

Erotism: Death & Sensuality Study Guide

Erotism: Death & Sensuality by Georges Bataille

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Contents

Erotism: Death & Sensuality Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Foreword and Introduction.....	5
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	6
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	8
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	10
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	12
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	14
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	16
Erotism: Death & Sensuality.....	18
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	35

Plot Summary

This book, written in 1957, places both eroticism (an experience of sexual stimulation) and death at the core of fundamental human experience. Examining both within the thematic context of what society defines as "taboo", the author explores themes relating to the necessity and meaning of transgressing such taboos, as well as the existential tension between continuity (union) and discontinuity (separation).

The author introduces his examination of the relationship between eroticism and death, as well as other aspects of human existence and relationships, with an expression of his intention to undertake this examination from a non-scientific perspective. That particular perspective, he suggests, considers facts and experiences in isolation from one another, rather than as components of what contemporary theorists and practitioners might call a "holistic" or "organic" approach. In other words, he is interested in how aspects of being human relate to and with each other, rather than considering them on their own merits and meanings.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into two parts. The first, and larger, is headed "Taboos and Transgressions", and explores the nature, purpose and evolution of various taboos (forbidden experiences). As part of his exploration, he suggests that most taboos emerged from the experiences and perspectives of pre-historic humanity as the race evolved into a deeper, broader awareness of what existence, including death, means and/or involves. He also suggests that at the same time as awareness and practice of taboos evolved, so too did the idea of transgression, of breaking those taboos, which he further contends is an integral part of the human experience of both day to day existence and evolution.

An important touchstone for the author as he explores these issues is how Christianity has, over the centuries of its existence, played a defining role in the shaping and evolution of various taboos. This, he suggests, is the result of Christianity having gone in the opposite direction from what he suggests is religion's core function: a reaching for an experience of continuity with that which lies beyond the physical world. Christianity, he contends, is ultimately grounded in various manifestations of discontinuity, or separation.

The second part of the book is titled "Some Aspects of Eroticism". The author begins this section with consideration of the famous Kinsey Reports. Researched and written in the 1950s, the Reports summarized the first comprehensive, scientifically-based research into human sexual behavior and activity. The author of "Eroticism" uses material from the Reports to support his arguments in favor of a broader recognition of sexuality, but at the same time suggests that the methodology of the Reports is both flawed and limited.

The rest of "Some Aspects ..." is taken up with consideration of the work of other seminal writers on questions related to eroticism and sexuality. The first of these is the infamous Marquis de Sade, whose explorations of the relationship between suffering



and sexuality led to the coining of the term "sadism" to describe the experience of getting pleasure, sexual or otherwise, out of inflicting pain. The second writer analyzed by the author is Claude Lévi-Strauss who, the author comments, explored the relationship between eroticism and incest. Finally, he again explores the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, drawing parallels between the emotionally and/or physically ecstatic experiences of those living intensely spiritual lives and those having an intense experience of sexual pleasure.

The author concludes his study by returning to the principle of taboo and transgression, suggesting that the former is a function of the world of work and/or survival, while the latter is a function and/or manifestation of the world of play.



Foreword and Introduction

Foreword and Introduction Summary and Analysis

This book, written in 1957, places both eroticism (an experience of sexual stimulation) and death at the core of fundamental human experience. Examining both within the thematic context of what society defines as "taboo", the author explores themes relating to the necessity and meaning of transgressing such taboos, as well as the existential tension between continuity (union) and discontinuity (separation).

Foreword - The author writes of his intention to examine the question of eroticism and its relation to the human experience from a non-scientific perspective—that is, how it relates emotionally and spiritually (as opposed to intellectually) to other aspects of being human, particularly the commonly felt fear associated with giving in to sensual experience. He also relates his intention to explore eroticism and its connection with "Christian religious experience".

Introduction - Here the author presents and develops his basic premise, that eroticism and death are both ways in which separate, individual, discontinuous human beings can experience, create, and perpetuate continuity, feeling and being less separate. He goes on to propose that he intends to explore three different kinds of eroticism, emotional, physical and religious, with the latter, he suggests, being defined for him by "the quest for continuity of existence ... beyond the immediate world" (pp. 15-16). He then offers support for this premise by suggesting that eroticism becomes at least a partial loss of individualized self in the name of reaching for union with the other (continuity, as opposed to discontinuity). He goes on to suggest that "death, in that it destroys the discontinuous being [i.e., the individual human life] leaves intact the genuine continuity of existence outside of ourselves". Here, he proposes, is another parallel—eroticism is a prelude to sexual reproduction, an act which in its essential intent and function, is exactly the same thing, a manifestation of the continuity of existence outside the individual life.

The author states his thematic and intentional perspective clearly in this section, establishing the experiential rather than the scientific context for his considerations. That said, there is a certain irony at work here, in that for all his evident protestations here and throughout the book that he is striving to write outside of traditional scientific perspective, the author nevertheless uses traditional scientific and/or academic form—presenting the thesis and presenting and developing evidence in support of it. On the other hand, this can be seen as a kind of balancing act, what Buddhist thought might consider the yin/yang balance of opposing forces. In other words, the author balances the academic with the experiential, the intellectual with the emotional/spiritual. On yet another level, the balancing act can be seen as the author's attempt to give scientific weight and significance to what he himself says is a mostly non-scientific perspective on an issue that, for most human beings and, as the author outlines in the following section, triggers a purely visceral, instinctive, emotional response.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Eroticism in Inner Experience" The author presents the theory that the conscious experience of eroticism is one of the aspects of living that separates human beings from animals. In this context, he identifies the concept of the taboo (something banned or prohibited), saying it is the key component of an experience of eroticism because, as he suggests later in the book, eroticism is linked in the human mind with the animal side of humanity's nature, and taboos came into existence in response to that animal side. Then, after a rejection of Christian religious thought, because "Christianity sets its face against eroticism", he suggests that ultimately he and religion in general, as opposed to specific religions in particular, have the same purpose—to communicate and understand an inner experience of the effort to achieve continuity.

"The Link between Taboos and Death" The author discusses taboos associated with death, referring to evolutionary theories about the origins of humanity and suggesting that some of those taboos began with prehistoric Neanderthals. He suggests that for early humanity, the purpose of burial was associated in part with repulsion, in part with the principle of removing the potential for disease, and in part with the intent to keep the body safe from further violence. He acknowledges that under some circumstances communities have transcended, or perhaps rationalized the ancient taboo against killing, suggesting that "generally speaking, there is nothing that can conquer violence".

