The pre-Freudian modernisation of sexuality: Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll

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Sigmund Freud's general perspective on sexuality and that articulated in his *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* in particular should not be considered as a unique and revolutionary breakthrough, but as part of a broader development: the modernisation of sexuality. A new understanding of sexuality began to take shape in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, which in its turn, came about against the background of wider historical developments. The conceptual groundwork was laid by some psychiatrists, in particular Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) and Albert Moll (1862-1939). Their pioneering role has largely been forgotten, ignored or belittled, and their work has often been presented in a simplistic way. Therefore, I will stress the continuing historical relevance of their work.¹

Traditionally sexuality had been mainly understood in moral-religious and legal terms, either as virtuous or as sinful and criminal behaviour. The new psychiatric interest in sexuality was linked to forensic medicine that focused on criminal acts like rape, sodomy, and public indecency. Whereas physicians first argued that mental and nervous disorders resulted from improper sexual conduct, psychiatrists suggested that they were the *cause* of deviance. In many cases, they added, such behaviour should not be regarded as sinful or criminal, but as symptomatic of a pathology. From around 1870 onward, under the influence of evolutionary and degeneration theory, psychiatrists shifted the focus from immoral acts to an innate morbid condition and the personal characteristics of moral offenders, who should be treated as patients rather than punished as sinners or criminals. Collecting and publishing more and more case histories, they diagnosed, categorized, labelled, discussed and explained a wide range of perversions such as uranism, contrary sexual feeling, inversion, homo- and heterosexuality, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, paedophilia, sadism, and masochism. Against this background both Krafft-Ebing and Moll articulated a new perspective, not only on perversion, but also on sexuality in general. What was initiated by Krafft-Ebing in the mid-1880s and elaborated by Moll in the 1890s was a shift from a psychiatric approach in which deviant sexuality was explained as a derived and episodic symptom of a more fundamental mental disorder to a consideration of perversion as an integral part of an autonomous and continuous sexual instinct which deeply affected one's inner self and manifested itself in various forms.

As a professor at the universities of Graz (1872-1889) and Vienna (1889-1902) and working in many fields of psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing was one of the most prominent psychiatrists in Central Europe and a leading forensic expert. As one of the founding fathers of medical sexology he is remembered nowadays chiefly as the author of the bestselling *Psychopathia*

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¹ This article is an abbreviated version of: Oosterhuis, Harry (2012). Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll. *Medical History. A European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health*, 56/2, 133-155. On Krafft-Ebing see also: Oosterhuis, Harry (2000). *Stepchildren of Nature. Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press. On Moll see the articles in the special issue of *Medical History* (56/2), edited by Andreas-Holger Maehle and Lutz Sauerteig.

sexualis and other works on sexual pathology.² By naming and classifying virtually all non-procreative sexuality, he synthesized the new psychiatric knowledge about perversion.

Moll ran a private practice in Berlin as a neurologist and psychotherapist between 1887 and 1938, and he established himself as an expert in forensic psychiatry, therapeutic hypnosis and suggestion as well as medical ethics. In 1913 he founded the International Society for Sexual Research, and in 1926 he organised the International Congress for Sexology in Berlin. His main works on sexuality are *Die Conträre Sexualempfindung*; *Das Sexualleben des Kindes* and in particular *Untersuchungen über die Libido sexualis*. The last work offered the most comprehensive and sophisticated theory of sexuality before Freud published the first edition of his *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* in 1905 and Henry Havelock Ellis completed his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* in 1910. Moll, who also edited the *Handbuch der Sexualwissenschaften: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der kulturgeschichtlichen Beziehungen*, arrived at several insights about sexuality that would later be claimed by Freud and his followers to be their own discoveries.

