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ARTICLE

Foucault and Ecology

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ABSTRACT. On the basis of a definition of ecology centred on Merleau-Ponty's thought, this essay examines the various phases of Foucauldian thought and their respective relationships to possible ecological outcomes: the Dionysian phase, which lasts until *The Order of Things*; the microphysics of power phase, in which a philosophy of the will that radically breaks with any idea of the original becomes central; and the late Foucault phase, characterised by the themes of the hermeneutics of the self, subjectivity and critique. In the latter period in particular, in which Foucault's rapprochement with Canguilhem and the idea of a living being immersed in a dialectical relationship with the environment and with others is very strong, a model is identified that is particularly amenable to interpretation in ecological terms. The essay concludes with some research hypotheses on the possible relationship between a philosophy of the will, such as that mediated by Foucault from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and ecology.

Keywords: ecology, contemporary philosophy, anthropology, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Bataille, philosophy of will, Wittgenstein, governmentality, truth

INTRODUCTION

In order to address the issue of the connection between Foucault's thinking and the topic of ecology,[1] we must first give a brief definition of ecology. Even though I am aware of

[1] There is now considerable bibliography on this topic, with very varied tendencies: for example, cf. T. Hargreaves, "Putting Foucault to work on environment," *CSERGE Working Paper EDM* 10-11 (2010); E.A. Forster, "Foucault and Ecology," in *After Foucault*, ed. L. Downing (2018), 122-138; C. Carpenter, *Power in Conservation. Environmental Anthropology Beyond Political Ecology* (2020); K. G. Nustad and H. Swanson, "Political ecology and the Foucault effect: A need to diversify disciplinary approaches to ecological management?," *Nature and Space* 5:2 (2022), 924-946; Yves Meinard, "The Foucauldian approach to conservation: pitfalls and genuine promises," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 44:2 (2022), 25; E. Leonardi and Luigi Pellizzoni, "Governmentality and political ecology," in *Handbook of Governmentality*, ed. W. Walters and M. Tazzioli (2023), 266-285.

the fact that the term has now taken on the most varied and contradictory meanings, both philosophically and politically, I nonetheless believe that certain distinctive traits can be identified from the point of view that interests me.

Ecology is a type of thinking that 1) questions Cartesian subject/object dualism; 2) places at the centre the question of a non-Promethean relation to the earth, to the living and to the body and sees this relation as one of *inherence*. To be is not to project one's own subjective will onto the world but rather to *belong to it*: to refer back to something that, like the earth and the environment, the subject has not constructed but from which, on the contrary, it comes; and 3) consequently, finds its essential points of reference in the *finite*, in the *limit*: there is no concept more anti-ecological than that of the infinite and the unlimited.

These three points can be considered a definition of the concept of nature. On a philosophical level, one can refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty as its main theorist: current exponents of ecological thinking such as the early Ingold, Augustin Berque and Philippe Descola all refer in different ways to Merleau-Ponty.

On the basis of this very broad definition, I believe that the problem of the concept of nature in Foucault's thinking can first be given a somewhat general, approximate answer. Foucault is a constructivist: he was a member or at least a supporter of the avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as shown by his appreciation of Andy Warhol and his famous course on painting held in Tunis.[2] Evidence of this constructivism, of this pronounced anti-naturalism, can be found more or less throughout his oeuvre, but an important book published a few years ago complicated the discourse in this regard by identifying a current of anti-antinaturalism in Foucault.[3]

However, if we move from a "distant" gaze to a closer look, the subject under study changes and is pluralised and articulated. We can then see at least four stages in Foucault's complex intellectual journey:

1. That of the Dionysian, of Artaud, Sade and Bataille. The key work of this period is the *History of Madness,* which presents us with a Dionysian concept of nature that in some parts of the book leans strongly towards the negative while being also *a radical critical tool.* The question arises here of taking the Surrealist legacy of Foucault's position into account.
2. The lowest point of Foucault's naturalism, which is presented in *The Order of Things*.[4] However, the stage of the microphysics of power in which the body is newly central had already started in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*[5] and, through substantial developments and modifications, would lead to:

[2] Michel Foucault, *La peinture de Manet. Suivi de Michel Foucault, un regard* (2004).

