



WHAT IS MODESTY?

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EXCREMENTAL CONDUCTS AND FOOD CONDUCTS

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totalitarian effects of modesty

Modesty is a phenomenon of major anthropological importance. But it is not interrogated as it would deserve. Can one hope to see open here a new thought on this relationship of the body and the soul, which have been the bases of Western philosophy for many centuries? As for the Moral, which is a result of it, **and which cultivates the interdict**, it is satisfied by a gap in the knowledge that Science should refuse.

Concretely, let us remark that the social sciences venture prudently into the subject of modesty. By this phenomenon, our body and our emotive reactions are brought closely face to face; and in the same way, with human language, the whole of the relationship between the being and the person.

Indeed, **speech is influenced by modesty, but the body feels the totalitarian effects**

of this. The emotive influence which expresses them is closely related to fear. We endeavoured to show that: this double inhibiting action, this double sensitivity of the body and the heart, this double psychic and physical expression, **always occurs at the moment of communication between human beings**. They occur when certain "laws of nature" are confronted with the all powerful symbolic system.

But the "laws of nature" do not relate only to sexuality. No one can be unaware that other human functions are subjugated to the same constraint. For some, the phenomenon is blindingly obvious. For others, it is less visible, is less recognized, but **it always affects the interpersonal exchanges, and the socio cultural configuration of the people and the communities**.

ridiculousness of the body

Among the bodily phenomenon affected by modesty, we don't put aside sneezing, coughing, hiccups. All these "ridiculousness of the body", can cause embarrassment to the person. We then notice that ritual words: "Bless you" "God bless you", have for a long time been reserved for the sneeze. On the other hand, by using pleasant words, it is often advisable to apologize for rumblings, or inappropriate hiccups, or a pressing need.

It would be quite unbecoming to speak about **excremental functions**. It is however **George Groddeck**, a famous author of psychoanalysis, who teaches us, in the "livre du ça", that:

"the most distinguished woman farts".

It is difficult however, on this subject, to embellish our text by literary references.

Alone in his madness, the **President Schreber** wrote:

" As all that happens in my body, the need to defecate is also caused by miracles; this consists of pushing the piece of excrement down wards (very often it is pushed back upwards), and when, in consequence of the exoneration, there are no more sufficient faecal matters, one comes and smears my posterior orifice with the remainder of the contents of the bowels..."

But the **President Schreber** speaks on behalf of science, and Universal Knowledge. As a proof of the perfidy of his persecutors:



Jérôme Bosch, Fragment de l'"Enfer"

"At each... need for defecation, one of my entourage is dispatched to the toilet "... Then when, under the pressure of a need, is really discharge, I almost always use a bucket to do it, since I find almost constantly the toilet engaged - -... each time... the deliverance of the pressure caused in the large intestine by the excrements has in particular as a consequence an intense wellbeing in the nerves of voluptuousness..."

One can also behave insanely, manifest an amiable exhibitionism like **Salvador Dali**. However, the Catalan Master, unknowingly, uses certain important mechanisms of modesty: the **temporal distance** and the **quoted speech**. They indicate, in the author, in spite of an immodest appearance, **a persistent verbal modesty**.

"As usual, a quarter of an hour after breakfast, I slip a jasmine flower behind my ear and I go to the toilet. I am hardly sited when I produce a stool almost without odour. And that, to such a point that the scented toilet paper and my piece of jasmine completely dominate the situation. This event could have been predicted by the beatifying and extremely pleasant dreams of the night which, with me, announce suave and odourless defecations. The stool of today is of the purest, if this adjective can employed for such an occasion.

I attribute it, without question, to my quasi absolute asceticism and remember with repugnance and almost horror of my stools at the time of my debaucheries, when I was twenty years old and living in Madrid with Lorca and Bunuel. It was of unnameable ignominy, pestilential, discontinuous, spasmodic, splashing"...

We point out here that the "olfactory message" is universal in living beings. Thus let us note that in front of this mode of communication, barely translatable by words, **Dali**, by a ludic euphemism, transforms the bad odour into the subtle perfume, as he transforms a dubious sonority into an agreeable euphony (by commenting on this "very long fart, really very long and... tuneful").

