

REVIEW

Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). ISBN: 0312203268

The Hermeneutics of the Subject is structurally different from all of Foucault's previous Collège courses, and thus from all those published so far, in that each weekly lecture lasted for two hours. Previously, Foucault had given single hour-long lectures and fulfilled the rest of his teaching quota with an hour-long seminar at a different time, in which group work was done around related themes.¹ In this course, Foucault initially stated his intention to use the second hour for discussion, but attempted this only once before abandoning the plan.² We can only speculate why this might be. Perhaps it was because of the questions he was asked, which led him into interesting discussions about his relation to Jacques Lacan, not a subject Foucault wanted to talk about in a lecture series on ancient thought. Moreover, Foucault likely realised how much time he would need to deliver the material he had in mind. There are several places where Foucault, apparently in the course of delivering material, explicitly excised portions of what he had planned to say.³ In addition, there is a dossier of material in the possession of Foucault's long-time partner Daniel Defert which the editors of this volume consulted, and which is at present still to be kept from public view in line with Foucault's wishes that there be no posthumous publications of his work.⁴ Even without that material, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 566 pages long, is nonetheless clearly the longest volume of Foucault ever published in English.

There is then much new material here. Nevertheless, most of the *concepts* found in this book are relatively familiar to readers of Foucault. Of course, the concepts here are far from new in that they are mostly ancient, but they are also largely concepts which can be found in Foucault's other

1 Frédéric Gros, "Course Context", in Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 518.

2 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 187-192.

3 For example Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 307.

4 See Frédéric Gros, "Course Context," 516.

published works from the same period of the 1980s. The notion of 'care of the self', for example, probably the signature concept of this work, is already familiar from the title of the 1984 third volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*,⁵ and Foucault's own corollary concept, 'technology of the self', has been prominent as a concept since the publication of a collection of pieces by and about Foucault called *Technologies of the Self* as long ago as 1988, most notably a piece by Foucault of the same name which originated as a lecture given in California in late 1982.⁶

'The Hermeneutics of the Subject' is itself a misleading title suggesting greater surprises than are to be found: there is not a single mention of 'hermeneutics' in the course, and the 'subject' is not really so prominent as the *self*.⁷ Indeed, a 'hermeneutics of the subject' seems to imply attention to precisely the practices of self-knowledge which Foucault is concerned to downplay in favour of the forgotten practices of concern for the self. In fact, where Foucault does mention hermeneutics, in the retrospectively written 'Course Summary', he specifically contrasts it as a "hermeneutics of the subject" to the ancients' way of relating to the self.⁸ This leads me to suspect that this course was originally meant to deal with thought which was a hermeneutics of the subject, meaning *Christian* thought. As things are, however, the title gives a different impression, that the 'hermeneutics' of the title is part of Foucault's own genealogical project, which is how Stuart Elden reads it.⁹ This apparent discrepancy is probably the result of course titles being announced a year in advance. A more apt title, as things turned out, would have been 'The Care of the Self'.

I realise now, having read Frédéric Gros's concise account of what happened in Foucault's work during the early 1980s, in the very useful 'Course Context' appended to this course of lectures, that something unfortunate had happened that is now being rectified by the publication of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Gros points out that in 1983 Foucault told Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus that his plan was for one of the forthcoming volumes of *The History of Sexuality* to be exclusively about the ethics and techniques of the self of the ancients, "and without any particular reference to

5 Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon: 1986).

6 Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

7 While I am on the subject of the title, I should like to object to the subtitle of this volume, namely that the lectures are all from 1982, hence not from both 1981-1982 as the subtitle to my mind implies. I know the reasoning behind this is that they are from the 1981-1982 academic year, and that some of the other Collège de France courses run across the New Year. However, of the six courses published thus far, only one—namely, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique: Cours au Collège de France. 1973-1974*—actually runs across the two calendar years advertised on its cover.

8 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 501.

9 Stuart Elden, Review of *L'Herméneutique du sujet*. *The Heythrop Journal* 46:1 (2003), 89.

sexuality.”¹⁰ What Gros does not say is what happened to this project. Stuart Elden points out the extent to which this projected book in fact matches *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.¹¹ This book was indeed to be called ‘The Care of the Self. The book that today bears that title is not principally about the care of the self, but is rather simply the book which deals with Roman-era sexuality, as opposed to *The Use of Pleasure*, which deals with earlier Greek sexuality. It was the previous year’s course, entitled ‘Subjectivity and Truth’, that would be reworked as this third volume of *The History of Sexuality*.¹²

Foucault tells us that he initially wrote a book about sex in the ancient world, then a book about techniques of the self, and then a compromise book, or rather a pair of them, in which sex and care of the self were balanced.¹³ The book under review is, in effect, the second book that Foucault wrote, as he wrote these lectures out in full before delivering them, as was his wont. Whether this makes it effectively a rough draft of the planned book on techniques of the self remains moot.

Contrary to what one might expect from Foucault, then, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* does not come as an intellectual shock. But this is not to imply that what we have here is not a work of great importance. While we have already heard much from Foucault on the ancients, it has been somewhat lacking—at least we can now see in retrospect, having read this book, that it was. We have seen fragments of his research, but not its core, and therefore understood the direction Foucault was indicating, but were hampered in moving along it as far as he had gone. Most of what we have had before from Foucault’s late period was made up of the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, and these are something many readers have never entirely known what to do with, failing as they do to live up to the exhilarating promise of the first volume of the series. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* then, is the heart of the late Foucault, the focus on sexuality being rather peripheral, imposed on him in the fulfilment of a project he had embarked upon which had led him to ancient thought. It is the masterwork, underpinning his late period.

