Unworking the Sadean Communion

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Abstract: Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom engages the question of limits—physical, mental, and moral—through libertine philosophy and the orgy. Sade’s controversial exploration of human nature, generally marginalized in both philosophy and the academy, deserves a re-examination for its ontological utility. I read Philosophy in the Bedroom as an attempt at being-in-community as defined by Jean-Luc Nancy in his book, The Inoperative Community. Nancy’s radical conceptualization of community is contrary to common notions of the social “community.” He argues that true community is something that occurs in the disruption of the everyday social and political projects, and it is in this sense that I read Philosophy in the Bedroom as an attempt at Nancean community. For Nancy, community is an experience that presents to us the reality of our finitude by a process of mutual exposure to one another at our limits. I argue that Sade makes an attempt to reach these limits and generate community, and although he does not succeed, he points us in the right direction. I apply a critical Nancean lens to Sade’s text in order to understand its reasons for failure and to rescue his philosophy from its limited context.

Keywords: Marquis de Sade, Jean-Luc Nancy, community, orgy, limits, being-in-community
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Marquis de Sade’s _Philosophy in the Bedroom_1 tells the story of three wealthy libertines—Dolmancé, Madame de Saint-Ange, and Le Chevalier—who take in a young virgin girl named Eugénie, and in one day teach her all there is to know about libertinage. Dolmancé and Saint-Ange not only arouse Eugénie’s body with excessive sexual practices, but also stimulate her mind with their libertine philosophy. At the beginning of the book, Sade instructs his readers to study and imitate the characters of Dolmancé, Saint-Ange, and Eugénie, so I will treat their speech and action as his philosophy. Given the radical nature of the book—and all of Sade’s work for that matter—and its controversial, “immoral” subject matter, the novel has remained mostly in the margins of the fields of literature, philosophy, and theory. This article is, however, ultimately not about morality, but ontology.

Viewing the novel through the lens of “community” provides a pathway for new interpretation, meaning, and perhaps even ontological utility. _Philosophy in the Bedroom_ is an attempt at being-in-community as defined in Jean-Luc Nancy’s _The Inoperative Community_.2 For Nancy, true community is antithetical to all common conceptions of community; in fact, it occurs precisely in their disruption—it is in this sense that _Philosophy in the Bedroom_ can be read as a movement toward true community. Furthermore, Sade’s attempt at community is thwarted by his problematic understanding of nature. Sade’s essentialist idea of nature renders his endeavor what Nancy calls a “project” or a “work,” which precludes the possibility of true community. I _unwork_ Sade’s philosophy so that it may become a useful tool in guiding us toward being-in-community.

**Being-in-Community**

Jean-Luc Nancy’s conceptualization of community is an answer to a question that is not merely social or political, but is in fact ontological. Nancy seeks to understand not simply the social “community” as it is commonly understood, but rather our very being. Nancy’s “community” is a response to one of the most fundamental ontological questions—not “what are we?” but “how are we?” or “how do we be?” By explicating the notion of community as a

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shared exposure of our finitude and contingency, Nancy presents it as “an experience that makes us be.”

True community necessarily involves what Nancy calls “being-in-common” and stands in opposition to communion, which involves “common being.” While the former entails multiple beings that retain their singularity and exist together, the latter involves a fusion of beings into a single common substance or identity. This self-immanent “common being” has historically dominated the traditional Western notions of community, which Nancy critiques. These notions—which are found in all Western political thought, from communist to democratic to (most explicitly) dictatorial—assume an essence of community that unites all of its members into a oneness. Nancy argues, “the community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader…) necessarily loses the in of being-in-common. Or, it loses the with or the together that defines it.” This “unicity” occurs when a would-be-community is made into what Nancy calls a “work,” “project,” or “operation.”

Nancy offers gemeinschaft, the Nazi “community,” as an elucidatory example of the “work.” This is only the most explicit illustration of the kind of consequences that occur when a community is essentialized and made immanent, in this case under the determinative title, Aryan. Nancy stresses that “all our political programs imply this work: either as the product of the working community, or else the community itself as work.” According to Nancy, a “community” of immanence such as gemeinschaft can ultimately only be a work of death. Whereas the struggle for absolute self-immanence would intuitively only entail a death of the other, in this case the entire community itself must also be sacrificed:

…the logic of Nazi Germany was not only the extermination of the other…but also, effectively, the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the “Aryan” community who did not satisfy the criteria of pure immanence, so much so that—it being obviously impossible to set a limit on such criteria—the suicide of the German nation itself might have represented a plausible extrapolation of the process: moreover, it would not be false to say that this really took place, with regard to certain aspects of the spiritual reality of this nation.