Krafft-Ebing and Moll were in touch with each other and exchanged case histories and opinions. Whereas Krafft-Ebing's work was largely an empirical collection of clinical observations and case studies, and his explanatory comments were rather fragmentary, Moll elaborated many of Krafft-Ebing's thoughts and devised a more systematic theory. Both criticized the criminalisation of sexual deviance, in particular homosexuality. Both also showed some appreciation for Freud's early work. Krafft-Ebing, for example, actively supported Freud's application for a teaching-position at the University of Vienna. Nevertheless, both men also shared similar criticisms of Freud. Krafft-Ebing dismissed Freud's early seduction theory as 'a fairy-tale'. According to Moll, Freud distorted his case histories and his patient's dreams in order to make them fit his theories, which, in Moll's view, were strongly coloured by Freud's subjective preoccupations. The way Freud responded to Moll's criticism, by degrading Moll's personality and accomplishments, is certainly one of the less elevating episodes in the history of the psychoanalytic movement. For example, Freud's claim that he was the first to recognize the significance of infantile sexuality and his accusation that Moll had plagiarized him on this subject were groundless.

One of the reasons why psychoanalysis eventually overshadowed the contributions of Krafft-Ebing, Moll and others such as Iwan Bloch and Havelock Ellis was that Freud developed a comprehensive theory, established a therapeutic school, acquired dedicated followers, and organized a movement implying disciplinary mechanisms to maintain unity and orthodoxy.

² (1877). Ueber gewisse Anomalien des Geschlechtstriebs und die klinisch-forensische Verwerthung derselben als eines wahrscheinlich functionellen Degenerationszeichens des centralen Nervensystems. *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 7, 291-312; (1886); *Psychopathia sexualis. Eine klinisch-forensische Studie*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke; (1887-1903, 11 editions); *Psychopathia sexualis. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der conträren Sexualempfindung. Eine klinisch-forensische Studie*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke; (1890, 1891, 2 editions); *Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia sexualis. Eine medicinisch-psychologische Studie*. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke; (1901). Neue Studien auf dem Gebiete der Homosexualität. *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* 3, 1-36; (1901). Ueber sexuelle Perversionen. In E. von Leyden & F. Klemperer (eds.), *Die deutsche Klinik am Eingang des* 20. *Jahrhunderts in akademischen Vorlesungen* (Vol. 6, pp. 113-154) Berlin and Vienna: Urban und Schwarzenberg.

³ (1891, 1893, 1899). Die Conträre Sexualempfindung. Mit Benutzung amtlichen Materials. Berlin: Fischer's Medicinische Buchhandlung/H. Kornfeld; (1897-1898). Untersuchungen über die Libido sexualis. Berlin: Fischer's Medicinische Buchhandlung/H. Kornfeld; (1908, 1909). Das Sexualleben des Kindes. Leipzig: Verlag von F.C.W. Vogel; (1912, 1921, 1926); Handbuch der Sexualwissenschaften: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der kulturgeschichtlichen Beziehungen. Leipzig: Verlag von F.C.W. Vogel.

Krafft-Ebing did not develop a coherent theory which could be adopted by students or followers. Moll did to some extent and in the early twentieth century he was a leading medical expert on sexuality, but he was a self-willed and even obstinate character, who did not teach at the university and also lacked any other institutional framework through which to attract students or followers.

A significant similarity in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work is the prominent role of socalled 'perverts' as patients, correspondents and informants. Their work is full of case histories, which included many (auto)biographical accounts, letters and intimate confessions. Both Krafft-Ebing and Moll relied on the experiences and self-descriptions of their clients as an empirical basis for their considerations. By publishing and quoting from letters and autobiographical accounts, they enabled voices to be heard that were usually silenced. Because they argued against traditional condemnations of sexual deviance as sin and crime, individuals approached them in search of understanding and support. Many middle and upper-class men contacted them of their own accord as private patients or corresponded with them in order to explain themselves. In sharing their views in this way with Krafft-Ebing and Moll, these men were given ample opportunity to speak for themselves. Several clients took advantage of the psychiatric approach for their own purposes, to justify themselves, to develop a dialogue about their condition, and to criticize the condemnation of their sexual desires as criminal or pathological. It is striking that Krafft-Ebing and Moll did not force these views into the straitjacket of established medical explanations. As more and more clients came up with stories that did not smoothly fit the current moral and medical judgements, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's approaches increasingly fluctuated between the explanation of perversion in terms of pathology and the recognition of the diversity of sexuality. Like Freud's ongoing theoretical elaborations on sexuality, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's approach was far from univocal, but full of contradictions and ambiguities.

