

MICHEL FOUCAULT: SUBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS OF THE SELF AS PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

(THE TELOS OF FOUCAULT'S PHILOSOPHICAL
THOUGHT)

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Abstract:

This article presents the thoughts of Michel Foucault, a cultural historian, philosopher, and intellectual, who brilliantly analyses the historical events of the past as creative criticisms for shaping human attitudes today. Through this historical analysis, Foucault examines the ways in which subjects were formed from classical times to the present. Foucault sees how this process takes a long time, starting from the subject as formed through various discourses to the subject as forming itself. To arrive at the latter, Foucault brings his readers to the classical Greco-Roman era to see how humans live their freedom and responsibilities. He also shows them various practices of the self through meditation and inner examination, as well as the practice of telling the truth (*parrhesia*) to oneself and to others. All this in the era was known as ethics and also seen as a practice of freedom. For Foucault, life must always be seen as a work of art that requires the attention of the artist from time to time in order to arrive at an art level considered useful and valuable to many people. Foucault calls this an aesthetic of existence, where life is not merely seen as something given, but also that must always be fought for creatively from day to day. Life must be seen as an unstable condition in which there are always cracks, therefore it has to be fixed from time to time. This is what Foucault calls a model of human existence.

Keywords:

Foucault • freedom • subject • ethics • self • aesthetics

Introduction

Michel Foucault, a 20th century intellectual and thinker, whose name was closely attached to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a French atheistic existentialist thinker, was born on October 15, 1926 in Poitiers, France, and died untimely on June 2, 1984.² He was a specialist in many fields of study and therefore, he is known as a historian, a philosopher, a sociologist, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, a penologist and an expert in the study of criminology, a politician, an expert in archaeology, etc. Because of this, in libraries his name can be found in different sections according to his expertise. Besides, he was internationally known as an expert of the history of the system of thought. He was also a visiting professor in many countries around the world.

His originality in philosophical thought invites various discussions and polemics, as it raises a lot of controversies in the history of philosophy. Controversy arises not only in the realm of thought, in that his logic is completely different from the modern thinking claimed by Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, but also on the fact that many of his interpreters doubt of many historical facts that he uses in many of his works.³

Modernist thought is mainly based in reason, subject, consciousness, essence, transcendence, foundation, human nature, etc, which, according to Foucault and postmodernist thinkers, neglects many other aspects of human life, such as unconsciousness, memory, imagination, historical and cultural backgrounds, and all other aspects that could be categorized as pluralism, human varieties, diversities, etc. This way of thinking has been then planted deeply in the human unconscious from one generation to another and has become pattern of thinking, expressed in the pattern of speaking and behaving. All other aspects which were outside of the rational subject or consciousness were considered irrational, unthinkable, illusive, magic, etc. Thus, Foucault was labeled by some as an irrational or anti-humanistic thinker.⁴

The next controversy is concerned with the accuracy of the historical objective truths that appear in his many works. Several historians doubt the accuracy of his information about certain events in European cultures, classical Greco-Roman customs and beliefs, political and cultural

habits, etc. Moreover, the controversy also emerged about his last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*) which do not treat all information about sexuality, as historians might have generally thought, but emphasizes rather the notion of subjectivity and the practice of freedom.⁵

Despite all the controversies emerging out of his works, we should be fair to Foucault's intellectual journey from his early works to his last published pieces. Foucault is known as willfully anti-systematic, and therefore many readers find difficulties in reading his works.⁶ The difficulty in reading him concerns on the one hand the fact that his work has attracted the attention of various linguistic and academic communities, and on the other that he has a powerful and genuine originality of thought. Moreover, he has an ample vision, a highly disciplined and coherent one, that makes his work *sui generis*, as Bernauer claims in his book.⁷ However, if we read through all his last seminars, interviews, and lectures at the Collège de France sometime before his death, we realize where Foucault began and where he ended up his intellectual journey.

Intellectual Journey: Subjectivity Seen in Foucault's Early Works

In spite of his unsystematic ways of putting things together, through his many interviews and seminars as well as his many courses delivered at the Collège de France shortly before his death, the readers can easily locate his thought process. In his early works Foucault concentrates on historical facts that were to him hidden or being forgotten in the history of consciousness. He picks them up and looks at them seriously. Though all these historical facts are forgotten, yet they are on the surface of human experience. Let us say, for example, that sickness and illness, the mentally ill, the delinquent, and the like, were seen as people who had no value and were not useful for society, and therefore were of no use to be taken care of. Those people and all their situations Foucault calls "madness" (*la folie*) in his thought process.