"Taboos Related to Reproduction" The author suggests that taboos against sexual freedom and/or expression are widespread across time and cultures, and had their origins in the necessity to regulate sexual behavior (which he categorizes as "violence" due to the frequent intensity of sexual desire) in favor of doing work, of ensuring survival. He goes on to discuss, at some length, his theory that incest and taboos related to female blood loss (occurring during menstruation and childbirth) are manifestations of the same root taboo, specifically, against the emotional violence that rise to sexual desire, and therefore to sexual activity.

"Affinities between Reproduction and Death" The author suggests that the circle of generation and destruction is at the core of all nature, that the human experiences of reproduction and death are part of that circle, and that the emergence of taboos around sex and death result from an innate human resistance to nature's inevitability. "Nature demands ... surrender," he writes, "or rather she asks [humanity] to go crashing headlong to [its] own ruin. Humanity became possible at the instant when, seized by an insurmountable dizziness, man tried to answer 'no'".

The most noteworthy element of this section is the author's introduction of his personal definitions of several key terms. It's important in consideration of the book to understand these somewhat non-traditional definitions.



Also in this section, the author reinforces his stance against the teachings of Christianity which, he suggests, have become profoundly restrictive on both the experience and interpretation of what it means to be human. It's important to note, however, that while he does comment on how Christianity has, in general, played a significant role in repressing the animal side of the human experience, he devotes relatively little attention to defining specific elements of Christianity that have shaped both the said restrictions and the morality that has emerged and/or been constricted by them.

Finally, the author develops his thesis by defining links between eroticism and death that suggest both are manifestations of a profoundly spiritual, or spiritually profound, human experience, which is humanity's innate desire to transcend the boundaries and limitations of physical life and reach for something eternal. He does this by first defining the concept of the taboo, then by suggesting that the reasons death and sexual expression, specifically in the form of eroticism but ultimately such expression in general, have the same root purpose, the repression of animal instinct, a theory discussed in some detail later in the book.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Transgression" In this section, the author writes of the human capacity for fascination with the forbidden (i.e., the taboo), which he says is at the root of the concept of transgression). He discusses how some transgressions have become not only acceptable but expected, suggesting that in fact transgression of almost all taboos has become/is becoming acceptable, if only to a point. Finally, he suggests that transgression, or more specifically feelings of fear, remorse, or anxiety associated with transgression, are essentially the reason for religion. Religion, he posits, exists to provide humanity with an opportunity to counter its instinct towards transgression with nobler actions and beliefs.

"Murder, Hunting and War" The author supports his contention that transgressions of certain taboos have become sanctioned (albeit, within particular limits) by citing as an example how the universal law against killing is universally transgressed when it comes to war and/or hunting and/or dueling. He traces the origins of these particular transgressions to prehistoric times, citing cave paintings as examples of how transgression became first ritualized and then widely accepted. He also describes, however, ways in which such accepted transgressions can go too far, citing instances in which man's capacity for violence results in deliberate cruelty to, for example, prisoners of war. Finally, he suggests that contemporary theories and practices of war seem to have moved humanity away from the raw viciousness of early humanity's wars, but the destructive instincts behind war and its manifestations remain the same.

"Murder and Sacrifice" The author discusses how animals have no sense of the taboo, how they live and die fully, if unconsciously, connected to the cycle of genesis and destruction. This, he suggests, makes animals contentedly and wholly continuous, whereas humanity, because of its self-awareness, is discontentedly discontinuous. He comments that prehistoric man felt that animal nature was sacred, saying that this was the reason why so many ancient gods had animal faces, so many ancient rituals involved human beings wearing animal masks, and prehistoric humanity used animal sacrifice as a means of ritualistically connecting with the universal sacred. All, he suggests, were efforts at achieving continuity in the face of a profound experience of discontinuity (i.e., of being human). There is also, the author further contends, a parallel between war and animal sacrifice. Both acts, he suggests, rationalize transgression of the taboo against murder while limiting humanity's animal nature and tendencies towards violence.

"From Religious Sacrifice to Eroticism" Here the author draws the parallel between acts of ritual sacrifice and acts of sexual penetration. He comments that in general, the possibility for responding to the connection between a sense of the spirituality in both sacrifice and sexuality has, over the centuries been suppressed and / or eliminated through the efforts of Christianity. Finally, he draws parallels between the physical



experience of sacrifice and the physical experience of sexual expression, suggesting that both are ultimately expressions of human inner violence.

The author's core subject in this section is consideration of just how much of an animal the human being is, or rather, is comfortable in allowing him/herself to be. The contention here seems to be that in theory at least, humanity is determined to be as un-animal like as possible, to move away from the raw and the impulsive towards the controlled and the considered. This determination, the author is suggesting, is what gives rise to taboos, to faith-based rules (as exemplified, according to the author, by the teachings of Christianity), and to surges of shame when humanity's animal nature inevitably (as the author would have it) breaks free. Eroticism, in the author's thesis, is both a manifestation of and a trigger for that breaking free—a manifestation of the animalistic desire for reproduction and experience of continuity in the universe, a trigger for the rushing advancement of sexual inclination into the actual act of intercourse.

Meanwhile, in his descriptions of the lengths to which early humans sought to increase their relationship with their animal selves, there seems at first glance to be a sense of contradiction: if early humans wanted to connect with animal spirit, why did taboos against manifestations of that spirit develop? The answer, in the author's interpretation of these circumstances, seems to be that as humanity became more and more self-aware, as thought and intellectualization and work became the rule rather than the exception, individuals become more and more determined to create distance between themselves and the animals. As the centuries passed and as religion evolved into monotheism, the human-based Classical Greek and Roman gods (embodying various aspects of both nature and humanity) provided the transition from the animal gods of the Egyptians and other cultures. This step, and in particular the characterization of the all-powerful father god Zeus/Jupiter, became the foundation for monotheism (i.e., belief in only one God). With each step of religion's evolutionary process, animals became further removed from the human and religious experience, with the author suggesting that this sense of deliberate self-removal from animal-ness climaxed in Christianity which, he implies throughout the book, is humanity's ultimate expression of self-determined distance from pure religion and from animal nature.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Sexual Plethora and Death" The author begins this lengthy chapter with a discussion of how reproduction, either sexual or asexual, is essentially the culmination of a buildup of excess energy, a "plethora". The result of action taken on that buildup, he says, again either sexual or asexual, is the creation of a new individual, a fundamental discontinuity—separation between individuals which, the author points out, can take place either immediately, as in asexual reproduction, or eventually, as in human sexual reproduction. Here again, he demonstrates the circular nature of these two states of existence, a defining of the relationship between sexual plethora and death. The former, a trigger for reproductive discontinuity is, he suggests, a precursor of the latter, a trigger for a return to continuity. Eroticism, therefore, as a manifestation of sexual plethora, is itself a precursor to death. It is, the author proposes, the beginning of a breakdown of barriers between natural urges (continuity) and taboo (discontinuity). Eroticism, he adds, is also the beginning of the process of breaking down the barriers to our essential animal nature which, fundamentally, is grounded in continuity, and in doing so, evokes the taboo against behaving according to that nature while at the same time promising pleasure. In other words, eroticism is not only an opener of the door to continuity, it also initiates transgression.

