

Foucault Studies

Subjectivity and Truth review

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Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave, 2017, ISBN 978-1-4039-8664-1

By the early 1980s Foucault had drafted a version of a book on Christianity and confession, intended to be the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*. The project had changed focus after the publication of the first volume, *The Will to Know* in 1976. Foucault had now turned to a much earlier historical period. While in the mid-1970s, with his *Abnormals* lectures and the outline in the first volume, the intended focus of the next book had been the late medieval Church, now he was looking at the early Church Fathers of the first centuries of the current era. A book under the title of *La Chair et le corps* [*The Flesh and the Body*] was replaced with one entitled *Les Aveux de la chair* [Confessions (or Avowals) of the Flesh].

Foucault shared some of the work in this draft in his 1980 lectures at the Collège de France, *On the Government of the Living*, and in lectures in the USA. But Foucault was not happy with this book being published immediately. He would later discuss in interviews how his treatment of Christianity was introduced with some discussion of pagan antiquity, but that he came to realise that much of this was dependent on claims he had taken from secondary literature. So Foucault put the volume on Christianity aside, and went back to the Greek and Roman texts to explore them himself. He had of course explored antiquity in detail in a course from a decade before, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, but his focus now was rather different. This work led to the actually published second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. What was intended to be the second volume became the fourth, left unpublished at Foucault's death. Foucault had delivered a typescript to Gallimard in 1982, but had said it should be published only after the volumes on antiquity. In early 1984 he took the typescript back, and began work editing it for final publication. His death in June of that year prevented him from completing the work, and the text remained out of the public domain. Thirty-four years later, *Les Aveux de la chair* has recently been published by Gallimard, edited by Frédéric Gros.

As before, Foucault used a lot of the developing research material on pagan antiquity in his lectures in Paris and elsewhere. In the autumn of 1980 he had presented a summary of his thinking in Berkeley and Dartmouth, alongside work on Christianity. These lectures are now available in a critical edition in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutic of the Self*. But his most thorough analysis came in his 1980-81 Collège de France course, *Subjectivité et vérité*, edited by Gros, and now elegantly translated by Graham Burchell as *Subjectivity and Truth*. Of all Foucault's Collège de France courses, *Subjectivity and Truth* is the closest in content to a published book, in this case volume III of the *History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*. There are some, albeit fewer, links to volume II, *The Use of Pleasure*. Gros provides some useful discussion of the relation between these texts in his 'Course Context' (pp. 310-311).

Foucault's course has a focus on "arts of life", a theme which is now familiar to us but which becomes a focus for him here for really the first time. The self, the other, and truth are central topics, as they are in many of his late texts and courses, but here the material is explicitly related to sexuality. He raises some interesting parallels and contrasts between this project and earlier work on "madness, illness, death and crime" (p. 13). But the contrast is in part because in those other areas knowledge is held over the subject, from the outside, while in sexuality the relation is more internal to the subject. Nonetheless, even this is shot through with power relations, since confession is the central practice through which the self comes to this truth about themselves. However the explicit focus is no longer on power, but rather on the relation of truth to subjectivity. He suggests that his course will undertake "a history of the notion of concupiscence" – sexual desire or lust – "inasmuch as it organized the subjective experience of sexuality, or rather of sex and sexual relations" (p. 14).

The course provides detailed readings of a number of texts, one of which is well-known from Foucault's later discussion in the third volume – Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, an analysis of dreams. He also discusses the question of marriage in antiquity in detail, particularly in relation to Stoic thought, and the Greek understanding of life as *bios*. (For a fuller discussion of these themes in the course, see my *Foucault's Last Decade*, Chapter 6). As well as discussing the relation between *zoe* and *bios* (p. 34), Foucault explains that the Greeks did not really have a notion of subjectivity, and that *bios* is the closest term to that in their thought (p. 253). He explores this relation in terms of the *tekhnai peri ton bion*, which he translates as "techniques of life" and glosses as "procedures of constitution of a subjectivity or of subjectivation" (p. 254).

However, perhaps the most important aspect is that in this course Foucault first introduces his understanding of the concept of *aphrodisia*. This is a notion, which the Romans called *veneria*, that is a way of understanding the relation between bodies, desire and pleasure. It is a different understanding to the *dispositif* of sexuality that he had explored in the first volume, or what the early Christians called 'the flesh' – a central theme in the fourth volume (see i.e. pp. 76, 282-3). Examining these three modes or techniques sheds considerable light not just on what we now call sex, but the relation an individual has to themselves, and to others: the question of subjectivity. As he claims here "sexual activity becomes... a permanent dimension of subjectivity, or of one's relationship of self to self" (p. 283). *Aphrodisia* is crucial to the ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman periods, before being supplanted by the Christian notion of the flesh. These notions sit in relation in complicated ways with a relation to truth (see i.e. pp. 156-7). Foucault makes some intriguing comments about how the flesh dominated thinking on this topic until the Middle Ages, giving some indications of how he thought his historical analysis might link up to the work of the first volume. But we also see how he suggests that the notion of *aphrodisia*, a relation of self to others, is concerned with acts. The notion used to describe this in Greek is *khresis aphrodisiōn*, the use of pleasures (p. 284).