Against this background of interaction between Krafft-Ebing and Moll as experts on perversion and their articulate clients, the foundation was laid for a fundamental transformation of the definition and explanation of sexuality and of its meaning in human life. There are five outstanding features of sexual modernity that can be found in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, and that foreshadow Freud's approach. The first concerns the conceptualisation of sexuality as an inevitable and powerful natural force in human life. The second is the classification of perversions and their relation to 'normal' sexuality. The third relates to the psychological understanding of sexuality. The fourth centres on the close connection between sexuality and personal identity. And the fifth refers to the shift from the reproductive norm to the pleasure of sexuality as well as its the relational dimension. All five of these features imply that the modern experience of sexuality is permeated with ambiguities and problems. In the remainder of this article I will elaborate on these five features.

1. Sexuality as an inevitable, natural force

While transferring sexuality from the realm of sin and crime to the domain of health and illness, Krafft-Ebing and Moll made clear that the sexual instinct, as a powerful and compulsive force, was an essential part of human nature. This is the steam-engine or pressure-cooker model of the sexual drive: it is viewed as a continuous building up of psychophysical energy, as an irresistible inner pressure that relentlessly seeks release, whatever its object might be (another person, a body part, a fetishist object or a particular scenario).

Closely connected to this model is the Janus-face of sexuality as a highly complex force that is both wholesome and dangerous, and with which everybody has to come to terms. On the

one hand, they underlined the then current idea that the sexual urge posed a persistent threat to the moral and social order because of its barely controllable and sometimes explosive, destructive and bizarre nature. Worrisome, for instance, was Krafft-Ebing's claim that the sexual relation between man and woman was rooted in sadomasochism and evoked associations with rape, murder for lust, and even cannibalism.

On the other hand, Krafft-Ebing and Moll stressed that the fulfilment of sexual desire was significant for individual well-being, partnership and social bonds. In the descriptions of sexual activities, as they appeared in their case studies, the prevalent reproductive norm was pushed into the background. Such an approach was rather new. Already before Freud, Krafft-Ebing and Moll questioned the biological-functionalist approach to sexuality that had its roots in age-old teleological (Aristotelian) as well as modern evolutionary (Darwinian) thinking. As far as sexual behaviour had an aim at all, it was physical pleasure as well as mental satisfaction. It was also seen to contribute to the forging of relationships. Such a viewpoint foreshadowed modern sexual enthusiasm, the idea that every individual has a right, and perhaps even an obligation to sexual fulfilment, which, together with ideals of partnership, is an essential part of what we view as personal happiness. Krafft-Ebing and Moll also acknowledged that sexual abstinence and dissatisfaction could be harmful to health and well-being. Thus, they anticipated the dilemma which Freud elaborated in *Das Unbehagen an der Kultur*: that sexual restraint, considered as an essential precondition for civilisation, at the same time may be unhealthy repression and lead to nervous and mental distress.

2. The classification of perversions and their relation to 'normal' sexuality

The second feature of sexual modernism concerns how the definition and classification of perversions undermined the differentiation between the normal and the abnormal. Several taxonomies of sexual deviance were developed in late nineteenth century psychiatry, but the one devised by Krafft-Ebing and adopted by Moll eventually set the tone in medical circles as well as in common sense thinking. Although they paid attention to a wide array of aberrations deviance, they distinguished four main perversions. The first was contrary sexual feeling, that is various physical and psychological fusions of masculinity and femininity including what we now define as homo- and bisexuality, androgyny, transvestism and trans-sexuality. The second was fetishism, the erotic obsession with certain body-parts, objects or scenarios. The third and fourth were sadism and masochism, terms actually coined by Krafft-Ebing. Some of Krafft-Ebing's neologisms are still current today. These include not only sadism and masochism, but also paedophilia. The terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, which had been introduced in 1869, but were not frequently used during the late nineteenth century, were reintroduced by both Krafft-Ebing and Moll around 1890.