[3] Stéphane Haber, *Critique de l'antinaturalisme. Études sur Foucault, Butler, Habermas* (2007), in particular in ch. II.

[4] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* [1966] (1994).

[5] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse of Language* [1969] (1982).

3. The formulations in *Security, Territory and Population,*[6] which marks the appearance of the ecological model proper. And, finally,
4. The Foucault of the very last years, who made the most decisive break from Nietzsche and Heidegger to focus on ancient philosophy, in particular that of the Roman Empire and the Stoics. The revival of Cynicism in his last course given at the Collège de France stands out in this period: the theme of the Dionysian reappears in it, albeit much transformed.

1. Let us therefore start with the *History of Madness*:[7] in what sense can we find resources for ecological thinking within it? Here it is essentially a matter of analysing the 1961 introduction, in which the basic structure of the work is formulated. As is well known, this is an interpretation of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, in which the Apollonian-Dionysian nexus is the key to its discourse.

Right from the start, the author combines the psychiatric and the philosophical meanings of madness. The pair of concepts madness-normality is overlaid with that of unreason (*déraison*)-reason, which is nothing other than a transposition of the Nietzschean concepts of Dionysian and Apollonian:

> To interrogate a culture about its limit-experiences is to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history. There, in a tension that is constantly on the verge of resolution, we find the temporal continuity of a dialectical analysis confronted with the revelation, at the doors of time, of a tragic structure.
>
> At the centre of these limit-experiences of the Western world is the explosion, of course, of the tragic itself – Nietzsche having shown that the tragic structure from which the history of the Western world is made is nothing other than the refusal, the forgetting and the silent collapse of tragedy.[8]

And further down:

> The following study will only be the first, and probably the easiest, in this long line of enquiry which, beneath the sun of the great Nietzschean quest, would confront the dialectics of history with the immobile structures of the tragic.[9]

The philosophical core of the work therefore consists of these Nietzschean concepts, *which are explicitly taken from* The Birth of Tragedy. If it is true, in short, that Nietzsche is (along with Kant) the author that accompanied Foucault's philosophical adventure from almost the beginning to its end, it should be clear that in the *History of Madness* it is *the early Nietzsche's metaphysics* – who is so close, at least apparently, to Schopenhauer – that is the

[6] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*. *Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* [2004] (2009).
[7] Foucault, *History of Madness* [1961] (2006),
[8] *Ibid.*, XXIX-XXX.
[9] *Ibid.*, XXX,

basis of Foucault's discourse. It is the loss of the tragic nexus between the Dionysian (unreason, madness) and the Apollonian (reason, normality) that results in the historical concealment and repression of madness; it is the fact that reason, *logos* and discourse have been detached from the Dionysian, from the Aorgic, that opens the way to History and progress. By carving out limits, values that separate good from evil, lawful from unlawful, every society (and here Foucault's Nietzschean discourse is tinged with anthropological implications, implicitly referring to Ruth Benedict)[10] represses the truest and most authentic vital values, which Foucault identifies with Dionysian totality. The history of madness thus immediately reveals itself as a metaphysical project of a much wider scope: it is the history of the repression that every civilisation and history in general operates on the non-historical and vital essence of the world, on a primordial origin and foundation. In this way, the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* matched Heidegger's ontologism without too much difficulty.

One first conclusion: it is evident that the theme of the Dionysian in connection with, but also as a background to, the Apollonian functions to all intents and purposes as a critique and relativisation of the concepts of culture and civilisation: it constitutes, to all intents and purposes, a concept of nature which can have ecological significance.