Thus, gemeinschaft epitomizes the antithesis of Nancy’s true community and clearly demonstrates what is at stake in our thinking of community.

3 Nancy 26.
4 Nancy xxxix.
5 Nancy xxxix.
6 Nancy 12.
True community cannot be *created* by society—it is not a calculable project but is rather something that happens to us. “Community is made or is formed by the retreat or by the subtraction of something: this something, which would be the fulfilled infinite identity of community, is what [Nancy] call[s] its ‘work.’” True community happens in the disruption of the work, in the disturbance of the everyday order of our normative social and political projects. It is “the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional,” and it is “what happens to us...in the wake of society.”

When societal norms, traditions, customs, and rules are broken and restraints are shattered—this is the time and place of true community.

**Sadean Attempt at Community**

This last concept serves as a point of departure for reading Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* as an attempt at being-in-community. The general topics of Sade’s writing—sex, perversion, violence, blasphemy—certainly interrupt normalcy and burst out of everyday social constraints. In choosing to engage with Sade’s text, readers are themselves creating a rupture in conventional social boundaries. Moreover, the characters in *Philosophy in the Bedroom* exhibit a certain obsession with reaching and exceeding limits. In the very first lines of the book, Saint-Ange says, “I have discovered that when it is a question of someone like me, born for libertinage, it is useless to think of imposing limits or restraints upon oneself—impetuous desires immediately sweep them away.”

Limits play a critical role in true community; for Nancy, the exposure of our limits is an exposure to our finitude, and this exposure generates true community. Nancy argues that community cannot happen to individuals, for an individual is isolated and “closed off from all community,” nor can it happen to subjects, for a subject believes in its own infinite ego, and community is “resistance...to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity.”

Rather, community happens to what Nancy calls “singular beings” who exist only through their mutual exposure at their limits, to and for other singular beings. This shared exposure of the singular beings’ limits, an exposure to contingency, is finitude itself. “Finitude, or the lack of infinite identity...is what makes community.” Whereas a subject intrinsically believes its own ego to be infinite or unlimited, Nancy argues that the exposure of our limits, the recognition of our finitude, reveals the reality of our Being: being-in-community.

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7 Nancy xxxix.
8 Nancy 31, 11.
9 Sade 4.
10 Nancy 27, 35.
11 Nancy xxxviii.
In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, social norms and regulations represent one type of limit. The characters repeatedly refute every single moral or social rule, thus revealing the “moral” framework of the story. Sade completely devalues and rejects the following ideas: modesty, piety, empathy, virtue, morality, God, religion, the propagation of the human race, marriage, monogamy, family, love, and friendship; and he defends and advocates the following: adultery, queer sexuality, theft, incest, murder, parricide, infanticide, and rape. The characters’ defense for these claims all come back to one fundamental thing: Nature, an essential point I will return to in later sections. When the characters speak of “those inestimable joys that come of bursting socially imposed restraints and of the violation of every law,” this disruption is framed as part of their quest for pleasure; however, it is more than just that. I argue that the characters see these social limits as artificial, and they imagine that beyond these false limits are true or “natural” limits. In exceeding all “artificial” limits, the characters seek their “natural” limits—this search is their attempt at community.

The characters’ “natural” limits are manifested in the text in two manners: physically, as the limits of the human body (i.e., the skin), and conceptually, as the limits of the possible, or in Sade’s terminology, the limits of Nature itself. First, to examine the physical manifestation, I turn to the orgies that take place among the characters, which constitute the majority of the story’s action. The orgy is the site at which all attention is put on the limits, or ends, of the participating bodies, and these limits are explored and tested in countless ways. In the orgy, the limits of the body are pushed beyond just the skin-as-surface to include orifices and lacerations of the skin. In the violence and intercourse of the orgy, the “internal” is pushed into the “external” (sperm, blood, etc.) and the external into the internal (penetration).

The violence and sexuality in *Philosophy in the Bedroom* is never individual—no masturbation or self-mutilation occurs. All of the exploits that we witness occur in the presence of at least three people, and the vast majority of them physically involve all of the present characters simultaneously. No body part is sacred—the possibilities of what can be used as an orifice are fully explored: the mouth, hand, vagina, anus, breasts, armpit. The room in which the events take place is lined with mirrors so that “everything is visible, no part of the body can remain hidden: everything must be seen.” Here we begin to see the parallel between the physical exposure of bodily limits in the orgy and the mutual exposure of singular beings at their limits. This idea is further demonstrated in Sade’s language, as when Dolmancé gives Eugénie this instruction: “expose the most intimate parts of your body; require of your friends that they

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12 Sade 125.
13 Sade 16.
do the same.” The libertines show an obsession with nudity and the complete exposure of the body because the naked body indicates to them our natural—and therefore truest—limits.

