



*The Philosophy
of the Marquis de Sade*

ROUTLEDGE

TIMO AIRAKSINEN

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE

The Marquis de Sade is famous for his forbidden novels, like *Justine*, *Juliette*, and the *120 Days of Sodom*. Yet, despite Sade's immense influence on philosophy and literature, his work remains relatively unknown. His novels are too long, repetitive, and violent. At last in *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*, a distinguished philosopher provides a theoretical reading of Sade.

Airaksinen examines Sade's claim that in order to be happy and free we must do evil things. He discusses the motivations of the typical Sadean hero, who leads a life filled with perverted and extreme pleasures, such as stealing, murder, rape, and blasphemy. Secondary sources on Sade, such as Hobbes, Erasmus, and Brillat-Savarin are analyzed, and modern studies are evaluated. *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* greatly enhances our understanding of Sade and his philosophy of pain and perversion.

Timo Airaksinen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He has written extensively on ethics, epistemology, and the history of philosophy.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE

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PREFACE

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Sade is not an easy topic. The subject matter is that which is evil, and perhaps one cannot quite want to know what evil is like. Sade is a revolutionary thinker who has much to offer any student of ethics, literary criticism, and cultural history. The characterization of virtue as a vice, the deliberate repetitiveness of his style, and the enlightened choice of what is worthless, are all paradoxical themes which Sade introduces and analyzes with great care and skill. My basic motive in writing this book has been the conviction that there is much in this world which is neither directly visible nor readily thinkable. One is a victim of shame, which makes one assume that something does not exist because it should not. Sade deals efficiently with this problem by forcing his reader to recognize what is dirty, disgusting, and forbidden. A liberating effect follows when the reader

PREFACE

overcomes his shame. He is then able to take a look behind without becoming a pillar of salt, as happened once outside Sodom and Gomorrah.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The second, on the meaning of perversion, is perhaps more difficult and certainly more analytical than the rest. It presents a review of human action and weakness as a technical theory to be deconstructed in the chapters that follow. It cannot be skipped without losing much of the main thesis; however, the chapter can be read cursorily so that one will at least get an impression of the notions of perversity and moral harm to self. The final chapters deal with more general issues, like censorship and the primacy of values in human life. Sade himself is the real hero of the book.

INTRODUCTION

D. A. F. Sade is a challenge to anyone who reads his black, or clandestine and censored novels. This book is a systematic study of the kind of challenge that is involved. At the same time it is a treatise on evil in the private world, where there is a mirror reflection of the social world of coercion, persecution, punishment, and war. I have said something about the aspects of cruelty in the public world in my book *Ethics of Coercion and Authority*.¹ In the present book we shall encounter the enigmatic aspects of privacy when it is accompanied by actual plans to be wicked – which is a stronger sense of wickedness than weakness of the will, to say nothing of mere error and self-deception.

Sade's novels invite a mixed mode of reading which combines literary criticism and moral philosophy. Sade is indeed a kind of moralist, but because he deals with a subject matter which is buried deep in the Id, it would be silly to think that he could provide a neutral description of the facts. Instead of science or ontology, one finds a rich assemblage of metaphors and other rhetorical devices, used in a narrative which works like no other text. The reader of Sade must learn a method of coping in the jungle of nausea and terror Sade creates.

Four terms provide the skeleton of my study. The first, *inversion*, refers to Sade's habit of turning his topic inside out. He deals with a topic as if it were a rubber ball that is cut open, and the inside pulled out with firm hands; the result is a deformed hemispherical object, its shape forever destroyed and half its insides obscenely visible. Such inverted objects are what Sade's world is all about; they are far from any neat mirror image of familiar objects like virtue, sex, and love. The deformation involved is itself a complex procedure and interpreted in terms of the rituals of debauchery. It starts from *transgression*—the crossing of a limit—but in the Sadean world the first step is merely destruction, because it leads nowhere. Man is

confronted by nature, an enemy which is as majestic as it is incomprehensible and unconquerable. Therefore, the first step across the borders of decency and shame promises only fear and trembling. It shatters the borders. *Subversion*, the essence of perversion, is to undermine all the known rules and principles, in order to derive pleasure from what is inside, underneath, out of sight. Here one leaves behind all that is transgressed and violated. The ultimate result is *transcendence* inside, not beyond, the shattered limits.