The other pivot in the 1961 introduction also converges on this: that is, the concept of "absence of work", which, in a series of texts from the 1940s, and later in *L'éspace littéraire*,[11] Blanchot had introduced as a characteristic, defining element of contemporary literature. Looking to the major models of the great experimental literature of the 20th century – to Kafka, Mallarmé, Joyce and Beckett – Blanchot wanted to emphasise the unfinished and fragmentary aspect of literary writing. The writer *works* and cannot but work, obsessively and in a perfectionist manner, following his *project* and his subjective intent. But it is only when this work, this project, this *telos* is interrupted to make space for that dimension that Blanchot defines as the *outside*, which is always beyond our intentions and our consciousness, that the work, paradoxically, is *fulfilled precisely by opening itself up to incompleteness* – by fragmenting and interrupting itself and by allowing the word to be succeeded by silence. The literary work and the act of working from which it results only make sense when they tap into the dimension of the inoperative (*désœuvrement*) and of non-work; when order reveals itself to be nothing more than the other side of the fragmentary, of chaos and disorder. Therefore, madness is the absence of work because it is the opposite pole of useful and finalised work, of the rational project, of *logos*. Madness is the chaos that comes to shatter their compactness, the silence that, always interspersed with speech, is suddenly projected into the foreground, making the infinite and Dionysian totality repressed by *logos* and work re-emerge.

[10] Foucault had long been familiar with *Patterns of Culture* (1934) by the American anthropologist: cf. the reference he makes to this work, precisely on the topic of the selection of values, in *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* (1954), 72.

[11] Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L'éspace littéraire* (1955), *passim.*

It is clear, therefore, how, even from the point of view of the absence of work, Foucault's discourse can be presented as a radical critique of the civilisation of labour, with the obvious ecological consequences that this entails.

Finally, if we continue to examine the *History of Madness*, we see that already towards the middle of the work a third characteristic motif appears, one that will become largely dominant in the final chapter, which goes in a different direction. The chapter on "The transcendence of delirium"[12] brings us face to face with the figure of the *Unreal* and thus with *delirium* and *the delirious discourse* that is its essential complement. The cycle continues through the notions of *dream*, *error*, *blinding* and *dazzlement* (*éblouissement*). The two latter notions fully bring to light the fact that classical reason stands in an essential relation to unreason, that reason and unreason represent an inseparable pair, which harks back to that solidarity of light and night, of Apollonian and Dionysian, that is now well known to us. It is only natural that Blanchot, particularly Blanchot as a commentator on Racine, should be Foucault's guide here: the chapter's finale is in fact a superb illustration of this theme through a rereading of some of the great 17th century French playwright's tragedies, and in particular *Andromache.* In the various stages of the madness through which Racine leads Orestes, Foucault rediscovers with great effectiveness the figures of madness that he had traced in the previous part of the chapter: the "three concentric figures of *dazzlement*" – error, dream and delirium – up to the *nihilistic self-destructiveness* which certain aspects of the character of Orestes fully highlight. In short, another line underlying Foucault's text emerges: the Sadeian and Artaudian one, which, in the final chapter, is reinforced by the reference to Goya's later paintings.

Indeed, the concluding pages of the final chapter, by foregrounding first the paintings in Goya's *The Deaf Man's House* and then Sade's work, bring to light this extreme line of apocalyptic self-destructiveness. At this point, inner transformation is indeed a revolution but only through the individual's nihilistic self-annihilation (a line of thought that certainly does not lack precedents in the extreme fringes of German Romanticism such as Kleist, and Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* can also be interpreted along this line).

Sade is very far from Jena Romanticism (which Foucault nonetheless values): in Sade's view, nature is dominated by the power of evil. Nature is not characterised by self-preservation, which was traditionally considered to be its essential attribute, but by self-destructiveness: what characterises it is *self-abolition*. The conclusion is a convergence of the lessons of Goya and Sade in self-destructive nihilism:

> Through Sade and Goya, the Western world rediscovered the possibility of going beyond its reason with violence, and of rediscovering tragic experience beyond the promises of dialectics.