Aphrodisia is structured around a number of themes, of which he stresses isomorphism and activity. The latter is that sexually only the active subject is significant for codes of behaviour. In *aphrodisia*, he suggests, there are very few absolute limitations, but rather a whole series of gradations and nuances (p. 98). Isomorphism is the relation of sexual act to social status – a man can have a relation with a boy or a slave, as long as he is the active partner. But if he is the passive partner, or his relation is with a social equal, then the activity may be seen as morally problematic. Isomorphism and heteromorphism are, Foucault suggests, much more important than what we would now call heterosexual and homosexual relations (pp. 79-80). It is partly for these reasons that so much literature from this period is concerned with the relation between men and boys, since there are more complexities at stake than with marriage. For one, a boy would eventually reach the age of being a

subject themselves. Marriage, by these understandings, is a much more straight-forward relation (pp. 91-2). There are some discussions of this in relation to issues of consent, both for women and boys (pp. 194-6).

One crucial theme is that Foucault insists that we should not see simply Christianity as imposing restrictions on behaviour that pagan thought had allowed (see i.e. pp. 158, 255). While he recognises that there are developments, he finds many Stoics like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca had strict codes of conscience. These might apply to behaviour more generally, but they often form a model for sexual restrictions. Marriage, for example, was highly valued in antiquity, but not for the same reasons. In antiquity, marriage was valued for its isomorphism, where for the Christian fathers the sexual relation had to be either stopped entirely (monasticism) or exclusively localised in marriage (pp. 102-3). These two themes come through very strongly in *Les Aveux de la chair*. Equally, the question of activity is challenged. While the ancients had suggested that pleasure in activity was good and pleasure in passivity dangerous, now “any pleasure, even that of the active subject, naturally presents the risk and the danger of the subject losing the mastery he exercises on himself” (p. 103). Foucault contends that this transformation of principles, the “line of intelligibility”, makes much more sense than the idea of a substitution of codes (p. 104). Foucault also underscores that “paganism cannot be treated as a single unit, and Christianity perhaps even less so” (p. 17), and his text is filled with some of the debates between different perspectives.

One thing that this course provides which is really important for an understanding of Foucault’s work is that here, more so even in the published volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, he makes connections and comparisons between different historical periods evident. In particular, the comparison between early Christianity and pagan antiquity is discussed in some detail. In other places he links this work on antiquity to the medieval work he had discussed in *La Chair et le corps* in the 1970s, but later abandoned (i.e. p. 99). While the connection of this course to the broader project on sexuality, and especially its changing form in the 1980s, is crucial, Foucault does explore other themes. One important discussion links this material to the question of biopolitics. He suggests that the arts of living he is discussing could be understood as bio-techniques, but that he prefers, here, the term “technique or technology of the self” (pp. 34-5). There are also glimpses of how this material might be situated in terms of a still broader study of the relation of Judeo-Christianity to capitalism and socialism (i.e. pp. 41-42).

For Foucault, arts of life should be understood as a “set of philosophical, moral and medical prescriptions”, where techniques or technologies of the self are situated “between a model of behaviour and a system of valorization” (p. 270). Intriguingly, there are some comments about how these questions can be read politically. The prince must govern both himself and others, and so there are ancient anticipations of the moment in Western thought that Foucault would examine as “governmentality – the government of self by the self and government of individuals by each other” (p. 281). His examples include Suetonius’ *Life of the Caesars*, the writings of Tacitus, and the *Historia Augustus* (pp. 276-77). A crucial theme is the relation between political power and sexual activity, with such texts’ criticism of political rulers who are not able to govern themselves appropriately before governing others. This is one of the many ways that we can trace the lineages between Foucault’s lecture courses on governmentality from 1977-78, 1978-79 and 1979-80 through to his last two courses on *The Government of Self and Others*. Sexuality is one common theme, but so too is subjectivity and the relation of one to another.

