



WHAT IS MODESTY ?

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A MAJOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

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There is no human society without modesty. However this field of human psychology is questioned little by science. Modesty is a double emotional movement which affects both the heart and the body. The variety and variability of its manifestations renders it much elusive. It is not known if it occurs by itself or in reaction to an insult. **It is not known if it has natural roots or if it is the result of a thousand-year-old oppression.** There is no human world without modesty, but a very small number of researchers is interested by this phenomenon unknown to all other living beings on the Planet.

Why question modesty?

* Because modesty is a condition of live in society: *"a world where modesty exists is a world where the individuals manage to group, to be evaluated in their mutual trade"*.

* Because modesty seems a central matter of anthropology for the few number of authors who studied it.

* Because it is not enough to retract it behind the taboo of incest, as the origin of all the things forbidden. Modesty is not unconscious; it is always immediately felt in respect to sexuality. It affects human beings, at least, on two sides: the **glance** and **speech**. One must obviously add to it the **sense of touch** which can also be used in a modest or shameless way. Notice that speech, glance and touch constitute three important **registers of communication** between the human beings.

In any event, the phenomenon of modesty does not exist outside of communication between human beings.

* Because the **speech** of all human beings is always supervised by "modest vigilance". It is thus, for the sciences of language:
«on a border line of what can be studied in reference to the linguistic concepts and of what concerns psychological or cultural interpretation of the facts of language».

A great historical and cultural variability.

In its form, modesty is **eminently variable, culturally and historically**. For a long time, it made the difference between "civilized" and "uncivilized" man. This idea holds for each society. The Chinese offend nobody by relieving in the street his natural needs. But, for him, the European woman who kisses her husband in the street is the image even of depraved person.

Western modesty, such as currently, and in its multiple aspects, seems to have appeared with the "**Renaissance**". However the first interrogations on this subject are posed at the "**Period of Enlightenment**".

Questions about modesty which occur at that time, are summarized as follows:

- is modesty a human invention? a social fact?
- is it unknown to people who live "according to the natural law"?
- is modesty a result of education?
- How and when does modesty appears in childhood?

Then the **Romanticism** scrambles the cards. The links between **modesty** and the **seduction** are appropriate to the spirit of this Era. It is regarded as a "*spur of*

desires". We then slip into the field, in truth very distinct, of **gallant behaviour** and **courting display** of the human being. It is obvious that modesty is not absent from situations in which sexual desire, its pleasures or its embarrassment, throw us. It forms part of it. It is revealed there by an emotive influence. There are situations, between peoples, which seems to accept a total immodesty. And even to require it. But that is only an appearance: until its finale, modesty always affects the sexual encounter.

It affects it, all the more surely, that the gestures of seduction introduce themselves to substitute *"nature for the law, by conferring on the whims of desire the intangibility of the laws of nature"*.

The field of the forbidden.

Any human society gives itself rules of prohibition with respect to sexuality. Every one knows that the concupiscence of the flesh is in the field of forbidden. Some are clearly conscious, others are not. But **modesty - sexual or not - is always conscious**; it only exists consciously. It is conscious by its reasons and by its real-life experience:

"it tells us what... is offended; it expresses the undergone attack and... makes it known to ourselves."

The expressions of modesty are physical and verbal. More exactly, modesty causes reactions, at the same time **in language and in body behaviour**. One can say that, in each society, every one *"regulates his behaviour according to the feelings of modesty that he experiences"*.

Modesty indicates limits, and these limits testify to the proper integration of the taboos and interdicts which structure the being: modesty compels people to the rules. When well adjusted, it is the index of a correct "acclimatization" of the person to the collective mentality. Beyond the diversity of manners and fashions, it concerns men as much as it does women. **It is characterized especially by "invariants" which spread across times and social diversities**. We must not misunderstand, indeed, its apparent historical variability; the author who, at the dawn of our era, wrote these lines, today, would be perfectly understood:

(These organs) "that nature... has dissimulated, it is that even as all those, which are healthy of the mind, remove from the sight ...and obeys as secretly as possible. As for these parts of the body whose the use is essential, these parts, and their use are never named. It is indecent to speak of what it is shameful to do, at least in secrecy." (Cicero)

Physical modesty imposes on the sexual body the **clothing screen** which can be

reduced to "penis sheath", or a rudimentary loincloth. All people able to use a language have recourse to accessories which dissimulate at least the sex organ. The dissimulation also relates to - and especially - **the acts of sexual communication** between people. In his behaviour, no human in the world can, in this respect, behave as an animal. This impossibility, let us note, does not have any rational base which may be immediately comprehensible. At the origin, in our civilization, this absolute ousting is regarded as a Mystery.

Modesty exists only in the acts of communication.

Concerning language, if there always exists a limit to verbal expression as regard sexuality, one points that **modesty is never felt in reaction to the representations or the ideas which we kept to ourselves**. One never makes oneself blush.

On the other hand, modest inhibition seizes somebody as soon as he intends to express these ideas, i.e. to communicate. The fact that these ideas may be guessed at by others, generates an embarrassment that is betrayed by a flushing of the face. Guessing is a "nonverbal" transmission of ideas or of feelings, it is a communication. **It thus does not matter, to generate modesty, that this communication be voluntary or involuntary, put into words or not: it does not matter that it occurs with a real being or a high-society, celestial, being**. Thus moral modesties could have involved during through the centuries with the representation of the sacred and supernatural powers: there is always a communication.

Monique Schneider expresses this characteristic of the studied phenomenon:

"the immodesty does not reside in the revealing of anything, but in the connection being able or not establish itself between what is revealed and a lively subjectivity living in the discovered place."

The immodesty coming from the outside inhibits speech. But there are internal obstacles which are not less inhibiting. One does not make oneself redden, but there always exists, in shared sexuality, this ultimate point where the verbal expression fails to take account of a desire, even intense. These facts are of a great banality: after many years of conjugal life and sexual exchanges, many couples never manage to really speak of their sexuality. Partners in love can have much difficulty in expressing a certain emotion or a certain desire, however very present in the inner discourse.

An always conscious phenomenon.

Some new concepts in the sciences of the mind raise the question of the **psychological category** of this verbal retention which is never voluntary but very

conscious. Authors have explained this phenomenon by calling upon psychoanalytical concepts of **refusal, denial, and repression**. Such a way of seeing does not appear to us to be supportable because modesty is a phenomenon always eminently conscious. It is a phenomenon whose reasons are immediately understood.

There is a very clear opposition: the refusal and repression (such as in Freudian theory) **unconsciously affects the contents of the thought**. Thoughts, without the knowledge of the person are altered or diverted from conscious life. This diversion of the thought and the ideas, prevent obviously their announcement at the same time as the announcing.

This is not the case with modesty: the modest individual feels strongly the inhibition of words; so he is informed of the ideas which are affected. In other words, **it is not enough to have speech to be able to express what we are thinking**. Desires or sorrows remain inexpressible, even if the ideas are present, or insistent. In this situation, where the speaking is rebellious to the power of mind, the subject is always aware of the censorship which weighs on its words and its acts.

This constraint is always eminently felt and this indubitable clearness suffices to withdraw modesty from the Freudian field of investigation which is precisely the subconscious. With the first access, from a linguistic point of view, we are thus in the presence of a **process which respects the message but affects its statement**. In other words: the modest reserve testifies to a direct effect of the message upon the statement. Modesty is primarily a phenomenon of language.



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