[12] Michel Foucault, "The transcendence of delirium," in *History of Madness* [1961] (2006), cit.

> After Goya and Sade, and since them, unreason belongs to all that is most decisive in the modern world in any oeuvre: anything that the oeuvre contains which is murderous or constraining.[13]

And so, to come once again to the point that interests us, it is clear that *in this respect* Foucault's position in the *History of Madness* is far removed from ecology: indeed, it is an *anti-naturalistic* view that recurs in the later Foucault.

If we now want to make an assessment of this set of positions as regards the question of ecology, it must be stated, first of all, that it is never *directly addressed as such* but rather indirectly and implicitly present. This point can be better understood if seen from a historical point of view.

Foucault's *negative* thinking, which, as we have seen, is so central to his work, adheres, as he himself repeatedly stated, to the philosophical line of Blanchot's and Bataille's radical existentialism. This line, which started as early as the 1940s, was intended as an alternative to Sartre's humanist existentialism, to his alliance of phenomenology and Marxism, to the idea of commitment, and to the anti-naturalistic voluntarism implicit in Sartre's position. While Merleau-Ponty, from the outset, pursued his own line of phenomenology of the body, in which the concept of nature would gradually become more central, Sartre's activism and his idea of absolute freedom stood as a typical expression of modern Prometheanism. In it, as indeed in classical Marxism and Soviet Marxism, a proletariat that was transformed into the totality of humanity took the place of the bourgeoisie in outlining a universal project of freedom and equality in a vision in which nature was typically conceived as a hostile entity, as Sartre of the 1930s had already outlined in the famous episode of the root in *Nausea*.

Sartre's vision appeared to be in line with the Glorious Thirties, with the great productive development that would lead to the most anti-ecological society ever, namely, the consumer society that culminated in the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, Blanchot's and Bataille's line of negative thought, which Foucault espoused and which placed authors such as Nietzsche and Heidegger at the centre, stood as a radical early challenge to that type of society. In particular, the radical communism that Blanchot proposed as an alternative to real socialism and the more orthodox Marxist models had at its centre the concept of worklessness, which, as we have seen, is so central in the *History of Madness*. This had a very precise ecological significance: it was a radical critique of a society based on work, on man's dominion over nature. The concept of the Dionysian was also part of this radical critique of Western and bourgeois society, putting forward a framework of *passivity*, of openness to Being, to the world and to nature that is still highly relevant today. The entire Surrealist experience of the inter-war years re-emerged through the valorisation of art as an alternative to labour-based society, which was at the centre of *History of Madness*, through its appreciation of the primitive and the non-Western and through the idea (central to a work that was as fundamental to the entire 20th century European culture as

[13] *Ibid.*, 535.

Aragon's *Le paysan del Paris*)[14] that the challenging illumination of the Dionysian could explode again at the very heart of industrial society. And we must not forget that the concept of the Dionysian entailed the absolute centrality of the bodily and the earthly.

The limits of this vision, which is still fresh and alive in its challenging radicalness, lay in the nihilistic aspects that, as we have seen, were so central to Foucault's work. His return to Sade and the centrality of the theme of self-destruction risked emphasising once again the denial of nature, prioritising death over life, outlining a version of the Dionysian that, rather than referring back to the body and the Earth, resolved itself into Nothingness. In this respect, did the Blanchot-Bataille line not risk repeating the typical industrialist anti-naturalism of Sartre's humanist existentialism? And does opting for the infinite, which in any case characterises the Dionysian, not pose a problem for the ecological vision, whose essential notion is that of the *limit*, of the *finite*? This is an ambiguity that ran through Foucault's work for a long time – one which, moreover, runs through all of 20th century French culture, right up to structuralism itself.

And yet, in conclusion, I believe that we should avoid being too rigid and univocal in judging even Foucault's more "negative" positions. Thinkers such as Bataille and Artaud, who referred so often to "primitive" societies and the experiences of the "non-civilised", strongly shifted the centre of gravity towards former colonised peoples, and this posed a strong challenge to industrial and bourgeois society in the name of an original, uncorrupted nature. Ecological thinking does, however, owe a deep debt to their work.