A striking feature of their extensive discussion of these perversions was a shift away from their classification within clear boundaries to an understanding of 'normal' sexuality in the context of deviance and vice versa. They foreshadowed the Freudian notion that the 'libido' consisted of 'component drives' and that a fixed sexual orientation was shaped in developmental stages through specific, either regular or irregular, conversions of various impulses. Krafft-Ebing explained, for example, that sadism and masochism were inherent in normal male and female sexuality, the former being of an active and aggressive and the latter of a passive and submissive nature. Fetishism was also part and parcel of normal sexuality, Krafft-Ebing and Moll argued, because individual taste in sexual attraction and, connected to that, monogamous love were grounded in a distinct preference for particular physical and mental

characteristics of one's partner. In addition, their extensive discussion of several forms of gender inversion highlighted the gradual and chance character of sex differentiation and the presumed concomitant bipolar sexual orientations. Exclusive masculinity and femininity and the commonly associated exclusive heterosexual orientations appeared to be mere abstract generalisations. In this way their approach began to vacillate between the labelling of perversion as pathology and the recognition of the great diversity of desires.

Another striking feature of their work was the highlighting of hetero- and homosexuality as the basic sexual categories. This was closely connected to their shift in perspective from the traditional distinction between procreative and non-procreative acts to the relational dimension of sexuality. Krafft-Ebing's use of the term heterosexual, meaning sexual attraction between a male and a female free from a reproductive goal - and as such initially considered as a perversion – prepared the ground for viewing hetero- and homosexuality as equivalents and identifying other perversions as derived sub-variations of this more fundamental division. This view was shared by Moll. In this way they anticipated a feature of modern sexuality: in the modern sexual configuration it is the gender of one's sexual partner – the other (hetero), the same (homo) or both (bi) – that predominates rather than more specific preferences for other characteristics of one's sexual partner or for certain objects, activities and scenarios. The late nineteenth century French psychologist Alfred Binet, for example, considered fetishism as the fundamental perversion that included all the aberrations by which sexual desire had fixed itself on the 'wrong', that is non-reproductive, goal. If such a fetishist framework for understanding sexual diversity were to have set the tone, our perception and experience of sexuality would be different from what it is nowadays.

3. The psychological understanding of sexuality

Another crucial feature of sexual modernisation was the eclipse of the dominant naturalist approach by a more psychological one. Before the late nineteenth century the usage of the term sexual predominantly concerned the typical characteristics of the body and the behaviour of males and females. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the term begin to be used to indicate a more intricate complex of physical features, behaviours, desires and passions. This new meaning was advanced by the shift in psychiatry in the late nineteenth century from a biomedical perspective that stressed underlying physical processes to one that viewed perversions as functional disorders of an instinct that could not be reduced to the body. Increasing attention focused on the mental aspects of what was now called sexuality.

Although both Krafft-Ebing and Moll speculated about the location of the sexual drive in the nervous system and brain and situated the underlying causes of perversion in heredity and degeneration, such speculations were of little relevance for their interaction with clients. The biomedical perspective receded into the background, and this was largely as a consequence of the prominent position they gave to case histories and the voices of their clients. It was not so much the body or behaviour as such that were crucial in the diagnosis of perversion, but the personal history, thoughts, feelings, perception, desires, imagination, fantasies, and dreams of their clients. Sexual desire was increasingly located in a psychological disposition that was at least partly shaped by the social and cultural environment, by sensorial and mental stimuli, memories, storytelling, habits and cultural trends. It was particularly Moll who would in this way foreshadow Freud's understanding of sexuality, which is conceived not as a natural given, but as something that is shaped by mental processes that mediate erratic biological drives, the possibilities of the body, on the one hand and cultural prerequisites on the other. This way of

thinking advanced the idea that sexual desires are based on a memory trace in the form of mental images of past experiences of satisfaction, which give rise to phantasy and are mediated by signs and language. It is the mental processes that lie behind outward appearance and behaviour that are vital for the determination of sexual orientation, and these processes are partly, in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's own words, 'unconscious' or 'latent'. A hermeneutic epistemology of depth became the way to make sense of sexuality: the visible surface of the body and behaviour were viewed as signs of something deeply hidden and more essential, the individual subject's interior or 'true self'. Sexual expressions, whether physical, mental or linguistic, were to be subjected to endless psychological interpretation - of which Freud's theory is, of course, the outstanding example.

In Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, sexuality thus emerged as a complex of reflexes, bodily sensations, behaviours, experiences and mental processes in which the physical and psychological dimensions interacted with each other. As such, sexuality has indeed become a meaningful and sensitive experience for modern man, entailing an array of emotional problems, such as anxious self-scrutiny, fears of being abnormal, worries about sexual attractiveness and achievement, and conflicts between both personal desires and social roles, and fantasies and mundane realities. Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's autobiographical case histories demonstrated that sexuality had become the subject of ceaseless and detailed self-analysis. On the one hand, self-reflection had a redeeming effect since it enabled self-awareness, self-expression and, later, sexual emancipation. On the other hand, endless brooding more often than not implied uncertainty, uneasiness, inner struggle and frustration.

4. The close connection between sexuality and personal identity

Closely related to the psychological dimension of sexuality is its strong link to personal identity. Late nineteenth century psychiatry shifted the focus from a notion of sexual deviance as a passing divergence from the norm to a notion of it as a continuous and essential feature of one's inner being. The psychiatric discourse and the case history method in particular, reflected as well as shaped the experience of sexuality as the quintessence of the individual self. Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's perspective offered a public forum to individuals concerned with articulating their sexual desires and experiences in the form of a personal, autobiographical narrative. Many of them appealed to ideals of authenticity and sincerity to comprehend and justify themselves, and to give coherence to their troubled selves. The shape as well as the contents of the psychiatric case history and the sexual autobiography overlapped. Both are patterned and selective narrative reconstructions of past life of the individual from the perspective of the (often troubled) present. Both facilitate the belief that sexual desire and behaviour express something deep and fixed from within the inner self. This presupposition is of course not real in an ontological sense but is just a way to make sense of sexuality. It has become part of our common-sense perception and, as such, it is still a widespread cultural reality in the Western world. Although scholars working in the wake of Michel Foucault's path-breaking work on the history of sexuality have repeatedly criticised the notion that sexual identity is fixed in the self and have emphasised that it is instead a social-historical fabrication, in our society it is very much experienced as though it were an essence that is already there, waiting to be discovered, explored, understood, expressed, liberated and emancipated. Sexologists, psychotherapists, self-help guides, emancipation movements, the mass media and popular psychobabble have only intensified the preoccupation with sexuality as a focal point of the authentic self, personal awareness, and self-actualisation.

As narrative scripts on which individuals could model their life history, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's case histories also linked individual introspection and social identification. Their cases reflected and also promoted the emergence of a new experience of sexuality that was closely bound up with the appearance of new kinds of individuals and their grouping into subcultural communities, about which several of their clients, especially homosexuals, gave testimony. They not only voiced the comfort of togetherness, but some of them also expressed a critical awareness of the social suppression of their sexuality, and thus the seeds of emancipation were sown.

5. From the procreative norm to the pleasure and relational dimension of sexuality

The move in psychiatry from a forensic and biomedical focus to sexual psychology entailed that sexuality was increasingly detached from reproduction and that the satisfaction of desire came to the fore. From this it was only a small step to the Freudian conceptualisation of the 'libido' and 'pleasure principle', in which desire's only built-in aim is its own satisfaction. In Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, in their case histories in particular, the sexual impulse already began to appear as a pleasure wish that yearned neither for reproduction nor for intercourse per se, but only for fulfilment, that is the release of tension through orgasm. This is in line with the steam-engine or pressure-cooker model of the sexual drive.