Nancy’s community requires multiple singular beings, beings-in-common as opposed to common-beings, because it is at the very limits between them where they are mutually exposed to finitude, where they be-in-community. The origin of community “...is the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed.” Thus, true community happens when one feels or experiences one’s own limits against those of an other. “A singular being appears, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the same singularity that is, as such always other, always shared, always exposed.” This mutual tracing of limits certainly occurs throughout the orgies, as the bare skin of each character is constantly touching that of multiple others.

When true community happens, this exposure to the other and to one’s finitude, at one’s own ends, leads to a loss of ego, or subjectivity, and an experience of the other. Again, community cannot be experienced by subjects, “it is not the space of the egos,” but happens rather to singular beings, mutually contingent upon one another. In this ego-shattering experience, the possibility of the autonomous self is destroyed and replaced by a necessary dependence on other beings. At the ultimate limit of the orgy, the orgasm, the participants seem to experience such a “death of the subject,” or loss of ego. The characters express the desire to be “torn asunder” and, when reaching their climaxes, their language is that of total obliteration. Saint-Ange cries, “Good God, I’m dying...It’s done, finished, I cannot go on...You’ve ruined me, both of you,” and Eugénie proclaims, “he causes me to die” and “I am annihilated.” Along with this annihilation of the self comes the revealing of a dependence on the other. Eugénie exclaims, “I cannot bear it any more! oh, I’m dying! Don’t abandon me, dear friends, I am about to swoon...I am dead, exhausted.” And further, they exhibit a giving over of oneself, a self-abandonment for the other: “Oh, ‘twill kill me, I’m sure of it, ’tis inevita-

14 Sade 54.
15 Nancy 33.
16 Nancy 28.
17 Nancy 15.
18 Sade 6.
19 Sade 63, 48, 88.
20 Sade 19.
ble... Go on, penetrate, my dear. I abandon myself to you.”21 Nancy describes this annihilation or death of the subject into community:

The motif of the revelation, through death, of being-together or being-with, and of the crystallization of the community around death of its members, *that is to say around the “loss” (the impossibility) of their immanence*...leads to a space of thinking incommensurable with the problematics of sociality or intersubjectivity.22

Significantly, the annihilation of the characters is not self-inflicted suicide, but always in relation to an other, or multiple others, following Nancy’s statement: “Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place through others and for others.”23

This notion of the death of the other—in which a death is felt by beings and reveals their mutual contingency—stands in opposition to the death mentioned earlier, that of suicidal extermination towards immanence, as in gemeinschaft, in which the death of the other (Jews, etc.) is not experienced or felt at all (by the Nazis). Each character, despite their claims to the contrary, expresses great concern for the pleasure and orgasm, which is to say death, of the others. Considering the mutual exposure and touching of bodily limits, and the subsequent loss of subjectivity in relation with the other, the orgy can be understood as a physical manifestation of an attempt at being-in-community.

The characters also seek their “natural” limits conceptually, and in doing so they shatter all social and moral limitations so as not to be restricted in their quest. In effect, their implicit definition of Nature becomes, essentially, deviance or Evil. In their rejections of common (or Christian) morality, they constantly refer to animals, beasts, and the “savage” man. Dolemancé says, “Cruelty is stamped in animals, in whom, as I think I have said, Nature’s laws are more emphatically to be read than in ourselves; cruelty exists among savages, so much nearer to Nature than civilized men are.”24 In trying to define not only Nature, but *our* nature or human nature, the characters revert back to animality, dismissing civility and morality as trivial, man-made limitations. Consequently, “Nature” becomes the excuse for a lack of consciousness or empathy, which allows for Evil.