2. It seems to me, on the other hand, that *The Order of Things*[15] is the text that is least capable of providing insights into an ecological theme. The culturalism that has prevailed since the 1960s, which largely imbues *The Order of Things*, is tantamount to the advent of a linguistic paradigm that has obscured that of the body and the flesh. While it is true that the concept of the Dionysian continues to be the basis of Foucault's discourse, in *The Order of Things* it appears to have been essentially transformed into purely linguistic terms. This great text was certainly an attempt to critique neo-capitalism from within – the theory of the episteme is a historicization of the great modernisation movement that swept the world in the 1960s – but the mechanism on which it is based is very specific: power itself is reduced to transcendental restrictions on utterances. Moreover, the ending of the work presents us, along with the death of man, with the advent of the *Being of language*, where the new avant-garde anti-humanist literature with which Foucault was associated in these years is wedded to the Heidegger of *On the Way to Language.*[16]

3. Moreover, Foucault himself was soon dissatisfied with this linguisticity. Through Wittgenstein, but also through the influence of the events of 1968, he already discovered in the

[14] Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926).
[15] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit.
[16] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* [1959] (1982).

Archaeology of Knowledge a much more concrete and material dimension of language.[17] But, as is well known, the decisive leap towards a new conception was only taken with the microphysics of power. Upon arriving at this new configuration of his thinking, Foucault was very explicit in pronouncing himself in favour of a materialistic paradigm of the body. Let us ask ourselves then: was this a rapprochement to Merleau-Ponty's model, or at any rate to an ecological model? It does not seem to me that this question can be answered in the positive, or fully in the positive. Certainly, implicit in the microphysical paradigm is an instance of plurality and a critique of the centrality of power – a respect for difference, an instance of the irreducibility of the real to the transparency of unity and concept – which may go in the right direction. But the central point is another: *a Nietzschean (or Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean) instance of the will predominates in this conception*. As is well known, in it the body is the medium for the action of discipline, its contact surface; as fascinated as he is by Marx's *Capital*, Foucault rereads its section IV on the relative surplus value as presenting capitalism as a great production not of objects but of docile subjects. In other words, and somewhat schematically: there is hardly any room for nature here,[18] unless one wants to read the concept of resistance in this sense – a concept which, however, still only concerns subjects and their revolt and is only the reverse of discipline.

It is only when the model of microphysics began to no longer satisfy Foucault, i.e., roughly in 1976-7, that the theme of corporeality made space for the concept of the limit, and the will once again comes into conflict with a world that is irreducible to it. As is well known, the theme of nature appears explicitly in Foucault's 1977-8 course on *Security, Territory, Population,*[19] giving shape to his new conception of governmental power.

Firstly, we are, since Galileo, in the era in which the natural sciences have conferred on nature full autonomy from its creator. Secondly, rulers have now discovered ways of relating to their subjects that are not those of the old sovereign – whom Foucault, moreover, mistakenly identifies with Machiavelli's vision and which could, from my point of view, with good reason be called "Promethean". There is now, says Foucault, commenting on the Physiocrats, a nature whose limits must be respected; and the government of life and populations must also be seen from this point of view. Nor should the fact be overlooked that in this course as well as in the following one, *The Birth of Biopolitics*,[20] the idea emerges that the transition from sovereign power to government power is that from a mechanical model to a vital, biological model, which takes as its reference the living body and its structures. After all, does the whole theme of biopolitics not go in this direction? Power not only has to do with subjects, it is not a matter of pure domination, but has to do with the imbrication of men with things, with their being rooted in the world:

[17] In this regard, cf. Manlio Iofrida and Diego Melegari, *Foucault* (2017), chapters 4-5.
[18] For a resumption and complexification of this point in the philosophy of will, which, however, continues to characterise the later phases of Foucault's reflection, cf. my *Conclusions* below.
[19] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population,* cit..
[20] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, [2004] (2008).