There are (at least) three dimensions to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. As we shall see, much the same tripartite characterisation could be applied to most of Foucault’s other works, though with perhaps a different admixture. Firstly, it is a work of history, the history of ideas, telling us what people thought in the past. This is obviously not its main purpose, but it is so lengthy and erudite that it still is, in its bulk, a history of ideas *simpliciter*. This can

10 Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” 514-5.

11 Stuart Elden, “The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault’s History of Sexuality.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 9:1 (2005), 31.

12 Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” 507.

13 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 341.

doubtless be said of all Foucault's works on ancient thought. It can be read then as a very interesting survey of the transition from Ancient Greek philosophy through Roman and Hellenistic philosophy, to Christian theology. The bulk of this book is made up of passages which are informative about what thinkers of the first and second centuries A.D., the Roman and Hellenistic thinkers of the Imperial period, were thinking, particularly the Stoics as exemplified by Epictetus and the Epicureans as exemplified by Epicurus.

Secondly, it is, like most of Foucault's work, and certainly all of his historical works, a "history of the present", history which looks for the underpinnings of the present, a genealogy tracing its lineage. "It seems to me that the stake, the challenge for any history of thought, is precisely that of grasping when a cultural phenomenon of a determinate scale actually constitutes within the history of thought a decisive moment that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects."¹⁴ It is of course in this that it becomes distinctively Foucauldian, oriented unmistakably towards the present and in understanding how we today came about. This purpose is stamped firmly in the first hour of the course, in which Foucault distinguishes the epoch he will go on to discuss from post-Cartesian Western thought or post-Scholastic thought, in which the subject is no longer in question.

However, there is a significant deficiency in this work *qua* history of the present. Prior to the 1980s, Foucault's preoccupation had always been with the roots of (late) modernity, material which was not quite contemporary, but always manifestly relevant to the present. Now, in the work under discussion, Foucault is of course still animated by a desire to write the history of the present. Indeed, his very reason for going back to the ancients in the first place was his intuition that it was simply inadequate in a genealogy of sexuality to confine himself to the more recent discourse. Yet, because Foucault died while the *History of Sexuality* series was still in production, we are left with a gap where a book should have been (*The Confessions of the Flesh*) that would have joined Foucault's work on ancient thought to Foucault's reflections on more recent history. And while, as Stuart Elden has pointed out,¹⁵ there are significant new connections made in this work between ancient and Christian practices, these are not generally made. This gap thus places a good deal of Foucault's reflection into the realm of historical curiosities. But this is not taking into account the third dimension of the book.

This third dimension is really less manifest, but I think of the greatest importance: the book is an attempt to survey the ground upon which to build future practices of the self and thereby future selves. The historical detail of what it looked like when people actually had an ethic of the self constitutes a

14 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 9.

15 Stuart Elden, Review of *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 48.

smorgasbord of possibilities for self direction. Foucault does not mean to present these corpses for resurrection. We cannot go back to these forms of self-relation. But seeing these radically different possibilities which used to exist is in itself an experience which destabilises our current mode of being and thereby opens new possibilities.

Foucault does not pass judgement on ancient wisdom. He neither calls it good or bad, nor does he treat it as a set quaint historical artefacts or call for its resurrection. Rather, this is ground opened up to us incidentally in the course of Foucault's grand analysis. However, this opening up is not in fact accidental to Foucault's project. It is not so much the specific pieces of ancient wisdom which are opened up, but rather the general form of ancient wisdom. A number of concepts stand out in this regard. One is the aforementioned and well-known concept of care of the self, which can be renewed without calling for a Graeco-Roman primitivism. There is also the clearly related concept of an ethic or aesthetic of existence. For Foucault, it is an open question whether such an aesthetic can be constituted today, and suffices to note the ways such a constitution had, in his opinion, been attempted in the nineteenth century and earlier by a variety of philosophers.¹⁶

In addition, Foucault introduces an idiosyncratic concept of 'spirituality'. For Foucault, spirituality is a practice by which a subject alters himself in order to gain access to a truth, in marked contrast to the modern conception of subjectivity, which holds that the subject is already capable of knowledge and simply needs to look in order to see, without needing to work on the self. Foucault's precise definition of spirituality is, "the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject."¹⁷

It is not clear what has happened to spirituality, except that it has, "from the sixteenth century," been denigrated in favour of "intellectual knowledge."¹⁸ The modern view of the subject of knowledge has not been without its residual opposition, however; spirituality never entirely disappeared from Western thought.¹⁹ Here Foucault goes somewhat further, specifically identifying Marxism and psychoanalysis in the twentieth century, if not as spiritualities *per se*, then as movements which need to be thought of along the same lines.²⁰ The problem here, though, is whether psychoanalysis is capable of actually understanding itself as quasi-spiritual, and therefore of becoming a new spirituality—it often seems hidebound by a dedication to a conception of science which has historically been allergic to spirituality.

16 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 251.

17 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 19.

18 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 309.

19 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 28.

20 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 29.

Foucault does not bother asking the question about Marxism, and with good reason, since Marxism is not capable of understanding itself in this way.

If we are to have a new form of spirituality which does understand what it is, as by implication the ancient ones did, whether this can come from psychoanalysis or must come from elsewhere, Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Self* serves to widen the breach in which it might be created.²¹

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21 I should like to thank the editors of *Foucault Studies* for their patient and helpful comments on an earlier version of this review.