"Transgression in Marriage and in Orgy" Here, the author contends that marriage is a licensed and formalized form of transgression against the basic sexual taboo, adding that this aspect of marriage results in a situation of paradox. On the one hand, he contends, there is the eroticism of that which is initially taboo and, in the early stages of a sexual relationship, more animalistic, yet on the other hand, there is the deepening of sexual intimacy and communication or continuity between couples who have gotten past that initial taboo and engaged in habitual sexual activity. "We can ask," he writes, whether the deep love kept alive in marriage would be possible without the [hint] of illicit love". The author contrasts this sense of restrained eroticism with the orgy which, in its classic rather than contemporary sense, was a complete release and/or reversal of taboos, an unleashing of divine and/or animalistic natural forces.

Here, the author re-expresses his theory that, in short, a taboo is a function of society, while transgression is a function of existence. He seems to be saying that if always respected and never transgressed, taboos against sexual stimulation (eroticism) and/or behavior would result in the eventual termination of the species. This, he implies, is the reason for marriage, a ritualized and formalized and accepted transgression that in a way gives its blessing to taboo behavior (i.e., eroticism and sexual expression).

At this point, it's interesting to note the two different sorts of transgression that the author suggests have become legitimized. Earlier in this section, he speaks of how tabooed murder, in the shape of war, has become a transgression that most people accept. The question here is whether the author is suggesting that said transgression is



as necessary as the accepted transgression he references here; that is, tabooed sexuality. Given his contention throughout the book that the urge to and experience of violence, essentially defined by the author as an expression of a powerful surge of feeling, is behind sexual energy and eroticism, it would be reasonable to conclude that this is, in fact, what he is suggesting. In other words, it seems that the author is contending that war, transgressing the taboo against murder, is a similarly condoned venting of intense emotional energy to the venting of sexual energy, transgressing the taboo against sexual activity, particularly in the experience of the orgy, as he portrays it here.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Christianity" The author here contends that Christianity has self-defined a belief system entrenched in DIS-continuity. The principles and practices of the faith have, the author suggests, left human beings eternally separated from one another—on Earth, in Heaven (with God), and in Hell (separate from God)—all with their individual souls intact and distinct. This, he proposes, resulted from Christianity's attempts to reconcile a negative perspective on transgression which, as has been defined by the author, is an attempt to transcend discontinuity, with a limited perspective on continuity—all are one in the love of God. He writes of how Christianity transformed impure sacredness (i.e., continuity through sexual expression manifesting in reproduction) into the profane (i.e., non-sacred). In other words, it became more than taboo. It became Evil.

"The Object of Desire: Prostitution" Here the author proposes that ultimately, the purpose of eroticism is to break down the barriers between individuals, creating a sense of continuity rather than discontinuity. He goes on to say that, in general, the first sensations of eroticism are triggered by the presence of something desirable, and suggests that for the most part, that something is a woman. He also suggests that "with their passive attitude ... [women] try by exciting desire to bring about the conjunction that men achieve by pursuing them...", adding that "prostitution is the logical consequence of the feminine attitude". Women's nakedness, he contends, within the context of either marriage or prostitution, indicates the beginnings of a negation of a taboo, in other words, a transgression, and by making themselves objects of desire, the author asserts, the prostitute is dedicating herself to perpetuating both the desire to transgress and the transgression itself. Prostitution, he suggests, is a "consecration ... [a] vocation ... in contact with sacred things...", a consecration made corrupt by the fact that in later centuries, prostitution has become a financial rather than a spiritual transaction. He goes on to suggest that "in this Christian world where morality and degradation are interdependent", humanity's disgust with the transgressive sacredness of prostitution is akin to humanity's disgust with animals.

"Beauty" After a poetic section in which he defines beauty in animals, "as they more or less resemble the ideal specimen of their kind", the author suggests that when it comes to feminine beauty, the further from any resemblance to an animal, the more beautiful they are considered. This, he further suggests, is one side of a paradox, since "the beauty of the desirable woman," he writes, "suggests her private parts ... the animal ones". He then describes the sexual act as essentially ugly and animalistic, adding that "for a man, there is nothing more depressing than an ugly woman, for then the ugliness of the organs and the sexual act cannot show up in contrast."

From a contemporary, post-feminist perspective, it's very difficult to not see much of the material in this section of the book as misogynistic, as demeaning to both men and women but especially to women, and as a product of the conservative times (the 1950s)



in which the book was written. This last point could explain but not necessarily excuse some of these views, but it's undeniable that some of the material in this section leaves an unpleasant aftertaste, not to mention triggers strong responses. Nevertheless, it might be valuable for the reader to work to get past the apparent flavor of the comments here and consider his points on their own merits. Is he objectively correct, for example, when he suggests that humanity's idea of beauty is defined by how far the appearance of the woman under consideration is from the appearance of an animal? That said, his comment about the ugliness of the female sexual organs undeniably comes from a limited, biased perspective, but should not be considered a reason to dismiss the author's arguments wholesale.

Meanwhile, it's important to consider the ideas on offer in this section and indeed throughout the book from the author's overall perspective—that sexual expression in general, and eroticism in particular, is a manifestation of humanity's animalistic side. There is the sense here that what appears to be a patronizing, anti-women argument is, in fact, in the author's intention, an exploration of femaleness as defined by as much by biological as by social evolution. In other words, what the author seems to be talking about here is the principle of sexuality as manifestation of continuity which, as he has previously discussed, is fundamental to the animalistic side of humanity which, in turn, he argues is the source of the urge to transgress.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Kinsey, the Underworld and Work" At the beginning of this chapter, the author considers the Kinsey Reports on human sexuality which, he suggests, attempt to scientifically quantify the breadth of human sexual experience. He contends that the purpose of the Reports, the experimental methods that gave rise to the Reports' content, and the Reports' conclusions are all fundamentally misguided, biased and flawed, because they treat human desire as quantifiable. Nevertheless, he evidently finds value in some of the information the Reports contain—for example, he discusses analyses from the Reports that suggest that Christian practices and work are both inhibitors to sexual activity. He also explores the Kinsey-documented relationship between economic status and sexual behavior, commenting that the report suggests that at the opposite ends of the economic ladder (the most/least wealthy), sexual activity is more frequent. This, he suggests, is because at the higher end, the wealthy have more leisure time, while at the lower end, laborers are closer to the basic animal instincts, including sexual desire. He also suggests that underworld figures, as documented in the report, also have a higher rate of sexual activity, which he suggests is because they are closer to their essential animal natures. The chapter concludes with further commentary on how science obscures the deeper meanings and values of human experiences like sexuality, and suggests that using a "a gentle light, not the full glare of science" is the best way to look at issues around eroticism.