> Now we can see that in La Perrière's text the definition of government does not refer to the territory in any way: one governs things. What does La Perrière mean when he says that government governs "things"? I do not think it is a matter of an opposition between things and men, but rather of showing that government is not related to the territory, but to a sort of complex of men and things. The things government must be concerned about, La Perrière says, are men in their relationships, bonds, and complex involvements with things like wealth, resources, means of subsistence, and, of course, the territory with its borders, qualities, climate, dryness, fertility, and so on. "Things" are men in their relationships with things like customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking. Finally, they are men in their relationships with things like accidents, misfortunes, famine, epidemics, and death.[21]

I will not address here the political dimension of these courses, their connection to economics, liberalism and neo-liberalism and all the issues associated with these themes, which are irrelevant to my argument here. Rather, I will ask this question: what becomes of this paradigm, in which the limit is finally central and which is undoubtedly a paradigm of inherence, in Foucault's later work? I will thus briefly discuss the great question that the courses and writings that followed those I have just mentioned have posed to interpreters from the outset: do they imply an abandonment of the political dimension that had strongly characterised Foucault's research from 1970 onwards? Do they mark a withdrawal from politics in favour of an individualistic ethics?

My answer, in line with that of many other interpreters, is clearly negative: subjectivity, on the construction of which Foucault concentrated all his work in his later years, is not withdrawn from the world. The subject he is talking about is still "imbricated" in the matters whose weight he had discovered in *Security, Territory, Population.* I believe that the thematic approach I have chosen is very useful to appreciate this continuity: self-care, the construction of subjectivity, hinges precisely on the concept of *limit.* The subject is not constructed from nothing but from its inherence in the world, its relation to other subjects and objects. If the subject deconstructs the subjectivity that the powers it has grown up with have imposed on it, this new subject does so not in order to flee into the infinite, into the unlimited, to reject the absolute limit but to construct limits for itself *that are its own*; those that it feels are suited to its individuality, to the difference that it represents in the world – becoming, in Nietzschean terms, what it is.

These are the years of the preface to Canguilhem:[22] this return to a master of the life sciences is certainly no coincidence. It indicates that, for Foucault, the relation to the biological, to a body that is not only will but also obedience to a series of laws, is central again (although it had never disappeared from his purview). In parallel, his interest in the Enlightenment starts, as does Foucault's particular approach to the topic of the subject, seen as comprising a practice on oneself, a practice towards others, and a practice towards the

[21] *Security, Territory, Population*, cit., 96.
[22] Michel Foucault, "Introduction," in *On the Normal and the Pathological,* G. Canguilhem [1943] (1978), ix ff.

world.[23] A passage from an only apparently minor piece of writing, in which Foucault recapitulates and reinterprets the whole of his research in a key of inherence, deserves to be mentioned:

> One must also reverse the philosophical way of proceeding upward to the constituent subject which is asked to account for every possible object of knowledge in general. On the contrary, it is a matter of proceeding back down to the study of the concrete practices by which the subject is constituted in the immanence of a domain of knowledge. There too, one must be careful: refusing the philosophical recourse to a constituent subject does not amount to acting as if the subject did not exist, making an abstraction of it on behalf of a pure objectivity. This refusal has the aim of eliciting the processes that are peculiar to an experience in which the subject and the object "are formed and transformed" in relation to and in terms of one another. The discourses of mental illness, delinquency, or sexuality say what the subject is only in a certain, quite particular game of truth; but these games are not imposed on the subject from the outside according to a necessary causality or structural determination. They open up a field of experience in which the subject and the object are both constituted only under certain simultaneous conditions, but in which they are constantly modified in relation to each other, and so they modify this field of experience itself.[24]

That this theme of inherence is a perspective that persists to the end in Foucault's discourse is confirmed in many ways. Take, for example, those passages in which he speaks of a philosophy understood as a *diagnosis of the present* as its *ontology*.[25] What does this mean? It means that *modern* philosophy discovers its historical dimension not only in the sense that it is fundamental for it to reconstruct its roots but also and above all in that it is a historical emergence as the capacity to focus on *a process of which one is part*: to become self-aware of the present, to discover the fact that what I am doing belongs to something that transcends me, to a *we*.

