



Postscript ON Subjectivity, Eros AND Pedagogy

In his so-called final ethical phase, Foucault moves ‘back to the subject,’ to the ethics of self-formation considered as an ascetic practice. Foucault argues that ‘work’ done on the self is not to be understood in terms of traditional left-wing models of liberation but rather as (Kantian) practices of freedom, for there is no essential, hidden, or true self, for Foucault, ‘concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression’ that is in need of liberation but only a *hermeneutics of the self*, a set of practices of self-interpretation. He emphasizes that freedom is the ontological condition for ethics and, in his works on the history of sexuality, he returns to the Stoics to entertain the notion of ‘care for the self,’ which has priority over and develops earlier than ‘care for others.’ Recently there has appeared a number of works focusing on the ‘late’ Foucault and his purported ‘return to the subject’ and to the ethical self-constitution of political subjects, yet this ‘turn’ can be seen as continuing a number of prescient themes in Foucault’s thinking. To be sure Foucault is no longer concerned with ‘the death of Man’ so much as the ethical self-constitution of political subjects, and it seems that criticisms of his ‘pessimism’ to do with questions of agency no longer apply especially when the emphasis falls on self constitution under ethical liberalism and even with questions of freedom and human rights. Increasingly, it seems that Foucault’s project revolves around the philosophy of the subject centering on the political technology of the body and the formation of the political subject. We will not pronounce here on whether there is an essential continuity in Foucault’s thought or how to relate his ‘late’ ethics to his earlier

work on normalizing power, except to say that we believe that there is a strong account of the self in relation to *practices* and thus to *culture* that emphasizes both active and passive elements of the shaping of subjectivity—both self-constitution and cultural/discursive shaping of individuals as two aspects of the making of subjects.

Sebastian Harrer (2005, p. 76) argues convincingly for such an interpretation against the view that holds

that at some point in his oeuvre, Foucault turned away from analysing the power/knowledge mechanisms that fabricate subjects, and turned to analysing how subjects constitute themselves. This view sometimes implies the idea that these notions, ‘constitution’ and ‘fabrication,’ refer to two distinct phenomena.

Harrer, in his investigations of ‘The Theme of Subjectivity in Foucault’s Lecture Series *L’Herméneutique du Sujet*,’ instead of a ‘return of the subject’ advocates a ‘conceptual continuity traversing the whole of Foucault’s oeuvre, rather than a rupture that separates the “early” from the “late” Foucault’ (p. 76). Harrer assembles a range of internal evidence including Foucault’s own recollections and interviews where he addresses his project as ‘a history of the subject’ (rather than a turn to ethics) and also develops a conceptual argument to support his interpretation, turning in particular to Foucault’s *L’Herméneutique du Sujet*.

What is interesting for our purposes is the way in which Harrer makes central to his interpretation Foucault’s account of subjectivity the notion of ‘spiritual guidance’ that is Foucault’s concept for the ancient teacher–student relationship. ‘Spiritual guidance,’ Harrer claims, occupies the same position as ‘surveillance’ in Foucault’s early work. Harrer finds a Nietzschean conception of power as the common denominator that links Foucault’s earlier works on normalizing power and later works on ethical self-constitution. As he says:

A subject arises through various modes of ‘subjectivation,’ some of them through normalizing power mechanisms, others through technologies or practices of the self (*pratiques de soi*). But the subject really is and remains only a ‘hollow gap’ in the field of power relations (p. 81).

He goes on to explain the significance of this position by suggesting

The process of self-constitution is situated in a field of forces and starts out through a relationship to others, which in turn aims at producing a relation to self (*rappor à soi*). This is achieved by way of certain ascetic technologies of the self, which one practices first under supervision of a master. This relationship is then replicated inside the subject, who will eventually take a ‘transcendental position’ towards him- or herself (p.83).

He then focuses on 'dietetics' and 'spiritual guidance' as ascetic practices in Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' used for the goal of ethical self-constitution.

Harrer reminds us that 'spiritual guidance' is the basis of Foucault's investigation of education in ancient schools of philosophy where the master did not teach a body of knowledge but rather participated in the development of a certain relation to self with his student, teaching his student to care for himself through engagement in ascetic practices of listening, reading, writing and speaking that establishes certain practices of self-discipline. Harrer's (2005) account is useful and informative although it does also miss something historically important in both Foucault and what we might call 'pederastic education' in the ancient schools of philosophy (briefly mentioned in chapter 3): the relationship of 'spiritual guidance' was between master and student was modelled on a form of pederasty, idealized by the Greeks in terms of a relationship and bond between an adolescent boy and an adult male. It became the basis for an aristocratic institution of education considered in moral terms—a form of homoeroticism closely connected with Greek ideals of athleticism and nudity. As part of philosophy, pederastic relationships often took a chaste form emphasizing the balance between desire and self-control. The *erastes-eromenos* relationship (Greek terms for 'lover' and 'beloved') constituted a complex moral system fundamental to ancient Greek society and to education, often forming a legal relationship of guardianship consecrated by a religious ceremony and requiring the consent of the boy's father. The relationship, mentioned uncritically by Plato in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, had strong educational purposes associated with introducing the youth into adult society by assuming certain citizen responsibilities and obligations. To this extent it was inseparable from the activities of the gymnasium, from pedagogy and from military training (see Percy, 1996).

We have to be careful to supplement our philosophical analyses with accurate historical accounts and to be wary of wanting to generalize investigations from one era to another to create universal necessities of human nature. This too is a message from Foucault.

The significance of Foucault's thought in relation to education is that he provides theoretical and methodological means to study the field of education part of the emergent human sciences, focusing the conditions under which subjects are constituted objects of knowledge and constitute themselves as subjects. Educationalists are only at the beginning of exploring the relevance and promise of Foucault's thought to their own field.

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