The technologies of the self, for Foucault, disrupt the “tight unity” of *aphrodisia*, of the link between “body, soul, pleasure, desire, sensation, mechanism of the body”; and shift the focus from the pleasure in itself, of the act, to the desire that led to the act (pp. 286-7). We can see here how this project links back to the concerns of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, even if the material examined is from a very different historical period. He is clear that this inquiry should not be to ask “how and under what conditions has desire been repressed?” (p. 288). Instead we need to interrogate how desires, pleasures and bodies become desire alone, the subject of desire. The question of desire, which Foucault had rejected in the first volume in 1976, now becomes a topic for historical inquiry. He says in interviews from this period that he came to realise that the way around the problem of the subject was to undertake its genealogy. The genealogy of the desiring subject is the lens through which he can examine the broader themes of subjectivity and truth. It is also crucial to the links between Foucault’s major projects of the mid-1970s to his death, the continually interweaved questions of sexuality, governmentality and techniques of the self:

[I]t would be somewhat inadequate and entirely insufficient, with regard to the extent and complexity of the problems, to want to do a history of sexuality in terms of repression of desire. Rather, on the basis of a history of technologies of self, which seems to me a relatively fruitful point of intelligibility, on the basis of a history of governmentalities—governmentalities of the self and others—we should show how the moment of desire was isolated and exalted, and how, on the basis of this, a certain type of relationship of self to self was formed that has itself undergone certain transformations, since he have seen it developed, organized, and distributed in an apparatus (*dispositif*) that was first the flesh before becoming that of sexuality (pp. 288-9).

The work of Gros in editing the course, and Burchell in translating it should be underlined. Having listened to some of Foucault’s Collège de France courses, and read some in manuscript, I recognise that the labours of producing a readable text are significant. Just transcribing the recordings, or filling in details from Foucault’s manuscripts, often with difficult handwriting and idiosyncratic abbreviations, is a major academic labour. There are few, if any, references in Foucault’s course manuscripts, and although Foucault’s reading notes are extant, all the notes needed to be developed from scratch. As with the others in the series, including three previous ones edited by Gros, this is a course edited to the highest standards. Yet however compelling it now appears, we should always keep in mind that this is not a ‘book’ by Foucault. In particular Foucault underlines the provisional nature of his thinking: “all that I am telling you is not the result of work, but a possible program of work” (p. 29). At another point he tells his audience how difficult it is to give a lecture every week on this developing research, and he would like more time “to stop, reflect a bit” and return to the topic a few months later. He recognises some of his analysis is therefore “somewhat disjointed or disordered” (p. 227 n *). Foucault’s final thoughts on these issues, especially in *The Care of the Self*, should of course be taken as definitive. Burchell’s role is also crucial. He has again captured Foucault’s speaking voice in a persuasive and sympathetic way. I worked with this course in French for my *Foucault’s Last Decade* book, and translated some passages I quoted there. I’ve compared most of those with Burchell’s, and his versions are both more elegant and felicitous. English readers are much in his debt.

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After *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault’s next course at the Collège de France was *The Hermeneutic of the Subject*, which we have had in English translation for many years. But while that course is also on

pagan antiquity, it only partially relates to material which is in the *History of Sexuality* series. Rather, it is part of a sequence of courses and related materials on a parallel project, on technologies of the self. There are multiple connections between these projects, some of which we can see here, and many of the thinkers and texts discussed in one are also a part of the other. At times, when Foucault was still unsure how to present and structure this work, he tells interviewers divisions of the material and titles of forthcoming books which either get changed, never appear or whose titles are used for different material. There is still much confusion in the literature about what Foucault intended, and speculation about how material might have been presented had he lived. It is also worth noting that the day after *Subjectivity and Truth* ended, Foucault began the lectures at Louvain which were published as *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* – an entirely distinct course which synthesises and summarises much of the work he had done over the previous decade at the Collège de France.

By June 1981, when he wrote the course summary for *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault had already moved on in his thinking. The summary, for example discusses Plato's *Alcibiades* in some detail, even though this was not a major part of the course. It would be discussed much more fully the following year. The synopsis, also included here, notes that the course will be the basis of a forthcoming publication, and that only a "brief summary" is needed (p. 299 n. 1). That publication, of course, developed and expanded, is the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, finally published under the title of *The Care of the Self*. Although Foucault would continue working and reworking this material through 1982 and 1983, and right up until his premature death, in May 1984 he suggested to an interviewer that he had finished his work on sexuality three years before. That date would be the end of this course, and it seems that the material presented here marks the culmination of the principal research on the topic. While he would continue to work on the manuscripts until his death, future lectures and courses present material intended for projects that would lie outside the sexuality series.

With the French publication of *Les Aveux de la chair*, we are entering a new period in Foucault's posthumous reception. This course helps us to understand still better how his project on sexuality transformed between the mid 1970s and the 1980s. It shifted in historical period, but also from a project concerned with the workings of power to one that put them into more explicit relation with questions of truth and subjectivity. The book on Christianity is crucial because its changing form and placement in the series serves as a measure of those transformations. Given that Foucault thought that it needed to be preceded by an analysis of antiquity, it should of course only be read in sequence with the actually published volumes II and III. But Foucault delivered the lectures which comprise *Subjectivity and Truth* in the early months of 1981. The course gives us an insight in what he felt was needed at the very time he made this decision. Even though much of the material will be familiar, the inflections and analysis offers many revealing insights. Above all it is of interest as Foucault's first sustained discussion of antiquity with the concerns of subjectivity, truth and sexuality.

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