

## Sade's Doctrine of Creative Destruction

*Caleb Heldt*

### **Abstract**

Within human activity there exists an indelible drive to create, and this is of course not limited to man's material existence, in his engagements with worked matter, but extends to interpersonal relations as well. Perhaps the most fundamental of these relations is that which subsists between persons in the sexual act, namely procreation. But the sexual act's creative potential is not bound by reproduction alone, and this is testified to by the provocative interpretation of sexual activity as put forward by the Marquis de Sade who avidly rejects that the sexual act's productive possibilities are ultimately procreative. He likewise rejects that sex should in any way be associated with love, which posits the Other as pure subjectivity and as such places that Other in a preferential position in relation to oneself. Indeed, for Sade the Other's subjectivity must be denied; that is, she must be reduced to pure objecthood. So what underlies this callous refusal of the Other's subjectivity in Sade's eroticism? What is at stake? What does he fear losing by affirming the Other's subjectivity rather than denying it? It is not freedom, as is commonly believed, at least not in the sense in which it has been so vaguely conceived by Sade's interpreters in the past. Rather, it is the ability to create in its most purified form. It is not man impressing his desires on canvas or stone or wood, but on the human form itself. For Sade, the sexual act is the medium *par excellence* in which man can express his profound and insatiable desire to create.

**Key Words:** Marquis de Sade, Max Scheler, Henri Bergson, creativity, destruction, sexuality, love, reproduction, evolution, ethics

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### **1. Introduction**

It is often thought that love is a kind of altruistic form of creativity since it endeavours to foster the elevation of value first and foremost in the beloved and the offspring of sexual love and only subsequently does it focus on the self and one's personal creative desires. And this is why Sade rejects the very idea of love, for in libertinage the primary beneficiary of the creative act is the self. Indeed, for Sade, sexuality itself is creative in this way. This is why, for Sade, sexuality is not creative in any sort of traditional sense in

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which sexual relationships aim at reproduction or the expression of love. For Sade, libertine sexuality is creative because it strives only for its own pleasure, however perverse.<sup>1</sup> And this means that libertine sexuality is creative only insofar as it is free of the aim of reproduction and the expression of love. Thus, libertine sexuality not only stands in direct opposition to the sexual act as a means of reproduction or as an expression of love, but essentially thrives on their negation. It allows them to exist only to destroy them. This is why the marital relation is so denigrated and women are allowed to ripen only to have their fruit decimated. 'Domestic violence' does not begin to characterise the conjugal relation, and abortive acts abound. A case and point can be made of Constance in *The 120 Days of Sodom* who is abused by her husband and father through the discovery of her pregnancy, culminating with the violent act which brings about the demise of mother and child alike. For Sade, the destruction of these two conceptions of sexuality is integral to elevating the value and creative potential intrinsic to libertinage. The sexual act is, for Sade, creative in being destructive. Sade seeks justification for this view by appealing to Nature, as he so often does, maintaining that She has need of both virtue and vice, of creation and destruction.<sup>2</sup> Of course, for Sadean Nature, and thus for the libertine, creation requires destruction, even if this destruction is only symbolic. On such a conception of sexuality, creativity is conceived in terms of difference and multiplicity, and this is precisely what Sade endeavours to demonstrate in *The 120 Days* in his catalogue of over six-hundred sexual eccentricities.

In destroying the Other, either symbolically through acts of degradation or physically through violence – and, at its extreme, murder – Sadean sexuality defines its creative power. Indeed, it can be creative to the extent that it is precisely because for the libertine the Other is merely an object for use.<sup>3</sup> As such, the libertine defines his freedom negatively as freedom from the Other which he attains by relegating the Other to pure objecthood. By denying the Other's subjectivity the libertine affirms his own. In rejecting the notions of the sexual act as creative in either a reproductive capacity or as expressive of love Sade is not simply endeavouring to be provocative (though of course this is an important aspect of Sade's project as a whole), but rather he makes manifest this relation to the Other which is essential for the type of egoistic creativity characteristic of the kind of libertinage he endorses. Only in destroying love and refusing reproduction can the libertine free the sexual act from a fully positive and, in Sade's eyes, homogenizing notion of 'virtuous' creativity. Vice thus becomes the destructive force which drives libertine creativity since its acts of destruction only serve to counteract the acts of the virtuous.