This is constantly applied in the reciting: "my stool was... this morning, fluid and

without odour". If he happens, further on to refer to the odour, *sui generis*, it can be only by the means of the temporal distance ("*when I had twenty years old*"). We will find this solution in sexual modesty as well as in alcoholism ("*when one is young*"..., "*formerly*"...)

Another process appears : the "**quoted speech**". The artist can't escape from it. He entrusts, to a *quidam* of the last century, the care of exposing his favourite subjects. By this intermediary we learn that:

"Silent farts... always carry with them a little liquid matter... and are unbearable to society by the fetid odour which they render: if one looks in one's underpants, one will see the "corpus delicti" that they usually print there."

But the true solution, with the scatological remarks, is the ludic speech. In the form of lewd jokes, it also applies to sexuality, and possibly with "puff outs". This question of laughter, associated with scatology, is a considerable interrogation. Let us now emphasize that in this field, in order to trigger off laughter, no one has need of **François Rabelais**'s talent.

Thus, the author of the "*Treaty of the farts*" noticed, that

"the laughter and often the glares which the fart excites as soon as people hear it ... : the most serious character loses his dignity; it is no prudish gentleman who remains unscathed..."

But we must tackle this subject without the intention of causing laughter. We will note however that, if our reason ennobles the cause, it does not remove from it that which is improper.

That which cannot be spoken of must not be seen. This has been said for the sex, and also holds for the "natural needs". The exhibition of excremental acts is not allowed by our social codes. According to the singularities of bodily functions, prohibitions still concern, by all our appropriate senses, **all the channels of information**: visual, verbal and others (on which, Salvador Dali is not ashamed to transmit his impressions of his youth). All in all, material screening resolves this imperative; it is well codified in the urban or country architecture of appropriate places.

The need of another person...

Sexual modesty being the most important, we have lengthily tackled this subject. Now, we can remark, a major opposition between the two successively examined fields:

- the accomplishment of the excremental functions **does not require an associated action with another person** ; here, the adult does not have need of another person ; no form of communication becomes as necessary as the courting display, for the accomplishment of the act ; the exclusion of the speech and sight are sufficient;

- contrary to the excremental, **the genitality needs another person to be achieved** ; for this imperative reason it first requires a verbal exchange between the protagonists (then a non-verbal communication). To this verbal exchange, we owe the linguistic singularities of the courting display and, for our pleasure, their literary and artistic aspects; but **that also explain this linguistic gap whose consequence is the sexual culpability.**

Consumption outside of the social code

Everyone is highly sensitive to the modesties, which have just been described. It should be known, **that the same phenomenon is also important for the alimentary functions**, although modesty is less visible and less recognized in this area. The food functions are a field where it is a question of survival to obey one's body, while **the need for another person is very important**. At the beginning of life, another person is necessary in order to nourish oneself. But, in the absence of language, it is not a problem for the child.

After weaning, the group, as a provider, is substituted for the maternal body, and **the child will no longer have any immediate contact with this body**. The submission of the mind to the nutritional impulse cannot, from now on, prevail on social relationships (constituted in the language). But here, as in Genesis, the act of nature is prohibited as soon as gathering is forbidden. The ritual of appropriation of food becomes very important. To become acquainted with "table manners", is for the child, **a major educational act**. The educated adult will know neither to consume a meal in the same manner nor to eat the same food, at home, with friends, on a picnic, in the dining car, at work, or at a social function.

Some precise details are necessary. The anthropologists know, that the social life of man, his relationship with himself, with other men and with the entire universe, supposes the revocation of the act of food gathering which is an individual and spontaneous behaviour.

Transformer work

meant for the primordial couple, is substituted for the passive food gathering. In other words, the access to the nutritional goods no longer directly solicits the Mother, or Nature. The bodily act and the need which expresses it will be subjected to the social action, collective work and transmitted knowledge. **This requires linguistic communication, therefore the formation of concepts for the production,**

as for the use of subsistence goods. More precisely, a Community form of consumption necessarily answers a Community form of production.