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21 Sade 86.
22 Nancy 14.
23 Nancy 15.
24 Sade 55.
Citing the continuous cycle of growth and destruction, of life and death, which occurs in Nature, Dolmancé defends the act of murder. Based on the idea that life comes out of death, he argues that the murderer simply “alters forms…gives back to Nature the elements whereof the hand of this skilled artisan instantly recreates other beings.”25 Further, he claims that the extermination of the entire human race would, “by returning to Nature the creative faculty she has entrusted to us, reinvigorate her…she would have again that energy we deprive her of by propagating our own selves.”26 Thus, the act of murder is not only defended, but advocated as giving “Nature a pleasure most agreeable.”27 All the other vices—theft, adultery, infanticide, rape—are similarly advocated because they exist in Nature, and are therefore in accord with “Nature’s mandates.”28 Thus Sade’s characters equate striving towards Evil with striving towards the “Natural.”

In the Sadean universe, the thorough conceptual exploration of all possibilities of deviance is a quest for the limits of Nature itself, for the limits of our Natural being. This idea is suggested in Dolmancé’s statement to Eugénie:

…everything libertinage suggests is also a natural inspiration; the most extraordinary, the most bizarre acts, those which most arrantly seem to conflict with every law, every human institution…well, Eugénie, even those are not frightful, and there is not one amongst them that cannot be demonstrated within the boundaries of Nature.29

Dolmancé specifies that although we can go against all the laws of man, we are ultimately confined within the “boundaries of Nature”—thus, the limits of Nature are our truest limits. Since human law (i.e., morality) restricts our behavior to what is Good, the characters seek what is Evil in order to escape our false limits and find our true limits. However, just as there is no accessing absolute Good, there is no way to attain the essence of absolute Evil, or of Nature, or further, of human Nature. This sentiment is apparent in Dolmancé’s language:

it is impossible for man to commit a crime; when Nature inculcated in him the irresistible desire to commit crime, she most prudently arranged to put beyond his reach those acts which could disturb the operations or conflict with her will.

25 Sade 43.
26 Sade 44.
27 Sade 43.
28 Sade 73.
29 Sade 72.
Ha, my friend, be sure that all the rest is entirely permitted, and that she has not been so idiotic as to give us the power of discomforting her or of disturbing her workings.\(^{30}\)

The unattainable condition of the essence of Evil or Nature leaves the characters reaching “toward the inconceivable,” and “beyond the possible” in search of their true limits.\(^{31}\)

Immanent Communion

Though Sade’s characters make an attempt at community, they are ultimately prevented from obtaining true community. I argue that the characters in fact make a project out of their community by employing a structure of immanence, corresponding to Nancy’s notion of immanent communion. Communion is a \textit{project} or \textit{work} of immanence—it is the denial of finitude through “fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed.”\(^{32}\) This fusion into an immanent unicity, into an infinite identity or Subject, involves a repression or sublation of difference or otherness, an erasure of limits between beings. “The subject cannot be outside itself: this is even what ultimately defines it—that its outside and all its ‘alienations’ or ‘extraneousness’ should in the end be suppressed and \textit{sublated} by it. It is altogether different with the being of communication.”\(^{33}\) This unification into a higher Subject involves an objectification of the other, an appropriation of alterity. This fusion into a single identity is appealing because it suppresses both the anxiety of finitude and the instability of contingent being. However, as finite creatures, our very Being is a being-finite, and therefore to deny our finitude is in a sense to \textit{not be}.

This immanence is manifested in \textit{Philosophy in the Bedroom} in two somewhat distinct manners: physically, in an enclosed spatio-temporal realm, and conceptually, in the characters’ assumption of a single identity or essence. Like many of Sade’s works, the physical setting of the story is a fixed realm within which the characters remain isolated from the outside world. The story takes place in the “delightful boudoir” of Saint-Ange’s estate.\(^{34}\) Although it is not specified, we can imagine from the descriptions of servants, gardens, and the fact that “one could slaughter a steer in this chamber without any risk of having his bellowings overheard,”

\(^{30}\) Sade 138.

\(^{31}\) Sade 41, 64.

\(^{32}\) Nancy xxxviii.

\(^{33}\) Nancy 24.

\(^{34}\) Sade 11.
that this estate is a private, isolated palatial manor.\textsuperscript{35} French literary critic Pierre Macherey offers an analysis of this spatial element in Sade’s \textit{One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom} that is equally relevant to \textit{Philosophy in the Bedroom}. The former novel sets up a “social utopia” that is isolated from real societies and their social and moral norms:

> Once all the bridges have been cut, the unchained—in every sense of the word—passions establish a new order...The requisite precondition for the enunciation of this law of desire is the total isolation that can be achieved within the limits of an inaccessible spot. Total isolation both provokes the explosion of the drives and contains their effusions, rather as though desire can be fully satisfied only if it is circumscribed within the closure of a pure “in-itself”... It is an inside with no outside, and one can neither leave it nor enter it, for the very idea of communication has been abolished, as has the idea of any exchange with that which escapes its order.\textsuperscript{36}

The language of immanence is unmistakable—the isolation and closure of an “inside with no outside,” “a pure ‘in-itself,’” are exactly the elements Nancy points out in communion. Moreover, the lack of exchange or communication with any alterity that Macherey refers to is precisely Nancy’s critique of the self-immanent unity that is “no longer exposed.”\textsuperscript{37} Sade’s choice of setting for \textit{Philosophy in the Bedroom} reflects the desire for a self-governed, non-contingent spatio-temporal realm reserved exclusively for libertinage.