So, let's first look at the way in which Sade seeks to systematically undermine love and its relation to sexuality. To provide a context for this discussion we will draw briefly on the work of Max Scheler as a kind of foil

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for the libertine's derision of love. We will then consider Sade's views on the reproductive capacity intrinsic to the carnal heterosexual act and show that what underlies these diatribes is a philosophy of Nature akin to Henri Bergson's conception of creative evolution albeit coupled with a much more cynical ethical element than that posited by Bergson.

## 2. The Destruction of Love

For Sade, romantic love is but a fanciful expression of so-called virtuous sexuality. It is a fantasy which serves only to perpetuate a notion of creation which denies any creative force to its negation. In this sense, love is closely tied to faith, since its power to influence creative action is only as powerful as the belief one has in it. Essentially, then, for Sade love is merely a fiction, an abstraction, an illusion, just as God is. As such, it is deserving of the same derision as that reserved for God and the same kind of violent re-education of the lover is deemed necessary as that reserved for the pious individual.<sup>4</sup> Hence the similar brutalities suffered by Sophie and her pious companion Adelaide and later with her lover Céladon at the château in *The 120 Days*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, what is said of the pious individual can, for Sade, equally be said of the lover:

Piety is indeed a true disease of the soul. Apply whatever remedies you please, the fever will not subside, the patient never heals; finding readier entry into the souls of the woebegone and the downtrodden, because to be devout consoles them for their other ills, it is far more difficult to cure in such persons than in others.<sup>6</sup>

For the libertine, both piety and love are but quixotic notions which compel individuals to place their own truth, their own freedom beyond themselves, and in this sense love and piety are forms of alienation.

For Sade this alienation is rooted in the fact that for the lover, the Other – the beloved – is not perceived as an object for use or an obstacle to one's sovereignty, but idyllically as pure subjectivity. In this way, the sexual act as the expression of love makes manifest the Other's intrinsic subjectivity which is denied by libertine egoism. Pleasure – as a fundamental self-relation – is therefore secondary, and though reproduction is closely linked to love, it not necessarily be its end result. Indeed, this is precisely Max Scheler's notion of sexual love as expounded in *The Nature of Sympathy*. For Scheler, sexual love not only perceives the Other not as an object for use, something which denies its subjectivity, but as an ideal which it is forever not yet, as pure potential for perpetual elevation of that very subjectivity denied by Sadean libertinage. In Scheler's eyes, love is a creative movement in which the lover sees in the object loved its latent possibilities for attaining ever-higher values, seeing in the beloved its ideal value and attempting to foster

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the continual development of the beloved's intrinsic value toward its ideal essence. Hate, according to Scheler, is that which characterizes a movement in the opposite direction, that is, toward lower values.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the one who hates sees in the hated object its nadir value and his interactions with this object will tend toward the degeneration of the hated object to the point of its destruction. Thus, for Scheler, the Sadean libertine's self-proclaimed creativity would be little more than glorified hatred.

As Scheler writes,

hatred looks to the possible existence of a lower value ... and to the removal of the very possibility of a higher value.... Love, on the other hand, looks to the establishment of higher possibilities of value ... and to the maintenance of these, besides seeking to remove the possibility of lower value .... Hate, therefore, is by no means an utter repudiation of the whole realm of values generally; it involves, rather, a *positive* preoccupation with lower possibilities of value.<sup>8</sup>