Consider then the theme of reflexivity, of self-reference, a theme that has long been central to Foucault and that now becomes an axis of his reinterpretation of Kantian critique. This *critique*, which is at the same time *self-critique*, is closely linked to the idea of a freedom that is not the denial of the limit but its reverse. The limit is that moveable construction that I create by continually relating to others but, at the same time, self-reflectively, to myself. Nor should it be forgotten that the theme of self-reflexivity was intimately connected, in Foucault, a student of Canguilhem, to that of life – the living being self-referentially relates to itself in the very act in which it relates to the world and to

[23] It is no coincidence that these are the years in which we find some positive references to ecological battles: see *Dits et Écrits (1954-1988)* (1994), III, 551 and 594.

[24] Maurice Florence, *Foucault*, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. II, Aesthetics, Methods and Epistemology,* ed. J.D. Faubion (1998), 642.

[25] Cf. e.g., Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow (1984), 38-9.

others. In this sense, the very concept of critique, as an exercise on one's own limits, is connected to the vital model of the subject's inherence to the world.

Again, the very model of *parrhesia* can be interpreted along these lines: in it the critical and polemical, agonistic aspect, the tense relation to the other (be it the agora of the polis or the sovereign to whom the counsellor speaks), and, more generally, the intersubjective relation are absolutely fundamental. Just as fundamental is the parrhesiast's *critical* relation to himself, the care of himself, the work on himself that he exercises and urges others to exercise; but equally essential is the relation of the parrhesiast to truth: the fact that, in this polemical game in which I and the other are engaged, between me and the other and between me and myself, the truth, the relation to the world, is inserted as a third element. According to a scheme that is unmistakably phenomenological, the intersubjective relation, the infra-subjective relation, and the relation to the object, to the world (or, if you like, intentionality), are inseparable. One year later, in the last text that his illness allowed him to complete, Foucault wrote:

> Error is eliminated not by the blunt force of a truth that would gradually emerge from the shadows but by the formation of a new way of "*truth-telling*" [emphasis added].[26]

The assumption here is that it is not subjects who create truths but rather these truths emerge from a systemic, ecological interplay between man and world in which the momentum of subjective activity is as inescapable as that of the subject's relation to a world other than itself.

The recurrence of the theme of the relation to truth is, moreover, continuous with that of governmentality throughout Foucault's discourse in his last period. His dispute with Schmitt in his penultimate course is incontestable philological confirmation of this: politics, says Foucault, explicitly opposing Schmitt, is not reduced to the constitution, to law or to unilateral power over others. Rather, it is the experience of telling the truth in relation to oneself and to others and is therefore an *exercise of rationality*. Power passes through the *logos*, through discussion and persuasion – and at this point Foucault explicitly refers to *governmentality*, which again he defines as *power that goes through true discourse*.[27]

Still in the same sense of the centrality of true discourse, Foucault takes up the Platonic theme according to which politics must be conceived on the model of *medicine for free men* as opposed to *medicine for slaves*. In the latter, which is a mere technique, a doctor who is as much a slave as his patient makes his prescriptions unilaterally, reducing his patient to an object. By contrast, the former is "free medicine for free people, practised by doctors who are themselves free men".[28] It is characterised by the dialogic relation that binds doctor and patient: the doctor does not perform a unilateral, technical, Promethean action on

[26] Michel Foucault, "Life: Experience and Science," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984,* vol. II, ed. Rabinow and Rose, cit., 471. This is a second version of the *Introduction* to Canguilhem cited above, in note 22.
[27] Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others* [2008] (2010), p. 184.
[28] *Ibid*, p.224.