Sade provides a whole new world for his illuminated heroes, who can now celebrate their cruel friendship under the gaze of the audience – the readers, the victims, who are themselves unable to reach transcendence and are instead buried under the ruins of their values. The Sadean friends produce waste, excrement, upon which they live in their inverted world of nightmares. They like pain, worship all that cannot be respected, and enjoy what is disgusting. They aim at pleasure, now understood in terms of suffering.

The finished Sadean world, as it emerges from his novels, is like a Möbius strip. The Möbius strip that results from joining the two ends of a strip of twisted surface is unexpected and ambiguous. It is a surface with only one side, which may be called either the top or the bottom. The surface itself leaves everything visible to anyone who travels along it; nothing can be hidden or found on such a surface, because it has only one side. It sounds like an impossibility, but like the ultimate Sadean transcendence, it follows simple mechanical laws. Like Sade's anti-humanism, it is one-sided and unique.

One cannot work only from the inside out in analyzing an author like Sade, and I have tried to provide an outside to my discussion by referring to a number of other authors. For the same reason I have provided some standard philosophical material borrowed from ethics and more extensively from the theory of action. Admittedly, it can seem almost foolish to use standard moral philosophy as a frame of reference, because from that perspective Sade can look like merely an inconsistent pedant, or at most a second-rate philosopher. The kind of philosophical frame which supports both virtue and akrasia must be deconstructed here. In reality, the object of study here is a source with a mixed nature in at least two different ways. First, Sade's project is a concatenation of philosophy and literature put together in such a way that the result is neither the one nor the other. Murder and sex are both described and recommended with solid reasons. Second, the source is tainted by the profane language and the

obscenity of the situations he describes. Sade deals with shit and fucking, but if the reader cannot handle this he is lost.

I have already said something about the first problem, that is, mixed sources. As for the problem of pornography in Sade's work, it has often been treated by means of a method which may be called "the celebration of embarrassment." This term refers to a set of rhetorical methods of coping. For instance, take the problem of war from a soldier's point of view. He may glorify the participation in institutionalized cruelty, mask his sense of terror, and forget war crimes by means of stories of patriotism, legends of duty, assumptions of a good cause, dreams of friendship between comrades in arms, and so on. War is recalled as something that it cannot be in order to help the soldier live with memories and consequences. Something similar can be said of studies on Sade. In dealing with the perverted subject matter, the less interesting of them either condemn and correct Sade, or camouflage him behind a biography.² This does not seem to produce good results, although some of their conclusions may be stimulating. Another strategy is to make a linguistic study of Sade. Roberta Hackel has produced a superb little book along these lines.³

The third strategy is to celebrate one's own embarrassment before Sade's language and style as well as the content – all the discharges, orgasms, the meals of shit, and scenes of torture and blood. This is the right strategy, as shown for instance by Jane Gallop and Angela Carter. Jane Gallop offers a critical summary and discussion of some French language work on Sade, and her development of these themes is admirable. A fascinating picture of Sade's world is created by Roland Barthes, whose imagination and keen eye for structural details are unsurpassed. Barthes's Sade speaks to the reader with all of his combined power and wealth of imagination. Simone de Beauvoir offers a more conventional, liberal reading in its own cultural context, while Philip Hallie is a moralist who wants to understand Sade's wicked will in order to create a better world.⁴

My own intention in this book is different. What I shall try to do is to provide a philosophical theory both of Sade and of the wicked will. Unlike most studies on Sade, my project serves some rather direct philosophical interests, but at a more descriptive level than, for instance, Hallie's treatise. I want to understand wickedness as such without evaluating or condemning the mind which emerges. It is, after all, a wicked mind whose own nature dictates the proper attitude towards it. At the same time I would like to reflect on the main features of the Sadean world of fiction, and how it can be used as a new philosophical tool. Fiction may tell us a most truthlike

story about evil and madness, simply because the field is so strange. It is the realm of the forbidden, the banned, and the repressed. In fact it does not exist, because its world is so full of irony, ambiguity, and paradox. Therefore, we must read fiction as philosophy, use metaphor as argument, rely on rhetoric, and believe in the plots of the stories. We shall learn what we are not or – which is the same – what we are afraid of. Certainly this fear is so real that its causes harass us more cruelly than any representation of facts.