"de Sade's Sovereign Man" In this chapter, the author discusses the philosophies of the Marquis de Sade, specifically those relating to the necessity for, and intensity of, commitment to the primacy of self-pleasure over every other human experience. He suggests that erotic experience in human beings is essentially a manifestation of that commitment, implying that on some level, de Sade, in spite of the extravagance, indulgence and ultimate cruelty of his belief systems, was expressing and living a fundamental human truth. The author also suggests that the so-called "sovereign man" (sovereign in terms of both social/political status and the capacity for self-aware self-government) is the sort of man most likely to be in a position to make that commitment. Finally, the author analyzes a pair of characters from de Sade's writings, paying particular attention to a woman who intensely desires to die in a fashion related to some kind of crime. The author suggests that her desire is in some way a denial of the value of her physical life in favor of embracing transcendent death. This, in the author's words, is de Sade linking "infinite continuity with infinite destruction".

"de Sade and the Normal Man" In this lengthy chapter, the author discusses several important points to note during consideration of the writings of de Sade. These include the idea that the divine, for all the efforts throughout history to render it straightforward, is as self-contradictory and self-obscuring as the vicious and violent, and just as motivated by deep-seated human experience, which relates to the premise that vice, or perhaps desire, is an undeniable component of that experience. The author also points



out that de Sade's writings and theories were developed while he was in prison (in other words, from the standpoint of a victim), and were an attempt to transform violence from something irrational and unknowable into something comprehensible—in other words, to transform something unconscious into something conscious. Finally, after all that analysis, he offers the opinion that on some level, the "normal" man should be grateful to, and for, de Sade and his debauchery.

There is a powerful contrast between the two resources of sexual experience and/or commentary highlighted by the author in this section. Kinsey is, in a word, researched, while de Sade is lived. Kinsey is essentially free, while de Sade is imprisoned and victimized. Kinsey is attempting to be objective, de Sade develops subjective personal experience and opinion into what he seems to want to be taken as a philosophy. In short, what is communicated here is the difference between science and suffering.

And yet, within those two contrasts there is, in the author's examinations, a pair of clearly defined links. The first can be found in his reiterated contention that sexual expression is, in fact, an expression of human animal nature. He uses data from the Kinsey Reports as well as quotes from the writings of de Sade to reinforce this point, with the support of the former resulting from its being at least somewhat objective and the support from the latter resulting from de Sade having been, on a fairly fundamental level, somewhat animalistic himself. The second link between these two analyses is that both, at least in the author's perspective, bring awareness and/or study and/or consideration of fundamental human experiences past the barrier of taboo and into broader awareness. In other words, both Kinsey and de Sade have transgressed and, in doing so, have advanced the cause of humanity's self-understanding, which, as the author contends throughout the book, is one of the fundamental purposes of transgression.



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"The Enigma of Incest" This chapter consists mostly of the author's commentary on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in studying intimate relationships in general and the nature of incestuous relationships in particular. The author quotes Lévi-Strauss as suggesting that the taboo against incest (which, the author suggests, is essentially a man's keeping of a female relative for himself) is, in the first place, an establishment of the boundary between animal and man. The un-self-aware animals, the theory suggests, have no sense of taboo, and therefore no sense that mating with a close relative is forbidden. Man, on the other hand, is fully self aware, fully aware of the taboos against sexuality in general and sees incest as among the most animal-like of the sexual acts and as something that must be avoided at all costs. The author then comments that Lévi-Strauss also suggests that the taboo against incest is in fact a manifestation of the social institution of bartering, of giving away, of trading, of exchange. This institution, he further contends, manifests in the various traditions of marriage (the idea that in marriage women are essentially treated and/or perceived as an object to be dealt—i.e., given away). To this argument the author adds his analysis of the role of eroticism in marriage, specifically the idea that that being given, or bestowed (i.e., the woman) is given even more appeal by its erotic, mysterious, taboo aspects. In other words, the eroticism of the woman increases not only her value, but that of the man "bestowing" her, or giving her away.

"Mysticism and Sensuality" The author opens this lengthy chapter with a statement of intent and quotes several writers, both religious and secular, who draw both literal and metaphorical links between spiritual and sexual ecstasy. These links suggest that the physical and emotional sensations of both tend to manifest similarly. He then cites further writings which suggest that sexual activity between married couples is, in fact, a heightening and manifestation of the spiritual/mystical bond between them, and that there is therefore a link between morality (i.e., sex is acceptable only within marriage) and mysticism. This leads to a discussion of the parallels between spirituality which has, as its goal, transcendence of physical life, and sexuality which, in purely biological terms has, as its goal, transcendence of physical death, contending that eroticism is a purely tempting experience that ultimately serves neither. He counters this point, however, by suggesting that love, the experience of "violent and tender love of one being for another" is a balancing force that unifies the dark promise of eroticism (a necessary trigger/incitement to sexual expression) with the brighter promise of transcending death inherent in traditionally sanctioned sexual expression. Finally, the author returns to his contention that several religious mystics have parallel emotional, spiritual and physical experiences to those experiencing sexual activity, concluding that while there is always an element of chance to a transcendent experience of either sexuality or spirituality, "constraint in the face of temptation is the key".



In chapter four, the post-feminist reader again runs into the sense that the author's commentary is somehow misogynistic and/or anti-woman. But again, it's important to consider the source and the context—in the time the book was written, and for literally centuries up to that point, that's exactly what marriage was. Women were property, and, it's unfortunate to say, but in many contemporary cultures they still are. In other words, looking at chapter four from a contemporary perspective, the reader must realize that the author is writing about where women were, what they are in the process of evolving away from.

Chapter five, meanwhile, contains one of the most interesting aspects of the book, the establishment of at least some level of parallel and/or linkage between sexual and spiritual (religious) ecstasy. It's interesting to note that all the examples of spiritual ecstasy referenced by the author are of Christian mystics or saints. There are two points to consider here. First, given the author's evident negative feelings about Christianity, it almost seems as though he emphasizes the Christian ecstasies out of a desire to reiterate how shallow most of Christianity is. In other words, the author is clearly suggesting that the experiences of the ecstasies aren't Christian, they are religious and spiritual, a key point of distinction and one clearly aligned with the author's central contention that the experience of being human, as opposed to being Christian, is more aligned to our central nature. The second point in relation to the question of the author's examination of spiritual ecstasy is this: one wonders what he would make of other experiences of ecstasy and/or enlightenment in other spiritual traditions. Would he find the same parallel if, for example, he studied the experience of an enlightened Buddhist monk, or the Dalai Lama?



