

Review Essay

Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg

Michel Foucault: *On the Government of the Living*. Trans. Graham Burchell. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. xviii, 365.)

It has been widely claimed that Foucault's 1980 lecture course at the Collège de France, *On the Government of the Living* (*GL*), constituted an important turning point in his thinking. That course would begin a series of lecture courses at the Collège that would end in March 1984, just before his death, all devoted to core issues arising in Hellenistic philosophy and Christian theology. While Christian practices of penance and confession are a focus of *GL*, as Mark Jordan has claimed, throughout what has been termed his "Greco-Roman" trip Foucault always emphasized "the historical importance of pastoral power for *modern* subjectivity."¹ There is, then, a definite link between what is often described as the "final Foucault," with his interest in Patristic Christianity and its own governmental practices, on one hand, and, on the other, the broader question of "government," both of the self and of others, as well as the historical modes of *subject* formation, all concerns that characterized the whole of Foucault's oeuvre. Indeed, as Foucault says in his conclusion to *GL*, the obligation "to tell the truth about oneself" has shaped not just Christianity, but Western modernity too; indeed "the whole social system to which we belong" (312).

Foucault's interest in Christian theology, particularly the theology of the Patristic period, which was the focus of *GL*, and especially its penitential practices, including baptism, penance, and confession, was directly linked to his long-standing interest in how human beings are *governed*: both how they are governed politically through power/knowledge and how they might govern themselves. The government of the living, then, is concerned with both the different modes of subjectification or subjection (*assujettissement*), which produce them as subjects on the basis of power relations, and the prospects for new and different modes of subjectivity in which, through practices of freedom, power can become what, as Judith Butler has claimed, "the subject effects."² Foucault's concern with subjectivity in this latter sense, then, is what led him in the last several years of his life to concern himself

¹Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 122, our emphasis.

²Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13.

with ethics, parrhesia (truth telling), *askesis*, how not to be governed as we have been, and especially how to fashion a novel and unique self. Ethics, for Foucault, was not about knowledge of some ahistorical “self,” and the rules to which one must subscribe in relations with others, not a code or rule book, but rather an *ethos*, a way of living composed of a set of practices, self-relations and relations to others. Parrhesia is integral to a diagnosis of what or who one is; telling the truth about one’s self is therefore entailed by any project of transforming one’s self, which also demanded a constant work upon one’s self—what Foucault designated *askesis* or arts of existence.

Foucault’s preoccupations here can be seen in other lectures that he gave in the same period. Thus in the fragment first published as “What Is Enlightenment?” he asserted that enlightenment constitutes an escape from our state of “immaturity,” a state where we “accept someone else’s authority.”³ Enlightenment, then, is “the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority.”⁴ Instead, it is the moment when the person “tries to invent himself.”⁵ What Foucault calls here “the critical ontology of ourselves” must be “conceived as an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is... the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and the experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”⁶ It is precisely those concerns, we believe, that underlie and animate *GL*.

What, then, is Foucault actually doing in *GL*? Foucault’s aims here may have been *misunderstood*. In his review of another lecture course from the same period, Jonathan Rée points out that Foucault “has been reproached for failing to establish plausible positive versions of what the past was really like, but his histories were always meant to be suggestive rather than substantive.”⁷ It seems to us that Foucault’s lecture courses at the Collège from 1980 to 1984 constituted a confirmation of his concern, when he assumed his chair, to distinguish between the history of *ideas*, or of social and cultural history, and the history of *thought*, the latter being the term for the lecture courses that he would give. For Foucault, the history of ideas focuses on precisely how ideas, beliefs, concepts were understood and experienced in their own time; how, for example, a Greek of the fifth century BC understood the “good.” While certainly not dismissing the legitimacy of a history of ideas, it was the history of thought that Foucault was engaged in.

³Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 105.

⁴*Ibid.*, 111.

⁵*Ibid.*, 118.

⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

⁷Jonathan Rée, “Foucault Put to the Question,” *Times Literary Supplement*, December 3, 2014. Rée was reviewing Foucault’s 1981 Louvain lectures, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

That history focused on what he termed *problematizations*: how a field of experience, a set of practices, hitherto accepted, indeed taken for granted, in a given culture or historical epoch, “becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions.”⁸ Here was history as Foucault chose to engage in it.

The above framework, then, needs to be seen as integral to what Foucault has designated the “history of the present,” and in that sense too, *GL* marks the beginning of an important new phase in his thinking, what is often described as the “final Foucault,” though we believe that this very term should *not* be taken as indicative of some conclusion to his oeuvre, a culmination to which his work had logically or necessarily led, but simply as the point that Foucault had reached in his intellectual trajectory before death cut it short. Whatever other paths Foucault might have taken, *GL* and the lecture courses that succeeded it confront us with the question of the relation of Christian theology in the Patristic period to government in the modern, Western, secular world, and to the government of human beings today. As Foucault was to try to show, those penitential practices with which *GL* was concerned rested on what he described as “government through truth,” which today in a secular world, in modernity, still remains—albeit in different forms and modes—a fundamental element in modern *assujettissement*, subjectification, and therefore constitutes even now a formidable obstacle to the kind of project to which Foucault himself was devoted: the project of fashioning a novel and unique self, and the freedom that would be its veritable basis.

