

REVIEW

Timothy O'Leary. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002). ISBN: 0826456278

Foucault's later work (1976-1984) has already been widely commented on,¹ and many critics have been trained in the "ethical turn" in Foucault's later thinking. Some Foucauldians consider that his genealogy of power remains, perhaps necessarily, incomplete and they denounce Foucault's "technocratization shift." Some classical scholars blame Foucault for his misunderstandings of Hellenistic thinking, while other commentators criticize Foucault's artificial, individualistic and nihilistic "return to the subject," and some political thinkers take a radical stance against the aestheticising of practical problems in Foucault's later works. Until the end, Foucault remained one of the most polemical thinkers of his time. His later work continues to be the subject of many controversies, and there is still no consensus about the philosophical value of his ethics. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* provides a well-detailed and exhaustive study of Foucault's ethical thinking, providing worthy arguments to feed the debates.

Timothy O'Leary presents Foucault's "art of ethics" as being, in large part, a Nietzschean answer to the Socratic question, "How is one to live?" The author clearly explains the meaning and consequences of the "fourfold division of ethical practices," which includes the ethical substance, the mode of subjection, the practices of the self and the mode of being (pp. 12, 41, and elsewhere) as defined by Foucault in his introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*. The book approaches Foucault's ethics from different angles by showing the unity in the seemingly discontinuous project of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. The author also discusses other writings of the same period (late interviews and unpublished lectures at Collège de France) in order to understand Foucault's later reinterpretation of his work in terms of a problematization of the ethical subject. O'Leary presents Foucault's "art of existence" (the "aesthetics of existence" or the "etho-poetics" as Foucault sometimes calls it)

1 Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999); Thomas Lemke, *Eine Kritik der politischen Vernunft. Foucaults Analyse des modernen Gouvernementalität* (Berlin: Argument, 1997); Jeremy Moss (Ed.), *The Later Foucault* (London: Sage, 1998). See also the special section of *Foucault Studies* (No. 2, May 2005) on "Rethinking the Later Foucault."

as an answer to the end of moral beliefs. In a world disenchanted with universal good, the new ethical task begins by refusing who we are supposed to be and by promoting new forms of subjectivity. In this context, Foucault's aim (which is similar to Nietzsche's) corresponds to "an attempt to formulate an ethics that would replace traditional moralities" (p. 134). Both Nietzsche and Foucault see the "ethical creation of ourselves" as an answer to the contemporary crisis of morality.

In the first three chapters, the author presents a comprehensive overview of Foucault's ethical project. It begins with an explanation of how the *scientia sexualis* finds its expression today in secularized confessional practices. O'Leary shows how those moral practices of confession (the new techniques of control or individualization) have to be substituted for "spiritual exercises," being inspired by the care of the self tradition developed in Greco-Roman reflections on ethics. The author explains why and how the "golden age" of this care of the self tradition (late Antiquity) has an advantage over the Platonic-Socratic tradition: that of not being reserved for elite leaders, but potentially open to everyone.

Other chapters relate Foucault's ethics to the ethics of contemporary thinkers. These may be the most interesting sections for those who are already familiar with Foucault's work. They develop some interesting thoughts about Foucault's main sources of inspiration and give original answers to critiques of Foucault made over the past few years. Chapter 4 discusses attacks on Foucault's late work by classical scholars (Pierre Hadot among others). Chapter 5 presents an interesting discussion of how Foucault was received by sub-cultures (gay, dandyism, etc.) and queer theorists (David Halperin and Simon Goldhill). Chapter 6 explores the relevance of Deleuze's anti-humanist reading of Foucault's later work. Chapter 7 brings out fundamental differences between Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" (which accepts plurality and refuses any kind of ritualization) and Walter Benjamin's description of Fascism as "aestheticization of politics" (which implies the construction of an "auratic" identity). Chapter 8 shows how *parrhesia* (freedom of speech) is a philosophical technique of self-transformation that evolved from Plato, by way of Montaigne and Nietzsche, to become the main critical tool of Foucault's practical thinking, and, finally, Chapter 9 deals with the well-known critique by those representing "Critical Theory" of Foucault's lack of normative principles and universal grounds for ethical actions; it explains how these two perspectives imply radically opposed understandings of the "attitude of Enlightenment."