However, Krafft-Ebing and Moll did not conceive of sexuality merely in terms of the pursuit of physical pleasure. Just like Freud, they did not follow the potentially radical consequences of their insights any further. Instead, they suggested a new aim of sexuality by replacing negative attitudes towards non-procreative sexuality for a positive evaluation of its relational dimension. The affective longing for physical and psychological union with a partner, the ideal of romantic love, appeared as a purpose in itself. Both love without sex and sexual pleasure without affection, tenderness and attachment were considered to be incomplete. By stressing that the fulfilment of sexual desire played an important binding role for loving relationships, Krafft-Ebing and Moll seemed to tame the dangerous potential of the sexual drive. They anticipated the increasing sexualisation of love and marriage in the twentieth century as well as a more accepting attitude towards homosexuality insofar as it was adapted to the relational norm – an attitude which has in recent years taken shape of the legalisation of gay marriage all over the Western world.

It was precisely Krafft-Ebing's appreciation of the relational potential of sexuality that contributed to his changed view of homosexuality as an equivalent of heterosexuality rather than as a pathology – a view which Moll then largely adopted. Many homosexuals who expressed themselves in their case histories made clear that partnership was as important to them as sexual gratification. Moll stressed that the manner in which they experienced sexual passions and also love was in no way different from the experiences of heterosexuals in this regard. The prominent position they gave to hetero- and homosexuality as the fundamental sexual categories underlined the shift from a biological-functionalist conception of the sexual impulse as a reproductive instinct towards a view that emphasized erotic desire and pleasure in the context of affection, relationships and personal fulfilment. In this respect, homosexuality appeared to be fundamentally different from other perversions, such as fetishism, masochism and sadism, and paedophilia. In contrast to homosexuality, it was difficult to gear these perversions to relational values such as intimacy, privacy, equality, reciprocity, and psychological rapprochement. These values also imply that sexuality was burdened with all the psychological complexities of love

relationships and the other way around. The marriage between lust and love, involving very different and sometimes contradictory needs and emotions, is not always a stable and happy one.

The social context of the modernisation of sexuality

The modern sexual configuration replaced some basic traditional patterns of sexuality. In traditional, collectively and hierarchically organised society, sexuality was largely embedded in a fixed moral order. As a function of social and moral behaviour, it had no distinct existence, but was rather instrumentally imbedded in marriage, kinship, fixed gender roles, social status and economic concerns. Sexual morality was dominated by a reproductive imperative: the crucial differentiation was between legitimate procreative sex within marriage and immoral acts that interfered with it, such as adultery, sodomy or masturbation. Moreover, since in traditional societies most people were not individuals in the modern sense, personal sentiment and attraction were subordinated to the calculus of economic security and familial and social interests in choosing a partner.

The psychiatric understanding of perversion, as articulated by Krafft-Ebing, Moll and also Freud, indicated that in the modern Western world sexuality dissociated itself from its near total dependence on and adaptation to other social requirements. It began to generate its own meanings as a distinct impulse with its particular psychological mechanisms, which became associated with profound and complex human emotions and anxieties. Framing the experience of sexuality as psychologically significant entails that it was also individualized and internalized: people were made to believe that the game was not so much in the outside world, in human relations and socio-cultural patterns, but foremost in the inner self. Such developments come not only from psychiatric (or psychoanalytic) thinking itself. First, the modernist – that is the overwhelmingly psychological – interpretation relied to large extent on the self-observations of laypersons who interacted with psychiatry and who were able and often very willing to share their sexual life-stories with medical and psychological experts such as Krafft-Ebing, Moll and Freud. Both parties were agents of culture at large, or at least bourgeois culture; to this day the dominant Western perspective of sexuality is largely determined by middle class values. Second, the modern experience of sexuality was rooted in more general and longer-term social and cultural developments, such as the rise of the nuclear family and romantic love; individualisation, psychological self-understanding and autobiographical self-analysis in bourgeois circles; social democratisation, social and geographical mobility, urbanisation, growing affluence and the promotion of and quest for enjoyment in consumer capitalism. Such social and cultural trends advanced the emergence of sexuality as a separate and largely internalized sphere in human life. Only at that point was it feasible to define it as a distinct impulse located in the inner self, and to explore its operation in psychological terms. And only at that point did it become possible to liberate and emancipate sexuality, as the precious core of the self, from what people had increasingly begun to experience as its social suppression.