For my own part I will try to follow that lead of the festival of style. The modification I shall make to it is the inclusion of philosophical elements which create an artificial exterior enclosing the mystery of Sade's inner vision. Therefore perversion deconstructs moral philosophy, which is seen as lacking the potential to penetrate. Philosophy is one of the original metaphors of the void, or castration, that is, of Wittgenstein's flybottle or of Hobbes's house in which "birds that entering by the chimney, and finding themselves inclosed in a chamber flutter at the false light of a glasse window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in."⁵

SADE: PHILOSOPHY AND ITS BACKGROUND

The Marquis de Sade creates a comprehensive literary project in order to examine the wickedness of the will in all its forms. His aims are at least half philosophical as he tackles some paradoxical issues and attempts to relate their meaning to his reader. Such a project, which combines narrative form and theoretical speculation, may be too complicated to be perspicuous. Indeed, if the subject matter tends to be paradoxical, Sade's texts themselves are enigmatic. They appear to be novels, yet one cannot really read them as such without concluding that they are failures. As is often said – mistakenly, of course – they cannot be read. We can read Sade, but only with a key. I shall argue that this key is the realization that Sade is actually a philosopher in disguise. Although we cannot read Sade as a conventional philosopher for some obvious reasons, his fiction (including its style) serves counter-ethical and metaphysical goals. Once we read Sade as a philosopher, we can then go on to appreciate his more literary achievements, which may otherwise escape the reader. My overall strategy, then, will be to start with an account of Sade's work and career, to look at his philosophy, and then return to matters concerning his style and narrative technique.

FACTS

It is evident that the books and other writings of Sade are not well known except in the form of rumors and legends which say, correctly enough, that they are bizarre, demanding, and very long. They also have the reputation of being unpleasant to read. Although they contain a wealth of pornographic and sadistic detail, they are not sexually arousing in any familiar way; and many readers see the texts as too rambling and boring to

warrant careful study. The reader who does wish to give careful study to Sade is confronted by the obstacle that often his books are available only in truncated versions; and it is usually Sade's philosophical speculations that are eliminated. Unfortunately, it is the speculative parts which are supremely important for a real understanding of Sade.

Sade wrote many plays, but his main ambition of becoming a successful playwright was never satisfied. Even today the plays remain largely unpublished and unproduced. As Lely says, "By the evidence we now possess, the Marquis de Sade was the author of seventeen plays. It seems unlikely that he wrote more, for the truth is that all that he wrote in this form was so humdrum that neither his family nor the authorities thought it worth consigning to judicial flames."¹ Yet he took this aspect of his work quite seriously, and his secondary career as a novelist reflects his theatrical background – an interpretive clue which should not be forgotten by those studying his novels. Besides being a dramatist, Sade was also a libertine, and his biography reveals a unique personality, amazing in its adventurousness, originality, irritable violence, and literary productivity. After spending over twenty years in prison, Sade was confined at the end of his life to the Charenton mental asylum in Paris. Napoleon himself refused to set Sade free, partly because of his destabilizing cultural and moral influence. The Comte de Montalivet, Minister of the Interior, issued the following order on October 18, 1810: "The greatest care [must] be taken to prevent any use by him [Sade] of pencils, pens, ink, or paper. The director of the asylum is made personally responsible for the execution of this order." Sade's ink is fertile, and the attempt to deny him the use of the pen may be taken as a kind of castration. Nevertheless, Sade wrote and produced his plays at the asylum, where the inmates were said to have become uncontrollable because of this entertainment. The performances seem to have been public. Doctor Royer Collard complained about Sade and Charenton in 1808, saying:

They were so improvident at the asylum that they had a theater erected for the performance of comedies and did not think of the harmful effects of such a tumultuous proceeding upon the mind. De Sade is the director of this theater. He presents the plays, hands out the roles and directs them. He is also the asylum poet. . . . How can such things be in an insane asylum? Such crimes and immorality!²

The production of morally disgusting stage performances for madmen was one of Sade's minor crimes, and it provides a clue to the interpretation of

Sade's philosophy. The fictional account of outrageous and unexplainable behavior is his ultimate vice, and the theatrical displays of imaginary cruelty is the topic in which he is interested.