The word \textit{exclusive} should be taken literally, for the limits of this realm are explicitly marked by the exclusion of Eugénie’s mother, Madame de Mistival, who comes to “save” Eugénie. Upon her unannounced arrival, Dolmancé threatens to “pitch [her] out of the window.”\textsuperscript{38} Even before her arrival, the libertines get a message from Eugénie’s father warning them of Mme de Mistival’s intentions to take Eugénie away, and they calculate how they will treat her, already precluding the possibility of true communication. They proceed to converse with her using either the utmost sarcasm and irony or gross vulgarity, both of which keep a distance or separation between her and them—their speech does not amount to communication.

\textsuperscript{35} Sade 136.
\textsuperscript{37} Nancy xxxviii.
\textsuperscript{38} Sade 132.
Before telling her to “get out” and sending her off the property, they physically treat her in such a way that an uninformed onlooker might even mistake her for one of them.\textsuperscript{39} They undress her, engage in various sexual acts with her, and use the same sex toys and weapons on her that they use on one another, although much more ruthlessly. Of course, she resists, but were she to “give in” and start to enjoy the proceedings—if she allowed herself to be assimilated—they would undoubtedly welcome her into their realm of libertinage. Their treatment of Mme de Mistival appears to be an attempt to absorb her into their realm, but, since she refuses to assimilate, they throw her off the property, eliminating difference within their realm of self-immanence.

Emmanuel Levinas explains this assimilatory posture in a critique of immanence that closely parallels Nancy’s.\textsuperscript{40} In Levinas’s view, all of Western thought has as its project the comprehension and absorption of alterity through knowledge. In this system of thought, every movement toward the other inevitably leads to a return to the self with an appropriation of the other—in this gesture the self retains and secures its own selfhood. Bringing the transcendental into immanence, and the other into the self, Western thinkers effectively totalize the world into a unicity. Levinas critiques this philosophical tradition, arguing that it renders impossible any authentic experience of the other. Nancy reflects an equivalent sentiment: “immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such.”\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, communication requires more than one being, and Nancy shares Levinas’s concern for the preservation of the other’s alterity. On the relation between singular beings, Nancy says, “We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside.... The like is not the same. I do not rediscover myself; nor do I recognize myself in the other: I experience the other’s alterity....”\textsuperscript{42} The preservation of the other, in its absolute otherness, is vital to experiencing and communicating with it. Yet Sade’s characters, in their project of immanence, deny alterity and create communion, preventing communication and true community.

In contrast to Mme de Mistival’s exclusion, from the beginning of the book Saint-Ange assimilates Eugénie into the libertine sphere. This inclusion is apparent not only physically—as she brings Eugénie into her home—but also conceptually. Just as the expulsion of Mme de Mistival emphasizes the self-containment of the libertine communion, so the integrative

\textsuperscript{39} Sade 143.


\textsuperscript{41} Nancy 12.

\textsuperscript{42} Nancy 33.
language of Saint-Ange suggests Nancy’s notion of the subject’s objectification of the other, as well as the Levinasian notions of subsumption and assimilation into immanence. Eugénie is certainly an “other” in many ways at the start of the book—she is a virgin who was raised “properly” by a strict, pious mother. When Le Chevalier inquires about Eugénie, Saint-Ange says, “I should in vain undertake to figure her to you; she is quite beyond my descriptive powers…satisfy yourself with the knowledge that assuredly neither you nor I have ever set eyes on anything so delicious, anywhere.” This declaration displays an objectifying posture and emphasizes the fact that Eugénie is an unknown other, soon to be assimilated into the known.