Erotism: Death & Sensuality

Summary and Analysis

"Sanctity, Eroticism and Solitude" This chapter seems to be the text of a speech, in that the author directly addresses an audience in a way he has not done in any chapter before. Most of the chapter is taken up with a discussion of the nature, value and purpose of philosophy, but at the same time, he reiterates several of his previous points—about the nature of taboo and transgression, about eroticism being a transgression of a taboo, and about eroticism being something different from sexuality. He discusses eroticism in terms of sanctity, which he defines as "the life that the presence of a sacred reality within us informs, a reality that may completely overwhelm us", suggesting that eroticism, because it is a transgression of a taboo, which is, by definition, grounded in sanctity, is unsanctified. Finally, he suggests that an experience of eroticism is a private, individual, solitary one, not to be spoken about in any great length. This, he argues, is a principle that negates philosophical debate on eroticism since philosophy, from his perspective, is essentially about using words to fill silence rather than explain it.

"A Preface to 'Madame Edwarda'" This is a brief opening commentary on a book by a writer named Pierre Angelique. The preface communicates very little about the nature and content of the book itself, suggesting only that it is a book on a sexual subject and that it contains the thematic suggestion that "we know nothing and we are in the depths of darkness". The author comments on the value of laughter, that it is a way of venting existential horror, that laughter is a way in which human beings strive to avoid disappearing to themselves and to the rest of the world, and that both horror and such disappearance can be dispelled by trying to connect with an experience of overwhelming happiness. Such joy, the author suggests, can at times be found in eroticism which, he writes, is a "deceit" but, he implies, a necessary one.

"Conclusion" The author comments that eroticism is "the most intense of all" experiences, adding that "the supreme philosophical question coincides with the summits of eroticism". This leads him into a discussion of philosophy, which makes language necessary, of language, which "scatters the totality of all that touches us most closely even while it arranges us in order", and of continuity, which, the author contends, is broken down by both philosophy and language. He also comments that philosophy and, by extension, language, prolongs the necessity for both work and taboo, all of which (philosophy, work, and taboo) are broken down by transgression, "the world of play". Embracing this aspect of existence, he concludes, will transform philosophy and language both into means by which the "pinnacle of being" can be achieved.

There is significant irony underlining the author's discussions of philosophy and language throughout this section. Put bluntly, the author tends to be as "chatterbox" in his work as those he tends to condemn. There is the sense throughout the book that he is engaging in philosophic-style breaking down of words to their infinite, nth degrees of meaning and relationship, that his work is as much about playing with words and the



ideas they evoke as it is about actually meaning and/or insight. He is, in other words, practicing what he preaches against. Meanwhile, the author's discussion of his ideas about eroticism, sexuality and existence in chapter six and glancingly referred to in the conclusion are essentially repeats of previous arguments. The book as a whole concludes with the most overt statement yet of the author's apparent belief that the principle of transgression is one of the most essential to embrace and/or celebrate of human existence.

Finally, there is the frustrating chapter seven, in which the author makes virtually no reference to either the book he is apparently introducing or to the ways in which his ideas and philosophies relate to that book. There is some sense that the book is a comedy and therefore intended to trigger laughter, an idea which on some level relates to the importance of play, as explored in the conclusion ... play, in the form of transgression, providing a key to unlock the door into both evolution and enlightenment.



Characters

The Author

The author, Georges Bataille, was a French philosopher and writer, living and working in the early-to-mid twentieth century. His work is perhaps not as well known as some of the other noted philosophers of the time (Nietzsche, Kant, Heidegger, Kierkegaard), but is nonetheless important in that he tends to ground his ideas in a broader understanding of what it means to be a human being. In other words, where his contemporaries (and, some would argue, his predecessors over the centuries) grounded their examinations in thought and intellectualism, there is the sense about his work that Bataille is striving for insight into the instinctual and emotional aspects of the human experience. That said, however, there is also the very clear sense that Bataille communicates his ideas and philosophies similarly to philosophers throughout history—through interpreting and re-interpreting words, through dissecting them to the finest and most specific and sometimes most obscure implications and meanings, through juxtaposing them with other words in order to find even more layers of meaning. In some ways, then, in this book at least Bataille contradicts what he's saying about the value of the deeper, more instinctual aspects of being human by how he says it—intellectualism discussing and advocating instinct. Even here, however, there are layers of implication, in that at times Bataille seems almost apologetic, both about what he seems to want to say (which, in many ways, runs contradictory to contemporary human thought) and the way in which he says it. While he has clear convictions, it sometimes seems as though he lacks the courage of those convictions.

Pre-Historic Humanity

Pre-historic human beings were, in the author's theories and premise, extremely close in habits, behavior and thought processes to animals, both their animal ancestors and the animals with which they shared the planet. It is the author's contention that as humanity evolved, specifically at the phase where so-called Neanderthal Man emerged, both taboo and transgression began to play increasingly important roles in what was evolving as society.

Homo Sapien

The current species of human being, homo sapien is, for the author, the stage at which humanity has, for the most part, established a difficult, complex balance between taboo and transgression, between keeping animal nature at bay and embracing that nature when necessary.



Women

In the latter chapters of Part 1, the author considers the role of women in sexuality in considerable depth, referring to them variously as objects of desire, tradable properties, and, as prostitutes, as ideals of sexual freedom. In other words, his consideration of women in a sexual context is defined almost entirely by the perspective that their sexuality is defined almost entirely by the need for the human race to reproduce itself.

Prostitutes

The author defines prostitutes as embodiments of the principle of sexual transgression, manifestations of both freedom and desire. He writes of how the commercial aspect of prostitution has, over the centuries, corrupted the essential purity of their purpose—to trigger, in men, an awareness of the potentially transcendent power of sexual experience and/or expression.

Alfred Kinsey

Alfred Kinsey was an American scientist and researcher, a pioneer in the studying and reporting of sexual behavior. His reports and analysis of a wide spectrum of sexual attitudes and experiences were the first of their kind, aroused considerable controversy, and are in many cases the basis for ongoing exploration of human sexuality.

The Marquis de Sade

The infamous Marquis de Sade, whose name provides the origins of both the name and experience of sadism, was a French aristocrat and philosopher, imprisoned and beheaded during the French Revolution. His studies of the dark, animalistic side of human behavior are cited by the author throughout the book.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss was a Belgian-born anthropologist, studying the origins of human behavior and belief systems.

The Carmelite Scholars

The Carmelites are Roman Catholic nuns and monks, several of whom the author cites as references in his examination of the relationship between physical/spiritual and sexual ecstasy. Among those most frequently cited are Father Bruno de Sainte-Marie, Father Philippe de la Trinité, Father Louis Beirnaert, and Father Tesson.