It is indeed typical of Sade's fate that he was placed in a mental asylum despite being certainly sane, as the five paragraphs of his last will show.³ It is a small masterpiece. He also provided some anti-psychiatric treatment for the patients – as we now understand it after reading Thomas Szasz. Nevertheless, Sade was not interested in caring for people, as he makes clear in his novels. Was he trying to create chaos inside the asylum? The final enigma of his life centers on what he was doing with the insane in the hospital, but the picture is as fragmented as it is fascinating.

As we have said, during his life Sade was not only an asylum inmate but also a prisoner. Although he was always saved through cunning and luck, he even received death sentences for some of his alleged crimes, as the following entry indicates:

1772 September – The public prosecutor's sentence at Marseille: Sade and Latour are condemned to make due apology in front of the cathedral door before being taken to the Place Saint-Luis where "the said Sr. de Sade is to be beheaded on a scaffold and the said Latour hung and strangled on a gibbet . . . then the body of the said Sr. de Sade and that of the said Latour shall be burned and their ashes thrown to the wind." The crime is stated to be poisoning and sodomy. . . . Sade and Latour are executed and burnt in effigy at Aix.⁴

They in fact violated the prostitutes who accused them, but in general the evidence for their crimes remains questionable. Such an example shows more about how the law worked then and how serious sex-related crimes were considered during that period. Sodomy led to capital punishment, and blasphemy was just as bad. Sade was considered guilty of both, and to increase his troubles, he was later mistakenly thought to be the author of the notorious pamphlet *Zoloe* (1800), which attacked Bonaparte and other important people. This mistake in literary attribution explains some of the persecution Sade experienced later in his life. He was not freed by Napoleon in spite of his pleas, even after his son was killed in action. His reputation was already tainted to the extent that he was no longer in control of his own fate. He was even harassed by his mother-in-law, Lady de Montreuil, who had him arrested and seemed to want to get rid of her kin

for good. representations of women are biased in some typical way because of his problematic relation to Lady de Montreuil.

Sade quite early became nationally famous for his debauchery and scandals, later for his books, and finally for his republican political activities during the French Revolution. Although he was himself a revolutionary, typically enough the revolutionaries also came very close to executing him as an aristocrat. He avoided the guillotine only because, in the confusion resulting from so many executions, he could not be definitely identified:

1794 – Sade’s name appears eleventh on a list of twenty-eight prisoners to be brought to trial. For some reason not wholly explained, the court bailiff fails to take Sade and returns with only twenty-three of the twenty-eight. All but two are guillotined the same day on a square.⁵

Knowledge of Sade’s life is of some importance to the understanding of his philosophical doctrine, as I shall show, but it is also worth noting that his life was not always congruent with his fiction. First, he was an unhappy libertine, a fact which refutes his own pet theory of the beneficial effect of vice. Second, many of his recent biographers seem to have exaggerated the degree of Sade’s personal debauchery, trying to see it as the image of the debauchery in his fiction. Certainly, he was a wicked and violent person who enthusiastically recommended crime, yet life is not fiction. One may ask the question, for example: did Sade ever kill anyone for the pure enjoyment of it all, as is prescribed by his own doctrines? The answer, evidently, is “no.” He may have been used to drawing blood with a whip and a dagger, but he does not seem to have killed anyone, except perhaps in the war in which he had participated as a young man. He may have wanted to kill, but in the context of the legal and social order of the period it was prudent for him to repress any such motive. The constraints on one’s personal life and career are severe compared to the liberty of the novel, where abstraction rules. Sade’s cruelty is ultimately fictional.