What Scheler acutely draws our attention to here is the fact that a preoccupation with devaluation is itself a positive, which is to say a creative, act. The positivity of the libertine's hatred of the Other lies in the destruction of the Other's values, in creating anti-values which contradict the elevation of value in the act of love. And the relation to piety will once again emerge, as Scheler shows that the elevation of value to its highest point culminates in sacred values, that is, those values which testify to a transcendent value above all other values, namely God. The hierarchical relations within a value system governed by the ideal of love is described by Peter Heath in the introduction to Scheler's *The Formalistic Principle in Ethics and the Non-Formal Ethic of Value* in the following way:

The lesson of these distinctions is that the realm of values is not a uniform whole, but divided into closed circles which rise hierarchically above each other and must, in the case of conflict, give way to each other. We ought to sacrifice our physical enjoyments to our duties as citizens of the state; we ought to sacrifice our social well-being to the claims of culture – beauty, justice, and truth; and even these august values should be sacrificed, if the need arises, on the altar of sanctity, on the altar of God.<sup>9</sup>

But whereas Scheler sees in this hierarchization of values a movement toward ever higher, ever more transcendent values, Sade sees only a progressively alienating movement, a movement away from the immanent self-relation – the self's relation to its embodiment – toward an ultimate transcendent value which he grants only an illusory status.

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In a sense, Sade's hierarchy of valuation is simply Scheler's hierarchy inverted, depreciating what is of the greatest value in Scheler's theory and extolling the value of individual pleasure which in Scheler's eyes should be the first to be sacrificed to the other types of values. In the end, this means that God, and the motivating force of love which justifies this method of organizing one's values, must no longer be that to which the lower values ought to be sacrificed, but must on the contrary be the first to be sacrificed to the libertine's most immanent value: pleasure.

### 3. The Destruction of Reproduction

Let's return now to the other aspect of traditional sexual creation to which Sade opposes his own, which is to say, the sexual act as aiming at reproduction. For Sade any sexual act which aims at reproduction infringes upon the liberality of the sexual act as a means of personal pleasure and hence as creativity in his sense, for the pregnant woman is no longer able to be used as a mere object from which pleasure is derived – at least to the extent that the avid libertine desires – if one wishes that the unborn child remain unharmed. Indeed, as is testified to by the numerous engagements with pregnant women in *The 120 Days*, the contrary is the case for the libertine mind; that is, he derives pleasure from the torture of the would-be mother and the destruction of her unborn child.<sup>10</sup> For the libertine, the sexual act itself is a creation. His pleasure is derived from turning an imagined possibility into a reality. In this way, the libertine is an artist and sex is his art. He makes of the Other a canvas upon which he paints his desired potentialities and his discharge marks the work's final brushstroke. The libertine *qua* artist is gripped by the desire to endlessly create in this way. As Curval says in the *The 120 Days*, "Well, you know, everything's imaginable and even possible .... I am convinced one can go still further than that .... It seems to me one never sufficiently exploits the possible."<sup>11</sup>

And this transgressive exploitation of possibilities is precisely what underlies the most prominent undermining of sexual reproduction in nearly all of Sade's libertine writings, namely sodomy. Pierre Klossowski, in his seminal study of Sade, perhaps put it best when he said that,

sodomy is formulated by a specific gesture of countergenerality ... which strikes precisely at the law of the propagation of the species and thus *bears witness to the death of the species in the individual*. It evinces an attitude not only of refusal but of aggression; in being the simulacrum of the act of generation, it is a mockery of it.<sup>12</sup>

Sodomy in Sade's texts represents a violent cancellation of the *re*-production of the sexual act, that is, the repetition of the species in the individual. The

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sodomite denies the creative potential of the sexual act by pursuing pleasure for its own sake, transforming sexual choice into a form of anti-reproductionism. In libertine psychology, sodomy becomes the ultimate source of pleasure because it destroys the very possibility of sexual reproduction. Indeed, that Sade's sodomite heroes abhor the thought of reproduction so much can readily be seen in a scene from *The 120 Days* in which Curval passionately describes the immense pleasure he derives from the idea of watching semen evaporate on a hot shovel: "I love the idea of watching fuck burn."<sup>13</sup>