Saint Theresa

Saint Theresa of Avila is the Christian mystic whose experiences of ecstasy are cited by the author as examples of how moments of physical and spiritual transcendence, occurring within the context of intense prayer, meditation and faith, parallel similar moments of transcendence experienced by those moving through sexual ecstasy. In other words, the author is suggesting that the intensity of Theresa's feelings is akin to the intensity of feeling experienced during the moment of orgasm.



Objects/Places

Eroticism

Eroticism is an experience of sexual stimulation, applicable to both the cause and the result of such stimulation, the doer and the done, the giver and the receiver.

Taboo

A taboo is something forbidden, that something generally being defined by society, morality, law, or some combination of all three. Taboos function on both the public and private levels, of both the community and the individual. The author suggests that eroticism has the allure it does, because the activity it promises (i.e., sex) is, in various ways and for various reasons, taboo.

Transgression

A transgression is a breaking of a rule, a guideline, or a taboo. It is often accompanied by both guilt and pleasure—guilt because society has conditioned us that rules are not to be transgressed, pleasure because rules tend to enact prohibitions against pleasure, or at the least personal freedom. Eroticism, in the author's perspective, is a transgression, but one that isn't automatically or necessarily a bad thing.

War

War, for the author, is an example of a generally accepted, often respected, frequently authorized transgression—in this case, a transgression against the taboo of killing. Eroticism, he contends, is in some ways and in some circumstances similarly authorized, while in other ways and other circumstances is profoundly constricted by taboo in ways that war is not, ironically, the author suggests, since the former is on some level connected to continuity and life while the latter is connected to discontinuity and death.

Work

Work, in the author's philosophic belief system, is what separates humanity from the animals, and modern humanity from its prehistoric ancestors. For the author, work is defined not only as the practice of getting things done, but also the philosophy that getting things done is necessary for survival. He also suggests that the more evolved the animal (i.e., human), the more work becomes a conscious choice, a means of escaping animal nature.



Violence

For the author, violence is less about physical and/or verbal violence, but rather the intense, overwhelming emotions that give rise not only to those sorts of violence but also to acting upon desire which, he contends, is a kind of violence itself. Eroticism, therefore, is seen by the author as a trigger for such emotional violence—specifically, the sort of emotional violence that defines sexual conquest, sexual intimacy, and the climax of the sexual act.

Religion

For the author, religion is defined not so much as organized, traditional faith (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, Islam) but as an experience of searching for and connecting with the spiritual, as opposed to the physical. Taboos against eroticism, he writes, have been constructed in response not to religion, which, he suggests, is positively related to eroticism, but to misguided, malformed manifestations of religion (i.e., the traditional faiths).

Christianity

Christianity is cited throughout the book as a primary opponent of eroticism in the Western world—the main reason it, and so many other universal, natural aspects of existence have become taboo.

The Kinsey Reports

In the 1950s and '60s, scientist Alfred Kinsey used scientific research techniques to explore human sexual behavior. He interviewed thousands of individuals about their sexual experiences and compiled the results into reports that, for the first time in human history, quantified sexual experience and attitudes.

Philosophy

For the author, excessive study and practice of philosophy, in its use of words and ideas, takes humanity away from lived experiences of itself. He suggests that some philosophical work, analysis and discussion, is necessary to understand the meanings and ramifications of such experiences, but that to take refuge in and/or to put too much emphasis on philosophy is to ignore and/or devalue the fundamental experience of living and being.



Themes

The Nature of Eroticism

Eroticism is an experience of sexual stimulation, the process by which an individual is awakened to the possibility of sexual activity. The first point to note here is that while the author makes it clear that he is, in general, speaking of person-to-person eroticism, the term can also apply to other forms of sexual stimulation, to erotica (suggestive) as opposed to pornography (explicit). The second noteworthy point is that when eroticism comes into a relationship between two people, it becomes a dialogue, a sharing, a give and take in which both the displayer and viewer are aroused to considerations of participating in a sexual act.

The core themes of the book are grounded in the author's carefully researched contention that that eroticism became an essential component of the human sexual experience in response to the evolution of humanity from its pre-historic, near animal existence to a more conscious existence, each individual becoming more aware of self, of relationship, and of society. As a result of that evolution, the author further suggests, humanity developed a fear-based taboo (restriction) on what it perceived as its more animal-like behaviors. These, according to the author, included death, excretion, and sex. Eroticism, he contends, emerged in response to all three of these taboos, inspiring human beings to break the taboos as much out of necessity (in order to perpetuate the race) as out of the naturally human tendency to transgress those taboos (to sample that which is forbidden). The relationship between taboo and transgression, the author goes on to say, goes questions related to eroticism and into deeper aspects of existence; it is, in other words, a fundamental component of being human.

Transgression versus Taboo

A taboo, the author contends, comes into existence for one main reason: fear. Other reasons, including distaste, danger, and ignorance, may come into the equation, but for the most part a taboo is, at its core, a manifestation of what the author often describes as horror—of animal ancestry and of discontinuity. But because a taboo is what it is—a barrier, an impediment—and because human beings are what they are—curious, independent, self-motivated and/or defined, determined to conquer fear and to evolve consciously as individuals and subconsciously as a race, there is a sense that in general, taboos create appeal, mystery and an obstacle to overcome. In other words, by their very nature taboos create the desire to transgress them.

Human beings have to know. Human beings have to achieve their goals. Human beings have to survive. That which is forbidden must be sought and/or sampled, that which is wrong must be attempted, that which ensures survival must be achieved. For all those reasons, the author contends, while some taboos are too deeply ingrained into the psyches of both a society and the individuals who live within it to be broken,



transgression is at times both necessary and sanctified. The author suggests that sexual activity and war are both such transgressions, the first breaking a taboo against pleasure and the activity itself and the second violating a taboo against killing. For the author, then, eroticism is participation in an act of transgression, a contravention of the taboo against sexual activity that, in the author's perspective, originates in a spiritual context that runs deeper than the biological or perhaps moral imperative to perpetuate the human race.

Continuity versus Discontinuity

The author further grounds his discussions of eroticism in his perspective on a fundamental nature of human existence—the contrasted values and experiences of continuity (connection) and discontinuity (separation). Throughout the book, these values manifest in several ways. For example, religion, defined by the author as a quest for connection, a transcendence of the physical that provides unity with all living things, is a manifestation of continuity, while Christianity, a practice of religion from which, the author suggests, come a great many of Western society's taboos, is a manifestation of discontinuity. Another example, sexual expression, is a manifestation of continuity, in that its ultimate goal, the reproduction and continuation of the human race, transcends the discontinuity of individual life, in which each individual becomes and/or feels separate from one another. Eroticism, therefore, as a prelude or prologue to sexual reproduction, is a manifestation of continuity, as is death which destroys the discontinuous being (i.e., the individual human life) but leaves intact the genuine continuity of existence outside of ourselves.