In this book I shall concentrate on four of Sade’s principal works, the ones called his black novels. They made him famous, and not without reason. His more conventional larger works and groups of shorter writings are less known than the clandestine black novels, but they are also less interesting. One exception, of course, is Sade’s essay on the art of fiction, “Reflections on the Novel,” which deserves to be read carefully. It claims to

be an explication of the main features of Sade's grand literary project; however, even this essay is perverted, because in it Sade gives the calculated impression of being a conventional novelist whose aims are neither surprising nor revolutionary. His strategy here resembles his attempts to deny the authorship of his most important clandestine works; he produces elaborate proofs that he could not possibly be the author of a book like *Justine*. (Sometimes he was not, as the case of *Zoloe* shows.) Sade writes in a typically deceptive manner:

Never, I say it again, never shall I portray crime other than clothed in the colors of hell. I wish people to see crime laid bare, I want them to fear it and detest it, and I know no other way to achieve this end than to paint it in all its horror. . . . Given which, let no one any longer ascribe to me the authorship of J [*Justine*], I have never written any such works, and surely I never shall.⁶

In his "A Note on My Detention," he uses two arguments to show that he is not the author of *Justine*. First, he argues, to write such a book at the Bastille would mean the risk of returning to prison, and such a self-destructive act cannot be expected of anyone. Second, to show that the obvious presupposition concerning his prudence is justified, he argues that his other books and stories, like *Aline et Valcour*, are indeed moral.⁷ This may even be true. If one reads them without presupposing the knowledge of the black novels and their system of anti-ethics, one may agree. In the more conventional works, virtue emerges victorious over vice. Why, he asks, should he write something as disturbing and dangerous as *Justine*? It is a good question.

There is one additional aspect of this bluffing which we must recognize, namely, Sade's declaration of his psychological goals in his books. In the "Reflections on the Novel," he says that the novel is a faithful mirror of the mind, so that "the most essential requirement for the novelist's art is most certainly the knowledge of the human heart."⁸ One may understand this as a blatant lie and say that Sade was merely a subversive writer whose novels are devoid of verisimilitude. However, one can equally well argue that Sade is being honest here. Perhaps he really tries to depict realistic characters and to show us what human nature is like in its vacillation between virtue and vice. My own opinion is that although Sade is a subversive writer, he does fictionally depict the subconscious mind and its repressions in a manner which is convincing. It does not resemble anything we know or have

previously thought of. This region is a bizarre conglomeration of all the waste and filth of the subconscious Id, kept intact as long as the processes of decay will allow before it vanishes into nothingness. In spite of such a mystery, Sade allows his audience to see the inner aspect of human life in all of its forbidden glamor. When the gaze is turned inwards, one sees what should not be seen.

It is impossible to say whether Sade denies the authorship of his books because he is prudently aware of the danger of legal prosecution, or whether he wants to play the game as it is prescribed – either by vice as an instinct or by the theory of perverse behavior. Perhaps both of these factors are relevant, for such standards are typical of the negativity and the ambiguity of vice.

According to the principles of perverse action, an attempt to turn people away from evil is more apt to attract them towards its acceptance than any direct recommendation. It is therefore not so strange that Sade, who insists on his indecency, denies authorship of his clandestine books like *Justine*. He first boasts about his wickedness and then denies it. By so doing, he is faithful to his own theoretical principles, difficult as they are to understand. The duplicity and ambiguity involved can also be explained, of course, on the grounds of his fear of punishment. This fear was well founded. He was arrested once again in 1801 in his publisher's office and duly imprisoned because of his books. The texts are still censored in many countries; indeed, the legal history of paternalism surrounding Sade and his books can be used with profit in any study of cultural oppression and censorship.

The black novels I shall discuss are the shorter *Justine*, *Juliette*, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and the long, great *120 Days of Sodom*. The first two novels represent the two sides of one story; they respectively follow the rather similar careers of two different women – one good, the other bad; one unsuccessful and unhappy, the other not. *Juliette* alone is 1200 pages long and consists of six volumes. *Justine* adds several volumes to the double story. The other books are smaller, but even the shortest, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, is more than 200 pages long. The sheer mass of text, then, is enormous, especially considering that Sade began his writing when he was 42 years old, when he was starting his career as a prisoner. Moreover, Sade's son, "that dismal, greedy creature," burned all his father's notebooks and manuscripts, assisted by the police, after the death of the old man.⁹ The Divine Marquis was clearly a hard-working person. Sade's fictional heroes are also hard-working. Their vice forces on them a busy life-style which resembles that of a modern businessman more

than that of a classic aristocrat, in that they acquire raw materials, shape them into a new and more pleasing form, and sell products to their fellow citizens; the main difference is that the material with which his libertines work is the human body and soul.