But we need to understand what is precisely at issue for Sade in the multiplicity of diatribes he directs toward the reproduction of the human species and why he advocates a "*refusal to propagate and destruction*"<sup>14</sup> in his own peculiar manner. Klossowski rightly points to Sade's unique sense of 'creative evolution',<sup>15</sup> which posits the sinister underbelly of Henri Bergson's conception of the pure positivity of life as an evolution of creative acts. There is an ethical element to Bergsonism which posits a kind of imperative of understanding the dynamic potential of other members of the same and different species, flora and fauna alike, with the consequence that life comes to be seen as diverse because of its tendency toward radical self-differentiation. And while Sade's intuition of the dynamicity of Nature is not at all dissimilar, he places much less faith in the ethical potentiality of the human species. He sees the human species not as Nature's keeper but as a parasite whose own reproductive acts come to dominate over those of Nature, hindering Her from producing anything new.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, for Sade, it is only vice and the destructive acts of the criminal and the libertine which lend any aid to Nature in the diversification of life. In short, life under the domination of humans is homogenizing for Sade, a mere reproduction of the same at the cost of Nature's own creative potential. This is why Sade's heroes reiterate time and again that Nature has need of destruction as much as of creation.

Indeed, while there is no doubt that at times Sade's libertines express a desire for a destruction which would be all consuming, in which the universe would destroy itself, such assertions are dwarfed by the staggering amount of destructive acts directed against human life by libertine creativity. Sade's libertines refuse human reproduction at every turn and advocate the destruction of the species in each concrete act, desiring only the preservation of their own licentious pleasures. Sodomy, infanticide and murder are the violent and violating acts which perhaps best characterize libertine destructive creativity, a creativity which seeks only to disrupt the hegemony of the parasitic and homogenizing creativity of a species which considers its creative acts virtuous because they refuse to destroy.

When the libertine allows one of his victims to live it is only because he believes he has succeeded in leaving the mark of human degeneration in her heart, undermining the smug self-satisfaction of Virtue.

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Is there any other moral to be found in *Justine* than this? And what of her sister, Juliette, that impious orphan turned libertine? *Juliette* is a text which details the education of a libertine, the learning to love destructive creativity. And would there be any other reason than this for the friends to let a single one of their victims leave the château in *The 120 Days* if it was not that their marathon of violation *created* new *destructive forces*, new libertines, to perpetuate the cause of destructive creativity?

#### 4. Sade, Our Conscience

Of course, one might raise an objection often proffered by Sade's critics, namely that there is an indelible repetitiveness to Sade's writings which undermines the creativity posited in the acts he describes. And perhaps this accusation is well-earned. However, Duclos' appeal after her final recitation at the château suffices to respond to such criticism, for this address to the friends is directed as much toward the reader of any of Sade's works, and *The 120 Days of Sodom* in particular, as it is to the novel's heroes. She states,

I would beseech Messieurs to have the kindness to forgive me if I have perchance bored any of them in any wise, for there is an almost unavoidable monotony in the recital of such anecdotes; all compounded, fitted into the same framework, they lose the luster that is theirs as independent happenings.<sup>17</sup>

The idea here is that if but a single act of such libertinage as is chronicled in *The 120 Days* – or any of Sade's other libertine writings for that matter – were to be placed in the midst of a novel with a more conventional storyline, or indeed within an otherwise quotidian day within life itself, the effect that but one of these undoubtedly imaginative horrors would have upon the reader or the witness of such an act – let alone the victim – would be quite different. But this is not Sade's endeavour. He opens the floodgates upon the reader, inundating her mind with an endless deluge of atrocities, each a masterpiece of perversion in its own right, but piled one on top of the other they ultimately elicit only a sense of redundancy and a feeling of callous indifference to the victims' plight in the heart of the reader. And this is Sade's art. He makes each of us a little more hard-hearted, a little more cruel and insensitive to the predicaments of Others with each turn of the page. In short, his writings provide us with an education in the creativity which underlies destructive acts; each text is a lesson in libertinage. Every leaf that is turned is a victory for Sade, and far from being forgotten as he supposed he would be in his 'Last Will and Testament', he lives on as the conscience of an age which prefers not to acknowledge its own capacity for cruelty, its own penchant for destruction. And it is in this sense that Simone de Beauvoir was right to proclaim that Sade "deserves to be hailed as a great moralist."<sup>18</sup>