Moreover, Saint-Ange calls Eugénie “the sweet innocent I am luring into our nets,” and, when Dolmancé first tries to have sex with Eugénie, Saint-Ange stops him and says, “Eugénie belongs to me only,” but promises her to him as a reward after their lesson is finished. Saint-Ange’s consumptive, objectifying attitude, which marks their effort as a project of communion, is embodied in her exclamation, “Eugénie, let me kiss thee, let me eat thee! let me consume, batten upon thy fuck…” Saint-Ange’s language regarding Eugénie’s father is equally telling: “Her father is a libertine—I’ve enthralled him,” and “Have no fears. I have seduced the father…he’s mine. I must confess to you, I surrendered myself to him in order to close his eyes: he knows nothing of my designs, and will never dare to scan them…I have him.” Here, she again exemplifies Nancy’s communion; by having sex with Eugénie’s father, she brings him so close to herself that he is completely absorbed into her self-immanence—she consumes his otherness. This possessive act of absorption closes his eyes; the two of them become one so that he can no longer see her—communication is thwarted by unicity.

Nature in “Philosophy in the Bedroom”

While the physical setting of the book functions as a realm of immanence and Saint-Ange’s assimilatory attitude towards Eugénie further marks their endeavor as a project of communion, perhaps what most characterizes the libertines’ effort as a work is their unification into a single, essential identity. This identity is none other than “Nature,” the characters’ justification for and foundation of all their deviant activities. They look to animals and “savage” man for guidance on behavior that is “Natural,” which in turn determines their own “nature.”

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43 Sade 8.
44 Sade 7, 17.
45 Sade 71.
46 Sade 7, 8. Emphasis added.
They employ a markedly false logic in their understanding of nature, and underlying this mistake is an even more fundamental one: they assign to nature an essence, and in doing so effectively make a project out of their Natural endeavors, i.e., the orgy—their attempt at community.

Picking and choosing the occurrences in nature which go against societal values, the characters privilege, and even exclusively use, these ideas in their implicit definition of Nature. This skewed logic in which they decide what is Natural and what is not renders their idea of Nature anything but natural. It allows them to say things like, “The most natural thing in the world: I am going to depilate her and lacerate her thighs with pincers.” And further, this philosophy allows them to impose and regulate a hierarchy of value within Nature: “…never listen to your heart, my child; it is the most untrustworthy guide we have received from Nature.” Because Sade’s characters believe in a hierarchical spectrum of what is most “truly” natural even within their idea of Nature, inevitably there can be no identifiable or essential distinction between the natural and the unnatural.

Somewhat paradoxically, Nature is both deified and rationalized. Nature takes the place of God in the text—her workings are “sacred” and “…she alone, by reason of her energy, is able to create, produce, preserve, maintain, hold in equilibrium within the immense plains of space all the spheres that stand before our gaze.” And, because the pursuit of pleasure is the most Natural instinct humans have, the deification is quite literal when Dolmancé says to Eugénie, “abandon all your senses to pleasure, let it be the one object, the one god, of your existence; it is to this god a girl ought to sacrifice everything, and in her eyes, nothing must be as holy as pleasure.” Nature is apotheosized as the creator, maintainer, and essence of everything. Yet it is also heavily rationalized, as illustrated by the references to Nature’s “irresistible schemes,” “operations,” “mandates,” and “dictates.” This language evokes Nancy’s “work,” and we can apply his critique of the communion and its work to the operative project that the characters carry out under the name of Nature.

Indeed, “Nature” is not only deified, rationalized, and essentialized but also Subjectified; satisfying another criterion of Nancy’s communion, it is the “Subject of their fusion.” Saint-Ange speaks of Nature as of a deified Subject, using language of respect and loyalty: “...
let us be certain indeed that this species of disorders, to whatever extreme we carry them, far from outraging Nature, is but a sincere homage we render her; it is to obey her laws to cede to the desires she alone has placed in us; it is only in resisting her that we affront her.”

They must respect Nature by pursuing their own pleasure in deviance, and they must never offend her by denying themselves pleasure, for that would “conflict with her will.” The identities of the characters are fused into the larger Subject of Nature—their wills become her will—she determines their “nature” and bears the responsibility of their actions. Hence, Saint-Ange declares that Nature gives them their purpose: “…a woman…must never have for objective, occupation, or desire anything save to have herself fucked from morning to night: 'tis for this unique end Nature created her.”

Nature unifies the characters under a single identity, eliminating the “in” of being-in-common.

This previous quotation can now be read in a new, more telling light:

…in libertinage, nothing is frightful, because everything libertinage suggests is also a natural inspiration; the most extraordinary, the most bizarre acts, those which most arrantly seem to conflict with every law, every human institution…well, Eugénie, even those are not frightful, and there is not one amongst them that cannot be demonstrated within the boundaries of Nature.