One of the most important questions O'Leary raises deals with the meaning of the word "aesthetics" in Foucault's later work, and how this "aesthetics" relates to ethics.² As we know, the expression "aesthetics (or art

2 See especially pp. 51-57 and conclusion.

or stylization) of existence” is Foucault's free translation of the Greek “*techne tou biou*.” The fact that *techne* is rendered by “aesthetics” is the source of a few misunderstandings, which O'Leary carefully tries to clarify. One such misunderstanding is in saying that Foucault wants to revive the old Platonic tradition that establishes an equivalence between the Good and the Beautiful.³ But, in fact, Foucault breaks with that tradition. For him, the realm of ideas and eternal essences clearly belongs to the past. Creating ourselves “as works of art” does not imply the contemplation of a universal truth/beauty. Foucault's conception of ethical aesthetics has nothing to do with the great cosmic order or with the normative role of nature and reason (Stoicism). Nor does it obey any eternal principle of good taste (Kant). For Foucault, creating ourselves as works of art thus means acting in the absence of universal and external norms without trying to objectivize (knowledge) or to dominate (power) other existences. O'Leary suggests that “Foucault's reading of ancient ethics” is neither “a ‘distortion’ of the truth” nor “simply an interpretation which picks out certain ‘neglected’ themes.” This “anachronism in Foucault's ‘aesthetics of existence’” is only “apparent” (p. 57) because Foucault never naively repeats or returns to a lost style of existence. That is why O'Leary advisedly prefers to speak in terms of a “creative meeting” rather than an “encounter” with the Greeks (p. 87). But even O'Leary himself goes beyond this thought, I believe, when he describes Foucault's ethics in terms of a “return to” (p. 173) the world of Classical Athens and Imperial Rome. In order to “destroy” the appearance of anachronism, I think it would be appropriate to refer to Heidegger's later sense of history, which might be less “reverential” than O'Leary thinks.⁴ In fact, Foucault's original thesis of a regrettable forgetting of the ancient care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*) shares some deep “structural” similarities with Heidegger's posited oblivion of the question of Being. For both thinkers, we do not have to repeat, return to, copy or imitate the past, but rather we have to “commemorate” (*Andenken*) a certain past by opening new *possible* interpretations (of the Presocratic experience of Being for Heidegger, of the Imperial care of the self for Foucault). Heidegger and Foucault do not believe in “historiographical accuracy” (which belongs to the ontical world for Heidegger, and to the traditional moral world for Foucault). This parallel drawn between Heidegger's and Foucault's sense of history does not undermine O'Leary's analysis, but could open a new perspective that would be helpful in understanding Foucault's specific way of aestheticising Greek and Roman ethics, and possibly in extending the inquiry.

3 See Plato, *Timeus*, 87c. O'Leary also recalls that the same idea can be found in Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1, 6, 9.

4 Heidegger is only mentioned twice in O'Leary's book: on p. 22 where it is said that Foucault's relation to the Greeks is different than Heidegger's (we would like to know in which sense), and on p. 98 where he qualifies Heidegger's sense of history as being “reverential.”

This book elegantly presents the unity of Foucault's ultimate work, the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, a highly complex work that goes from the seventeenth century to today and back to Greco-Roman culture; from a history of modern sexuality to the techniques of self; from bio-politics to ethics; from sexuality to governmentality; from the death of man to the modes of subjectivation, and so forth. O'Leary successfully brings coherence to all these seemingly chaotic problematizations by helping us to face today's new challenges in ethics. Some readers may have expected a discussion of some of Foucault's primary historical sources in the development of his etho-poetics, something Leary does not do. Here, I am referring to works by Peter Brown on the Hellenistic period, as well as those by Jacob Burckhardt and Stephen Greenblatt on the Renaissance.⁵ But O'Leary's book makes a definitive contribution to the understanding of Foucault's etho-poetics in relation to ancient ethical practices and to contemporary philosophers. Finally, all the references are given in French and English (a real asset), and there are generous endnotes and bibliography.

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5 Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Period of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2 vol., trans. S.G.C. Middlemore, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Brown and Burckhardt are mentioned in O'Leary's book (pp. 90, 173 and 175, note 7) even though their works are not listed in the general bibliography. For the importance of those two authors in Foucault "historicality", see the index at the end of *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). Greenblatt is mentioned by Foucault in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* (trans. R. Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988). It is interesting to note that the notion of "style" plays a central role in Peter Brown's interpretation of late antiquity. See his French introduction as well as Paul Veyne's preface in *Genèse de l'antiquité tardive*, trans. A. Rousselle (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).