The history of people living from hunting and fishing, as that of great civilizations, agrarian or pastoral, teaches us that the development of cultural forms is determined by the work of social production of the food goods. We are thus faced with the social conditions which cause the formation of the Law.



J.-B. Chardin, Le Bénédicité (fragment)

The constraining force of table manners and the rules of food preparation, the force of its symbolic and structuring system were underlined by the research of the Lévi-Stauss School.

One is thus authorized to admit that, like the sexual need, "social and socialized in its essence (because it needs another person)... the social mediations are fundamental for other biological functions, like drinking and eating".

If for the natural act of eating, the civilized human being primarily has need of "the other" it remains that the majority of people are unconscious of the modesty phenomenon and the constraints on the language are not apparent there.

There is a reason: the preliminary transformation of food, their "conditioning", in association with "table manners", avoids **by anticipation**, in all "civilized" cases, any conflict between social protocol and the bodily act (which would express the pure impulse). **It's true in all cases, except for bulimia and alcoholism**, which are

individual deregulations. These two affections impose upon the patient a consumption outside the social code. They introduce, in his speech, wide gaps and deformations.

Alcoholism, an example of an impulse laid bare

These gaps and deformations, these inexpressible words, make the alcoholic disease a remarkable observatory for the deformations of the language, and anomalies of the statement. It is thus thanks to this affection which, further on, we will study the mechanisms of inhibition of modesty, their operation and the means of correcting them. Known of for a long time these disturbances, still too often, are imputed to a supposed "bad faith", or imputed to the denial of the psychoanalysts (in spite of the theoretical and clinical difficulties of such assimilation). The modest behaviour, in alcoholism, holds with this in that the patient, because of his dependence, **makes a diverted use of the social protocol.**

As for solid food, drinking is an act of nature, without this act no being would be able to live. It is carried out, by man in society, as a cultural gesture. One drinks to accommodate, commemorate, "accompany a meal". One clinks glasses to conclude a game of belote.

But the dependent person, who joins his comrades in the bar, **does not share these motives with them.** The existing and prevailing motivation is, for him, that of satisfying his need for alcohol.

There is a diverted use of the social ritual. Around this diversion plays the question of the language: for our patient some representative gestures, which are those of the community, no longer accomplish their significant function. The apparent connection is unauthentic. **The normal components of the linguistic sign, signifier and signified, no longer refer to a same referent.** Let us say, that, for the patient there is no more relation, of the signified to the signifier, between the social protocol and the act of drinking. The inadequacy of meaning prevents the stating.

By another bias, we find these constraints which prevent everyone from stating the facts of sex. In the alimentary compartment, the patient **cannot enounce the details,** when, how, how much, in which circumstance he drank. In the first case we are in a non-symbolizable process. In the second case, the disease creates a disproportion which exceeds the protocol accepted by the community. Guided by an exposed impulse, this control is rebellious to the symbolic system inscription.

That which cannot be spoken of must not be seen

In this subject matter, people can be surprised by such a constraint, but the alcoholic himself is the first to be astonished when he drinks in secret. Mrs R.

reflects, after her drying out, upon her shame at the time when she drank:

"What astonishes me, it is that I hid even at home, where, however, I was alone." - "I did not hide the bottles in the wall cupboards of the living-room... because, in this room, there were photographs of my family, and a Christ on a crucifix... it was as if they had eyes." - "It intrigued me that, although alone, I hid drink under the mattresses in my bed-room, because, in my bed-room, there were neither photographs nor Christ." "I did not have the courage to serve myself a glass or to leave the bottle on the table in the living room". "Nobody would have seen me, but there were these photographs and this Christ" - "I used to drink from the bottle, by lowering myself under the mattress, as if there, they would not see me"

In this field, the study of the modesty function becomes a matter for the specialist in the treatment of alcoholism. But for obvious reasons, the observation will prove easier to seize, analyze and to expose than for sexuality.

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