Without saying it explicitly, the author seems to be creating a link between continuity and spirituality on the one hand, and discontinuity and a focus on the material/physical world on the other. The point is not made to suggest that either eroticism or sexuality should be seen as a spiritual end unto themselves—on the contrary, the author goes to considerable length to state clearly that neither eroticism nor sexuality should be considered a spiritual goal. He does suggest, however, that if experienced through the filter of responsibility and continence (i.e., restraint) either or both could be a means to a spiritual, continuity-defined end.



Style

Perspective

The book contains no clear, explicit evidence of the author's academic and/or philosophical background. The depth and detail with which he quotes his sources and references suggests that he has done an extensive amount of research and devoted a great deal of time to contemplation of the subject. But aside from presenting himself as a socio/sexual philosopher of sorts, there is not a great deal to indicate whether his intentions and curiosities spring from academic, intellectual, or personal curiosity and/or insight. The only indication of his reasons for writing is found early in the Introduction, in which he makes clear his intention to discuss the subject of eroticism as freely as possible from the influences of both scientific method and Christian teaching, both of which he finds limiting. In other words, he is writing from a place of intending to transgress taboos, in this case injunctions against thinking of eroticism as anything other than shallow titillation and/or a gateway to physical and spiritual corruption.

All that said, it's difficult to discern what his intended audience is. The language in which the book is written (keeping in mind that the book under review is a translation) is definitely more academic and philosophic in style, which suggests that he is writing for an audience with a similarly contemplative bent. There is, however, underneath the complicated philosophical syntax (and the self-conscious coyness about naming the sexual act and the sexual anatomy) a sense of pleading, that the author urgently feels that humanity needs to get past its self-imposed taboos on discussion and consideration of sexuality and embrace, at least to a point, the more honestly animal side of their natures. In other words, it appears there are two perspectives at work here—the academic, presenting a thesis, and the human being, striving for humanization and acceptance of that thesis.

Tone

As discussed above, the book is generally written with a fairly academic tone, familiar to anyone who has read and/or studied philosophy, which often comes across as a complex exercise in semantics, or manipulating words to uncover all their possible contexts and connotations. Also as discussed above, tone is on some level defined by the audience for which the author is reaching, which seems at times to be entirely academic and at other, rarer times, broader and more egalitarian in scope. In short, the tone is that uniquely academic blend of subjective and objective—the latter because the author attempts to support his thesis with facts and analysis, the former because as the case with any strongly held thesis, there is an undercurrent of passion and personal commitment to both the ideas and their communication. If there wasn't passion of some sort, what sustains the years of work that go into writing a book of this nature, or indeed any other book?



Interestingly enough, though, there is the sense about the book that neither its academic nor its emotional contexts would have too much of a lasting effect on the reader. This is partly because the author's arguments are complex and not always logically followed through, and partly because of the very taboos the author seems so desperate to break down. In other words, the societal and cultural taboos against sexuality and erotic expression are so pervasive and run so deep and have existed for so long that the author's arguments will, in all likelihood, fall mostly on unreceptive ears.

Structure

After presenting his thesis in the Introduction, the author structures his arguments in a fashion that is at times linear (i.e., one idea leading into the other, developing the thesis as he goes) and at other times seems tangential (i.e., going off into diversions and contemplations that frequently seem to have relatively little to do with his central thematic premise). The sense of linear structure is most evident in the first section, in which analysis of one aspect of his thesis clearly triggers contemplation and examination of another. That said, there are still frequent, and quite detailed, detours into ideas and perspectives the author seems to find both relevant and important but which ultimately don't do a great deal to support his thesis. Structure is even less effectively grounded in the second part, which tends towards somewhat rambling, and occasionally repetitive, explorations of various interpretations of eroticism rather than developing the thesis explored in the first part. Granted, the second part is in fact titled "Some Aspects of Eroticism", which is actually accurate. Ultimately, though, in spite of occasional efforts to link the two parts of the book, they follow two essentially separate lines of thought without fully bridging the intellectual and emotional gap between them. In short, then, the book's structure is frequently looser than the academic reader, which seems to be the intended audience, might be accustomed to.



Quotes

"I do not think that man has much chance of throwing light in the things that terrify him before he has dominated them."

p. 7

"[A]ll eroticism has a sacramental character, but the physical and the emotional are to be met with outside the religious sphere proper, while the quest for continuity of existence systematically pursued beyond the immediate world signifies an essentially religious intention."

pp. 15-16

"Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality."

p. 18

"Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic but erotic it is whenever it is not rudimentary and purely animal."

p. 29

"[S]exuality with shame ... gave birth to eroticism ..."

p. 31

"[M]y first words may make the unwary reader think that we have in mind some intellectual adventure and not the ceaseless search which carries the spirit, beyond philosophy and science if necessary, but by way of them, after every potentiality that can open out before it."

p. 33

"Eroticism as seen by the objective intelligence is something monstrous, just like religion. Eroticism and religion are closed books to us if we do not locate them firmly in the realm of inner experience."

p. 37

"There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order."

p. 40

"Violence is what the world of work excludes with its taboos; in my field of enquiry this implies at the same time sexual reproduction and death."

p. 42

"[W]hat we call death is, in the first place, the consciousness we have of it. We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is



the image of his own destiny."
p. 44

"[F]rom the first, sexual liberty must have received some check which we are bound to call a taboo without being able to say anything about the cases in which it applies ... in all times as in all places as far as our knowledge goes, man is defined by having his sexual behavior subject to rules and precise restrictions."
p. 50

"It is always at bottom a matter of two incompatibles: the realm of calm and rational behavior and the violence of the sexual impulse."
p. 53

"Death and reproduction are as diametrically opposed as negation and affirmation. Death is really the opposite process to the process ending in birth, yet these opposite processes can be reconciled."
p. 55

"The sexual channels are also the body's sewers; we think of them as shameful and connect the anal orifice with them."
p. 57

"When a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant, we violate it [the taboo]."
p. 64

"The act of violence that deprives the creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things is with its profound logic an intentional one. It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires, and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim."
p. 90

"The external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as loss of blood and ejaculations."
p. 91

"Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers."
p. 92

"The natural urge means a barrier destroyed. The barrier destroyed means the natural urge. Demolished barriers are not the same as death but just as the violence of death overturns ... the structure of life so ... does sexual violence."
p. 106



"We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behavior. Eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety."

p. 109

"Primitive religious feeling drew from taboos the spirit of transgression. Christian religious feeling has by and large opposed the spirit of transgression. The tendency which enables a religious development to proceed within Christianity is connected with these relatively contradictory points of view."