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But there lies in Sade's writings a perhaps more subtle ethical intuition, such that we can say that there exists a kind of sexual ethics intrinsic to libertinage from which much can be learned. I am speaking of the radical emphasis Sade places on our power to control the functions of our sexual behaviour, whether placing it at the behest of love or reproduction, or for our own pleasure. But there is more to it than this; for as Sade never tires of showing, this power to control the reproductive capacity inherent to the sexual act can be exercised not only to maximise our own potentiality for pleasure but perhaps more importantly to curb the homogenizing effects which the reproductive dominance of our species imposes upon the creative potential of the rest of the natural world. Our reproductive hegemony has single-handedly hindered the dynamic self-differentiation of other species along diverse lines of evolution. There is thus a kind of sexual ecology at the heart of Sade's libertine ethics which provides the motivation of sexual pleasure to promote reproductive responsibility. So perhaps there is yet another reason not to burn Sade given the relevance of such ideas to 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns.

Caleb Heldt is currently a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. His research concerns the ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre and his theoretical influences.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that in the discussion that follows, the ‘libertine’ that is posited is that of the ideal type as it appears in Sade’s works, which could perhaps take as its prototype Dolmancé: an utter atheist, an enjoyer of active and passive sodomy alike, a tutor in the ways of libertinage, etc. Many, indeed most, of Sade’s libertine hero’s are not of this ideal type but are themselves imperfect models thereof. An example can be made of Saint-Fond who despite all of his other impeccably libertine traits remains a theist, though believing in a Being Supreme in Wickedness.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writings*. R. Seaver and A. Wainhouse (trans), Grove Press, New York, 1965, pp. 274-275.

<sup>3</sup> The Duc to Adelaide: “bear well in mind that, alive though you may be, you are only so in order to obey and let be done to you what we please.”

M. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom & Other Writings*. R. Seaver and A. Wainhouse (trans), Grove Press, New York, 1966, p. 530.

<sup>4</sup> According to Scheler, “love is an emotional gesture and a spiritual act.”

M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*. P. Heath (trans), W. Stark (ed), Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1954, p. 142. If love is indeed a spiritual act as Scheler asserts, this does much to explain the similarity which manifests itself in the Sadean libertine’s avid hatred of piety and love.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, pp. 403-404, 669.

<sup>6</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, p. 498.

<sup>7</sup> “Hatred, on the other hand, is in the strictest sense *destructive*, since it does in fact destroy the higher values...and has the *additional effect* of blunting and blinding our feeling for such values and power of discriminating them. It is only because of their destruction...by hatred, that they *become* indiscernible.” Scheler, *Sympathy*, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, pp. 607, 614, 619, 620, 635, 639, 652, 656-657, 660, 661, 663-665, 670.

<sup>11</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, p. 470.

<sup>12</sup> P. Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor*. A. Lingis (trans), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, p. 522.

<sup>14</sup> M. Sade, *Juliette*. A. Wainhouse (trans), Grove Press, New York, 1968, pp. 771-772.

Cf. Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor*, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Sade, *Juliette*, pp. 768-769. Cf. Klossowski, p.86.

<sup>17</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 568.

<sup>18</sup> S. Beauvoir, ‘Must We Burn Sade?’ in Sade, M., *The 120 Days of Sodom & Other Writings*. R. Seaver and A. Wainhouse (trans), Grove Press, New York, 1966, p. 40.

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