the patient but first listens to him and then tries to persuade him regarding the path to recovery. In a community in which political activity is based on this model, the philosopher is not simply a legislator who tells the city how it should be governed and which laws it should obey. His role is actually to persuade both sides: those who govern and those who are governed.[29]

To conclude, I would like to recall how the model of the aesthetics of existence, so central to the final Foucault, also falls fully within this ecological paradigm. It should be borne in mind that Foucault conceived this model not only by looking to Baudelaire but also by keeping in mind Burckhardt's *The Civilisation of the Renaissance*.[30] In this text, Burckhardt described 16th century Italian society, arguing that in it the aestheticization of life was a shared project of a community of equals in dialogue who, through sociability, established a relation to the world and to others that was not one of instrumental, brutally utilitarian reason but which can, to all intents and purposes, be defined as an ecological relation. Is beauty not that ever-moving dimension of the limit in which we open ourselves to the world and to others, not through domination but in order to be passive as well as active, co-present in a relation to otherness that can be defined by the phenomenological term "attention"?

CONCLUSIONS IN THE FORM OF FURTHER PERSPECTIVES

I will end with a few historical and theoretical remarks and a few questions in order to better frame my previous considerations and to envisage potential further research. An enquiry into the ecological character of Foucault's philosophy, on the ecological resources that his thinking can provide, is at bottom an enquiry into the ecological character of a philosophy of the will, and therefore into Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and how they have been interpreted in France since the 19th century. This was the deepest core of Foucault's philosophy at least from 1970, when he delivered his now famous *Lecture on Nietzsche*:[31] elsewhere he refers to Fichte and even Sartre.[32] How much can the ontologies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (I am aware that they are quite different, but it is difficult to separate

[29] *Ibid*, p. 225.

[30] Cf. J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Renaissance in Italy* [1866] (1960), spec. part V; "Sociality and Festivals,"; for Foucault's explicit mention of *civilization,* cf. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits (1954-1988),* cit., vol. IV, 629-630.

[31] Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know* [2011] (2013), *XIII: Lecture on Nietzsche*.

[32] On the centrality of the philosophy of the will in relation to the subject, see the statements in F. Sassine, M. Foucault, "Entretien inédit avec Michel Foucault," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 351-378, where, on p. 370, Foucault refers in this regard to Fichte and Sartre. There is much to investigate in this philosophy of the will as a (basically Kantian) response to the transcendentalism and humanism of the Third Republic in relation to the often hidden spread of Schopenhauer's philosophy and the much more overt and extraordinarily fast spread of Nietzsche's thinking. It would also be worth reflecting on Bergson's actual relation to it. Xavier Léon's study on Fichte, the first volume of which came out in the early 1900s (X. Léon, *Fichte et ses rapports avec la conscience contemporaine* (1902)), and which was completed by a third volume published in 1927, certainly bears testimony to the strength of this tendency. Brunschvicg's Fichteism evidently has a very different significance, but it is certainly, at least in some of its aspects, connected to it.

them, especially when discussing French philosophy and Foucault as a representative of that philosophy) contribute to ecological thinking?

Despite the fact that the primacy of the will might seem to preclude any ecological attitude, it is easy to see, by retracing various aspects of these two great thinkers, that this is not the case: in both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the will is deeply rooted in bodies, so the comparison with phenomenological models such as those of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty becomes inevitable. Moreover, the diversity of perspectives that derive from both models does not at all preclude many potential convergences and much mutual enrichment. Foucault's own path from 1978 onwards, which I have tried to show in this essay – his limitation of the role of the will with respect to his microphysics period – confirms this.

An in-depth study of the ecological views in Michel Foucault's thinking, which goes beyond what I have attempted to do here in a very preliminary and provisional way, must come to terms with these nodes that lie far upstream. In any case and to conclude, Michel Foucault's ecology, as I have tried to outline here, appears to be a 20th century outcome of these two great models bequeathed by the 19th century.

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