Sade's project also assumes that the reader is a hard-working individual – determined, independent, even virtuous. Certainly, only those who are least vulnerable to his rhetoric can read Sade all the way through; but for everyone he presents an enormous challenge by the special nature of his text. Perhaps the moral danger comes from reading only part of the whole.

TOPICS

In Sade's doctrine, I shall distinguish between five levels. *First*, we find in his work a parody of the social contract theory, together with the idea of the state of nature and the utopian social order. We can also appreciate the discussions of elitism and anarchism, focusing on social inequality and exploitation. According to Sade's syllogism, the civilized life is part of the state of nature, because of its inherent violence; our social world is already evil and society unjust; one should therefore make all this explicit and learn how to enjoy its possibilities. To form a social context fit for the cruel exploitation of the weaker by the stronger is the ultimate role of civilization. The social contract crystallizes a medium, explicating a *chronique scandaleuse*, or a good story of the wicked order of things.

Second, we are provided with a psychology of the person who is seeking for pleasure, or rather stimulation, and whose motivation is explained by this search. The illuminated Sadean hero is one who is longing for extreme pleasure, even if it is only for the short run. Pleasure is understood in an anti-Epicurean manner, so that the resulting hedonism is a caricature of the utilitarian calculus of benefits. Sade rejects the ideology of maximizing expectations, according to which the agent is a prudent egoist who abhors unreasonable risks. On the contrary, the Sadean person wants everything at once, regardless of consequences. Such pleasure is related to deliberate cruelty, perverse sex, and the climax of sexual excitement which is crazy pleasure, that is orgasm – understood as the simple act and fact of discharging. Obviously, a serious effort must be made to explicate such a strange pseudo-psychological theory whose key metaphor refers to military life and its guns. Can we call it hedonism?

Third, Sade's metaphysics claims that nature must be seen as the original principle of death and destruction. He sees nature in terms of the classic atomistic model, according to which the universe is a giant vortex of bodies loaded with energy and *conatus*. The collision of atoms is the truth of nature, and therefore Sade claims that there is no room for transcendental values or gods. He is an atheist. A naturalistic counter-ethic follows. From the principle of nature, he thinks, we can derive a code of conduct for the heroes who are able to appreciate the true science. The main laws of nature prescribe destruction – that is, violent collisions – which are again connected to the psychology of pleasure via the orgiastic experience of nothingness. Murder is the passion which Sade wants to justify in this context. He claims that conflicts irritate and stimulate the mind. Metaphysics is an important part of Sade's philosophy, simply because it explains his psychology of pleasure and leads us to the heart of darkness – evil itself. Nevertheless, the naturalistic ethic is an interim stage.

Fourth, for Sade, ethics proper is the field in which conventional virtue becomes vice and vice becomes virtue. Two different interpretations can be given to this paradox. According to the first interpretation, social life and the role of a person are such that virtue does not pay off, although vice does. In the Aristotelian manner, virtue is a mean between the scarcity and excess of what is *prima facie* desirable. When a person is too virtuous, as it were, he acquires characteristics which are not exactly wicked but are harmful defects of personality. Insufficient or false virtue, on the other hand, is also dangerous. But who doesn't shade into one side or the other? For Sade, the golden mean of virtue is so narrow that one never hits it, and much of what Sade wrote is dedicated to proving this thesis. According to the second interpretation, all cultures support different and mutually conflicting values. This relativism can be shown by means of comparative anthropology; to support it, Sade himself uses empirical data in a bewildering manner. He tries to sketch a blueprint of an ideal society of villains, so there is a return from ethics to a parody of the civil contract. The narrative circles back to its starting point, and parody provides the contents for the later stages of philosophy.

The true Sadean problem is not at the surface of his ethics. As I shall argue, the problem is that after denying all enduring values except violent pleasure, Sade must nevertheless postulate the existence and validity of something like objective values. The truly wicked person wants to commit crime, and nothing stimulates him like mischief. But to be able to do so he must first define crime, and for crime to exist there must be laws and