KNOWING THYSELF ... IN PRIVATE: 
MASTURBATION AND PHILOSOPHY

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Karl Marx once compared philosophy to masturbation, essentially seeing both as privative, idealistic, and impractical activities. Indeed, many lay folk see philosophers as “wankers.” While the present state of universities does throw doubt on the liberatory character of contemporary philosophy, Marx’s jibe nonetheless mischaracterizes masturbation. This paper is a brief attempt to correct Marx’s characterization of masturbation by drawing on the work of a thinker often associated with “intellectual onanism”: Martin Heidegger. Speaking ontologically, Heidegger’s theories can be developed to show that masturbation is not privative, but “stretched” in time and place. Moreover, masturbation plays a practical role in the creative development of the self, including the self’s essential bodiliness. While not necessarily defending philosophy against Marx’s charges, this paper does show how even so-called “onanistic” philosophy might be redeemed.

“Only a being which, like man, ‘has’ the word ... 
can and must ‘have’ ‘the hand’”
—Martin Heidegger

“I have a dangerously supple wrist.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction: Marx Contra Masturbation

In The German Ideology, Marx writes that “[p]hilosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another ...

as masturbation and sexual love." When I mention this to non-
philosophers—lay and academic—it is often met with a nod and a
knowing laugh. For those outside our tradition of "footnotes to
Plato," this statement apparently contains a grain of truth. In Marx,
we have an eminent philosopher confirming this truism: philoso-
phers are "wankers."

Certainly, there is a sense in which Marx is playing on this com-
monplace slight, and no doubt relishing the rhetorical impact. How-
ever, Marx is not arguing that philosophy is masturbation, but rather
that the relationship between philosophy and reality is analogous
to that between sex and masturbation. As part of his polemical at-
tack on the Young Hegelians, this statement expresses Marx's
pronomatization of abstract idealism—embodied and theoretical—
in German radical philosophy. While thinkers such as Feuerbach
developed humanistic conceptualizations of liberatory religion and
history, their political contributions—for Marx, at least—remained
merely academic critiques of other intellectuals' abstractions. As
McLellan puts it, "Marx's general criticism of Feuerbach was that
Feuerbach's doctrines were purely 'contemplative' ... and gave no
guide to action." Similarly, Max Stirner—the immediate object of
Marx's jibe—was presented as a bumbling theoretician, unable to
join the proletariat except by abjuring thought altogether. Rather
than dealing with the material conditions of social life, the charge is
that these idealists merely dealt with the derivative abstractions en-
gendered in thinkers by the productive base. In doing so, these
men merely perpetuated the prejudices of philosophy per se. In
Marx's famous words from Theses on Feuerbach, "philosophers
have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to
change it." This "interpretation" is apparently akin to masturba-
tion.

We should admit that these observations are often unproblematic
when applied to contemporary academia. If we recognize that much
philosophizing occurs in the context of universities, philosophy loses
any prima facie gloss of liberatory praxis. Many universities seem
to be enframed by a logic of commodification and egoistic indi-
vidualism antithetical to political praxis. Australian higher educa-
tion, for example, has involved more administration and control,