p. 118

"Christianity has never relinquished the hope of ... reducing this world of selfish discontinuity to the realm of continuity afire with love. The initial movement of transgression was thus steered by Christianity towards the vision of violence transcended and transformed into its opposite. This ideal has a sublime and fascinating quality."

p. 118

"Not only is individuality itself submerged in the tumult of the orgy, but each participant denies the individuality of the others. All limits are completely done away with ... but it is impossible for nothing to remain of the differences between individuals and the sexual attraction connected with those differences."

p. 129

"The temples of India still abound in erotic pictures carved in stone in which eroticism is seen for what it is, fundamentally divine."

p. 134

"Extreme poverty releases men from the taboos that make human beings of them, not as transgression does, but in that a sort of hopelessness ... gives the animal impulses free rein."

p. 135

"[W]e cannot avoid dying nor can we avoid bursting through our barriers, and they are one and the same."

p. 140

"Beauty that denies the animal and awakes desire finishes up by exasperating desire and exalting the animal parts."

p. 144

"However low a man may sink he is in truth never just a thing as an animal is. He conserves a certain dignity, a fundamental nobility and even a sacred truth which attests that he cannot be put to servile use (even when this abuse occurs in practice)."

p. 150

"Animal nature, or sexual exuberance, is that which prevents us from being reduced to mere things. Human nature, on the contrary, geared to specific ends in work, tends to



make things of us at the expense of our sexual exuberance."
p. 158

"de Sade came to endow the excesses of his own imagination with a value which he saw as absolute, one which was a denial of the reality of other people."
p. 180

"The divine will only protect us once its basic need to consume and to ruin has been satisfied."
p. 181

"[C]ivilized men speak and barbarians are silent, and the man who speaks is always the civilized man ... language is by definition the expression of civilized man, [and] violence is silent."
p. 186

"[w]e must declare that violence belongs to humanity as a whole and is speechless, and that thus humanity as a whole lies by omission and [that] language itself is founded upon this lie."
p. 186

"The man who speaks, however blind he may be, has nevertheless broken out of the solitude to which his condemnation of other people has condemned him ... violence is the opposite of the solidarity with other people implicit in logic, laws, and language."
p. 189

"Human life ... is composed of two heterogeneous parts which never blend. One part is purposeful, given significance by utilitarian and therefore secondary ends; this part is the one we are aware of. The other is primary and sovereign; it may arise when the other is out of gear, it is obscure, or else blindingly clear; either way it evades the grasp of our aware intelligence."
p. 193.

"[w]hat de Sade was trying to bring to the surface of the conscious mind was precisely the thing that revolted that mind."
p. 195

"[i]f today the average man has a profound insight into what transgression means for him, de Sade was the one who made ready the path. Now the average man knows that he must become aware of the things which repel him most violently—those things ... are part of our own nature."
p. 196

"Incest is the first proof of the fundamental connection between man and the denial of sensuality, of the carnal and animal."
p. 216



"Marriage is a matter less for the partners than for the man who gives the woman away, the man whether father or brother who might have freely enjoyed the woman, daughter or sister, yet who bestows her on someone else. This gift is perhaps a substitute for the sexual act ..."

p. 218

"Marriage is a compromise between sexual activity and respect. More and more it is coming to mean the latter."

p. 219

"[t]he state of marriage enables man to live a human life in which respect for taboo contrasts with the untrammelled satisfaction of animal needs."

p. 220

"The religious seem to have been mainly concerned to prove that fear of sexuality was not the mainspring of the Christian practice of continence."

p. 222

"[t]he statement that he intends to 'examine the question [of] whether fear is not precisely what does underlie 'sex' and whether the connection between 'mystic' and 'sexual' has not something to do with the gulfs of terrifying darkness that belong equally to both domains."

p. 222

"[M]orality cannot be confined to keeping life going as it is; it calls for life to expand and blossom."

p. 230

"In temptation there is only an object of attraction of a sexual nature; the mystical element which restrains the tempted man has now no "immediate force"; its power derives from the fact that the religious, faithful to his decision, prefers the safeguard of the equilibrium acquired through the mystical life to the delirium into which temptation would have him slide."

p. 236

"The trances, the states of rapture ... prolifically described by mystics of every religious discipline ... all have the same significance: non-attachment to ordinary life, indifference to its needs, anguish felt in the midst of this until the being reels, and the way left open to a spontaneous surge of life that is usually kept under control but which bursts forth in freedom and infinite bliss."

p. 246

"The saint is not after efficiency. He is prompted by desire and desire alone and in this resembles the erotic man."

p. 256

"[H]uman sexuality is limited by taboos and the domain of eroticism is that of the transgression of these taboos. Desire in eroticism is the desire that triumphs over the



taboo. It presupposes man in conflict with himself."
p. 256

"[O]n the scale of unlimited loss we come again upon the triumph of being—whose only failure has ever been to be in tune with the movement that would have it perishable."
p. 270



Topics for Discussion

Do you agree with the contention, stated by the author in his Foreword on p. 7? Why or why not?

Discuss the author's re-interpretations of words like "taboo", "transgression", "violence" and "religion". What are the differences between his interpretations and more traditional ones? Which interpretations fit best with your personal experience of what those words mean and how they function in your life?

Do you think it's necessary for rules and boundaries around sexual behavior? If yes, discuss where your sense of these rules comes from, personal experience or some form of what the author might call restrictive teachings (i.e., science, Christianity, society) and why you think they're necessary. If no, discuss how you believe such no-boundaries sexuality can/should function in a society where, as the author points out, such boundaries are pervasive and inescapable.

Consider the quote about the Marquis de Sade from page 195. Discuss whether you think this is a truism, a universal human experience that goes beyond the context of its author (de Sade has been recognized as a profound, troubled sado-masochist). Consider ways in which contemporary society has, by the actions of some of its citizens, been made aware of the so-called dark sides of humanity. Discuss ways in which society has changed as the result of that awareness.

Discuss the author's references to women and their sexuality. Are they sexist and/or misogynist? Are they a product of a less enlightened time and therefore must be allowed for? Or are they uncomfortable honesty?

Discuss ways in which the place of women in marriage have, or have not, evolved from the place described by the author in chapter four. Consider not only your own culture, but other cultures, societies, perspectives, and philosophies.

Debate this quote on the subject of morality: "[M]orality cannot be confined to keeping life going as it is; it calls for life to expand and blossom." What definition of morality does this quote imply? What is the traditional definition/interpretation of the subject of morality? Which definition do you agree with? Why or why not?

Consider this quote on the subject of sainthood: "The saint is not after efficiency. He is prompted by desire and desire alone and in this resembles the erotic man." Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this statement, and why.