Before addressing the complex of issues surrounding Christian theology and penitential practices in the Patristic period, it is important to focus on *how* that theology and those very practices, what Foucault designated pastoral power, have continued to have a profound impact on *modern* subjectivity in the West. Indeed, as Foucault said in his conclusion to *GL*, the obligation to tell the truth about oneself has shaped not just Christianity but the whole trajectory of Western modernity down to the present time:

The Christian has the truth deep within himself and he is yoked to this deep secret, indefinitely bent over it and indefinitely constrained to show to the other the treasure that his work, thought, attention, conscience, and discourse ceaselessly draw out from it. And by this he shows that putting his own truth into discourse is not just an essential obligation; it is one of the basic forms of our obedience. (312–13)

While the specific forms and techniques of truth telling have changed from Tertullian to Freud, that obligation to disclose the truth about oneself, and its implication for how we are governed, how we are subjectified (*assujetti*), is no less powerful in the twenty-first century than in the second. Telling

⁸Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 74.

the truth about ourselves is a key modality of the way in which we have historically come to understand ourselves: to know our self we need to tell our secrets, to expose who we are. It is through our telling the truth about ourselves to another, to *power*, that those who rule can govern us. As Foucault forcefully claims: "This institutionalization of truth/subjectivity relationships through the obligation to tell the truth about oneself, the organization of this linkage cannot be conceived without the existence and functioning of a form of power" (312). And yet that same truth telling can permit us to govern our self. Care of self too, in the West, rests on the belief that only by *knowing* the self can one care for it.⁹

Those penitential practices with which Foucault was concerned in *GL* include baptism, which, even in the second century AD, in the Western church was still largely adult baptism, as most Christians were still converts to the new faith. The link, then, between baptism and penance on which Tertullian, for example, insisted, was profound: baptism itself was not just an act of purification, but one of *repentance*, replete with all its rituals, as well as its profound psychological ramifications, not unlike baptism today in a Pentecostal church, for example. Baptism meant that one had to lament his/her sins in preparation for pardon; that one had to undergo a "conversion" (*metanoia*), the movement by which the soul turns away from matter and the world, "turns towards the light, towards truth, towards the truth that illuminates it" (128, citing Tertullian's *De paenitentia*). Indeed, as Foucault points out, for Tertullian, conversion *is* repentance. And one of the most important acts of penance was to speak the truth about oneself.

Foucault asks several provocative questions in his elucidation of Christian penitential practices: "When the subject is enlightened by the truth, is it still subject?" (186). Here he raises the issue of the compatibility of that enlightenment with subjectification, subjection, *assujettissement*. Beyond that issue, however, Foucault also grapples with a related one: "what is the situation of the subject when having established its fundamental relationship to the truth through baptism, it has fallen away from this relationship, when it has fallen back. ... In other word[s] what is the situation of the subject when it breaks with this truth?" (186). It is here that penance in the strict sense of the word arises in Christian theology, a practice that has been metaphorically compared to a "second baptism," a process which as Foucault hastens to point out is "just as unique as baptism," and which "cannot be repeatable" (194). Baptism, then, in both these modes, is aimed at binding the Christian to the truth he or she has spoken.

GL is literally shaped by Foucault's insistence that "the schema of Christian subjectivation, a procedure of subjectivation historically formed and

⁹Foucault's last lecture course at the Collège, 1983–84, published as *The Courage of Truth: The Government of the Self and Others II*, explored the historico-cultural roots of the possibility of *another*, a different relationship, of subjectivity to truth.

developed in Christianity," entails the "production of the truth of oneself" (309). In elucidating the actual practices through which that truth is expressed, Foucault discusses *exomologesis*, the specific practice of penance, the admission that one is a sinner, and the emphatic and public expression of one's faith, on the one hand, and *exagoreusis*, the actual practice of confession (*aveu*), the duty "to tell all regarding the impulses of thought" (323) to one's spiritual director, first largely limited to the monastery, and then for seminarians, and only in the sixteenth century as a regular obligation for *all* believers. What is central to both penitential practices is the overriding need to discover and to express the hidden truth about oneself, and—most importantly—to *speak* it. Christianity imposed "the indefinite task of penetrating the uncertain secrets of conscience, and it imposed on Christians... the indefinite task of knowing oneself" (310). What Christian theology sought, then, was precisely a transhistorical essence beneath historical human being. For Foucault, it is those Christian antecedents that still shape, albeit in different modes, the need to tell the *truth* about ourselves today. And that obligation still underpins the social system, and its governmental practices today providing a historical link to the constitution of power relations in the modern world. However far the West has strayed from its own Christian "roots," that truth obligation, and the obedience to it, still shape *our* subjectivity, and the power relations to which it is linked.

The penitential practices of the Christian, *how* one's Christianity is enacted, the acts that one must *perform* to be a Christian, what one must *do*, its outward expressions, are Foucault's concern in this lecture course. It is, after all, the *government* of the living that he seeks to grasp. For us, Foucault's concern with the government of the living is directly related to his distinction between what he termed the history of ideas on the one hand, and the history of thought, as he had designated his chair at the Collège de France and which animated his reading of Christian penitential practices, on the other. For Foucault, the history of thought focused, as we have said, on what he termed problematizations. Foucault's 1980 lecture course provides the basis for just such a problematization of the governmental practices not just of Patristic Christianity, but of the secularized modes of truth telling that are its inheritors; modes of truth telling that constitute the bases for governmentality in the modern world. As such, *GL* constitutes an exciting series of *probes*, a daring experiment in linking the practices of our past to the history of the *present*.