These “boundaries of Nature,” which they seek as their own “true” limits, are in fact of their own invention, and they are neither true nor natural. This essentialized idea of Nature, which gives them their purpose, determines their will, and unifies their being(s), deprives each of them of their singularity and prevents them from experiencing one another’s alterity. Functioning as what Nancy calls the “fulfilled infinite identity of community,” it precludes, by making a work out of their “community,” the possibility of the characters exposing their true limits and experiencing their finitude.

The “working” or “operational” manner of the orgies is quite apparent in the language of the text itself. In fact, throughout the book the orgy is referred to as an “operation” three times and as a “project” three times. Rather than a chaotic free-for-all, every act in the Sadean orgy is carefully calculated and arranged before it takes place. As Saint-Ange says, “If you please, let us put a little order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of in-

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53 Sade 32.
54 Sade 138. Emphasis added.
55 Sade 31.
56 Sade 72.
57 Nancy xxxix.
Dolmancé plans each sexual operation to an excessive degree—he instructs the others on every detail of their physical positioning, the timing of every act, and the manner in which the acts are carried out.

**Multiple Texts within “Philosophy in the Bedroom”**

A fair question is how a group of people (or an author) who stringently oppose the ideas of morality, empathy, friendship, and love, and who promote theft, murder, and rape could possibly be trying to generate community. The answer is found within the multiplicity—or better yet, the duplicity—of texts that are available within the book. These multiple texts expose themselves through incongruities within the speech and action of the characters. To begin with, Dolmané verbally rejects one of the most fundamental rules of our morality: “Tis a very false tone you use when you speak to us of this Nature which you interpret as telling us not to do to others what we would not have done to us.” He goes on to explain that this guideline is totally absent from Nature and should therefore be absent from human behavior. But his actions say otherwise—when he is beating Eugénie’s mother he says, “Augustin... give me back the blows I am going to strike this stricken lady.” Dolmané literally has done to him what he is doing to another. Further, he says, “I ask but one favor of Eugénie: that she consent to be flogged as vigorously as I myself desire to be; you notice how well within natural law I am.” In absolute contradiction to his previous statement, he actually situates the “do unto others” code *within* Nature and embodies it in his actions.

In a similar example, Dolmané attempts to destabilize morality by explaining the impossibility of empathic relations:

...there is no possible comparison between what others experience and what we sense; the heaviest dose of agony in others ought, assuredly, to be as naught to us, and the faintest quickening of pleasure, registered in us, does touch us; therefore, we should, at whatever price, prefer this minor excitation which enchants us, to the immense sum of others’ miseries, which cannot affect us.

He claims that he cannot be influenced by others’ feelings because it is impossible to ever know what another person is experiencing; thus, he thinks empathy is an absurd idea. How-

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58 Sade 45.
59 Sade 55.
60 Sade 139.
61 Sade 77.
62 Sade 80.
ever, in explaining his sadistic tastes, Dolmancé inadvertently contradicts this very claim: “Pleasure’s effects, in women, are always uncertain; often disappointing... hence, pain must be preferred, for pain’s effects cannot deceive, and its vibrations are more powerful.”

While this instance does not display sympathy, it does show empathy—Dolmancé expresses his recognition of the feelings of an other with the statement, “pain’s effects cannot deceive.”

Nevertheless, Dolmancé insists that his quest for pleasure is entirely egoistic and that he does not care in the least for the pleasure of others: “’Tis false ... to say there is pleasure in affording pleasure to others; that is to serve them, and the man who is erect is far from desiring to be useful to anyone.”

However, during the orgies, Dolmancé again contradicts his own statement. He says, “...the major object, so it appears to me, is that I discharge the while giving this charming girl all possible pleasure,” and, “Do I frig you well, libertine?...Eugénie, discharge, my angel, yes discharge!” Not only does he express his acknowledgement of the others’ feelings, he actually wants to gives them pleasure. In fact, throughout the story Dolmancé repeatedly insists on the simultaneous orgasms of all the characters. He exclaims, “All of us, let’s discharge together!...I expire! Ah, in my life never have I come more voluptuously!” and, “Oh, my friends, let us not discharge but in unison: ‘tis life’s single pleasure!” In complete opposition to his previous claim, in this last line he successfully affirms the values of friendship, empathy, and kindness toward others. Dolmancé reveals that his greatest happiness actually requires not just the pleasure of others, but giving this pleasure to others.

