who moves it. In this way, the anti-social side of violence, which derives pleasure from loss and self-sabotage, is concealed: violence, Nicolini asserts, generates pleasure not only in the form of domination and control that induces people to create a community, but also in the loss of self and sociability, that is, in *jouissance*. Once again it is in the death drive that evidence is identified that something resides in human nature that leads the individual to the dissipation of self in a repetition of *jouissance* that is incapable of producing anything but aimless *jouissance*. This is precisely the main limit of Girardian theory, which views the subject as a fixed entity in perpetual pursuit of its own well-being, devoid of the unconscious and the fundamental negativity that the author considers the root of human existence itself. Through the unveiling of the *jouissance* hidden behind the effervescence and once again taking up Lacan's reflections, Nicolini thus shows how masochism is the nature of sexuality itself, inseparable from the subject, who does not try to escape pain, but rather seeks it as a structural part of its *fantasme*.

The comparison with Lacan, which is present under trace in each of the four chapters of which Nicolini's monograph is composed, is fundamental in the author's reflection, which nevertheless does not refrain from showing the crucial ambivalence inherent in the theoretical perspective elaborated by the French psychoanalyst: if in fact it is true that Lacan makes masochism the core of all forms of perversion, it is equally true that he uses this particular structure to account for human sexuality in general. The only case in which the object *a* is brought back into the subject by means of the *fantasme*, masochism comes to coincide with that structure in which the individual itself becomes the object *a*, filling the lack that characterizes the nonexistence of the sexual relationship with its own body and making self-destruction the center of pleasure and the object of desire. A short circuit is thus generated: the masochistic subject uses the *fantasme* to remove the object *a* from the Symbolic and replaces it with itself, making his own *fantasme* coincide with his own death. It is this scandal that represents the constant that is repeated in each of the infinite forms that masochism can take, a scandal that is the essence of human sexuality itself: the drive that drives the subject toward a deadly form of *jouissance*, Nicolini explains, belongs to every human being, who independently of its own will seeks its own destruction. It is in this sense that masochism, an attempt to escape from the symbolic circuit, represents, as the subtitle of Nicolini's monograph states, a real challenge to ethics.