Sade’s text provides an abundance of evidence suggesting this kind of selfless care for others. The characters constantly refer to one another using endearing terms such as “dear heart,” “my angel,” “my darling,” “my friend,” and “my love.” Their language continually affirms the very ideas of friendship and love that they claim to reject. Further, Dolmancé makes this particularly uncharacteristic statement in one of their discussions about excessive cruelty:

Such excesses, perfectly simple and very intelligible to me, doubtless, all the same ought never be committed amongst ourselves: “Wolves are safe in their own company,” as the proverb has it, and trivial though it may be, ‘tis true. My

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63 Sade 55.
64 Sade 126.
65 Sade 45, 85.
66 Sade 63, 71.
67 Sade 77, 78, 128, 127.
friends, dread nothing from me, ever: I’ll perhaps have you do much that is evil, but never will I do any to you.68

Dolmancé establishes friendship, safety, trust, and empathy—this certainly does not seem to be a “Natural” environment in the way Sade would have us understand it. Notably, by including only the characters present and excluding everyone in the outside world, Dolmancé produces and delimits a realm of safety and immanence. Those who are within this realm can be trusted, and in this space (and time) all things may be carried out without fear of reprehension, provided one is a libertine.

The characters’ pursuit of community in the orgy is undermined because they instead create a work. Recall that the immanence of the physical setting precludes the possibility of communication to any “outside”; the objectifying posture and assimilatory action of the characters, particularly of Saint-Ange, bring them into a unicity, preventing communication amongst themselves and removing the in of being-in-community. They essentialize and Subjectify “Nature,” allowing for the fusion of their wills into her “will,” and the fusion of their identities into “Nature” as a higher Subject. In the end, all these elements demonstrate that their attempt at community in the orgy is thwarted by their making a work of it, and this is further confirmed in the very language of the text itself. The Sadean orgy points towards being-in-community, yet it requires a fundamental refiguration if it is to become a useful ontological tool for experiencing true community.

Unworking the Sadean Communion

To realize a redemptive re-reading of Sade’s marginalized philosophy, it must be liberated from the determinatively essentialist context from which it comes. The philosophical subjects presented—sexuality, religion, morality, love—are perhaps the most sensitive topics in human life. Historically, these topics have been responsible for incredibly violent conflict, yet at the same time they are constitutive of the most intimate relations between people. In this sense, these philosophical subjects comprise much of what we would call our limits.

I posit that the issues that define our limits push people away from each other only when the limits are established and fixed in advance—in other words, when they are essentialized. When a limit is thus predetermined, it is impossible for it to meet another limit in any harmonious manner and can only result in it clashing with or rejecting other limits that it encounters. The only way an essentialized limit could possibly cohere with another would be if

68 Sade 49.
the two were identical—and since it is impossible for two distinct beings to have identical essences, their relationship would be one of self-to-self, immanence and unicity. Therefore, we cannot calculate and predetermine our limits—we do not determine them at all; rather, they must be discovered in relation to an other, when we are in community.

Rarely do philosophers thoroughly engage the sensitive topics taken up in Philosophy in the Bedroom because they are “personal,” i.e., they relate to “me” and not to anybody else. Thus the limits that relate to these topics can remain secure and fixed, not contingent upon others because they are not exposed. However, when these topics are genuinely explored between people, our true limits are exposed, and we experience the intimacy of being-in-community. Sade points us in this direction by pushing social and moral limits and searching for our most intimate limits. The general hesitancy to explore these topics, and our limits, is undoubtedly due to the necessary instability of the loss, or even just the suspension, of our subjectivity, our ego, our identity. This instability is the very contingency of our being that surfaces when we allow ourselves to be defined, or de-limited, by the limits between ourselves and another being. This is what it means to be-in-community: to allow our being to be entirely determined by our relation to an other, so that our limits are unmade and remade at each moment, never fixed and never complete. And if Nancy is right, this release of the self into the flux of contingency in the face of an Other is our very Being.

By reading Philosophy in the Bedroom as an attempt at being-in-community and revealing precisely the ways in which it fails, I have made it possible to mend Sade’s essentialist errors and rescue some of the philosophical content from its limited origins. Having seen the way in which immanent communion and essence in the text suppress the efforts towards genuine community, it is now possible to unwork and de-essentialize the text so that it is opened up to new interpretations and a path is cleared to give it new meaning. Without the false essence of nature as its foundation, it will be possible for much of the philosophy to take on quite different meanings, and hopefully, the limits of the text will be set in motion.
References