Let us see closely his piece on leprosy written in *Folie et deraison: histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*.⁸ Those who suffered from leprosy were regarded as dangerous and the disease was very dangerous and contagious. In Christian teaching at the time, leprosy was a sign of God's anger and

punishment. They therefore should be removed from family members and from society. Later on in other periods of time, they were gathered and brought home, and for them were prepared hospitals (*l'hopital general*) to take care of them and to cure them. In a later period of time, the Christian teaching changed so that the lepers were seen as the people of God, and therefore, helping them would be beneficial with a lot of grace. This enhanced Christians' desire to help them.

There were of course causes of the disease and therefore people had to take care of sanitation in all aspects of life, including the surrounding environment. People did not only take curative action for the sick but also preventive action. Then, education and health facilities were prepared by society for the well-being of its citizens. Nowadays we see many doctors with their various specialties and expertise serving various hospitals for different diseases. Here we see how the government took action politically to help all citizens.

Here we also see that those who were sick were not well aware of their disease. The healthy, normal ones looked at them as sick and abnormal; hence they had to be normalized. The venues they took to help these sick people were in accord with normal thinking. These suffering people were treated as objects to be acted upon. They were objectified. And so were the many mechanisms of helping them. However, it is interesting to notice that the sick persons were also aware of themselves as subjects, as they were well treated. In this sense they also felt important. It was useful to see how the madmen were made subjects in such a relation of power.

Interesting also to note here is the influence of Nietzsche on Foucault, who picked up the surface of certain experiences and made it intelligible in order to be thought of by mankind. Therefore, all treatments on madmen were seen as the progress of human thought in terms of what kind of treatments should be taken in different eras of thought. As expert in the history of the systems of thought, Foucault is highly interested in this matter rather than the accuracy of the historical information. In other words, the historical facts might be wrong on one or several occasions, yet the more crucial thing was the movement of human thought on certain special issues. All the above mentioned historical information justifies that each era of thought has its own way of thinking and behaving towards

certain issues. In other words, people in those different eras of thought have some episteme which shows that they have certain knowledge of what they are experiencing.⁹

Foucault's Subjectivity in His Axis of Power

Foucault's next axis of thought is power. There he tells us about delinquency and the people involved in criminality, who should be confined in prisons. This appeared in his *Discipline and Punish*, and the deployment of sexuality, which is found in the *History of Sexuality*, volume 1.¹⁰ These two different discourses, namely on prison and on sexuality, were certainly two different ways of showing his second theme, that was power. The first discourse was centralized on the issue of criminals, on how the delinquents and the criminals were treated from the beginning of the 17th century to the 18th century. They were at first treated not as human beings and were tortured vehemently and could even be killed instantly, depending on the type of criminality they were involved in. Later on, they were treated mildly and more humanely as people thought about them quite differently. Then, they would be going through court, be examined, and so on, according to the procedures of law. They were probably put into prison and stayed there temporarily, depending on their charge. They were confined in close spaces in order that they become aware of their faults, and to escape from many other threats coming from their victims and their families. While they were in prison, they had to obey all rigid regulations, as ways of disciplining them. They were really objectified, and were made to work in order to afford their lives in prison. However, sooner or later the prisoners were aware of themselves being there, and that they no longer felt themselves as mere objects, but subjects of all those strict schedules and regulations. They could even manage to control their own guards and all other prison staff.

In this scenario we also see how people thought of doing some good things to these people. People from different institutions participated in doing something for all the prisoners. Not only the particular institutions but also different state institutions, particularly those involved in this matter, would think of the many ways they could benefit these people. The prisoners were objectified on the one hand, yet, on the other, they also had some functions and roles, accepting themselves as subjects that were

doing something for other prisoners and all practitioners in prison. They were clearly seen in the power relations practiced among the prisoners and the practitioners in prison. This was called a non-discursive formation of the subject.

In *The History of Sexuality* volume 1, Foucault maps out the discourse on sexuality from the early 17th century through 19th century, and saw the deployment of sexuality which affected the whole population. From the beginning of the 17th century on, sex and sexual acts were guarded strictly and were limited at home, in bedrooms, and people were not allowed to speak of them publicly. It was a real taboo. The sin against sex was only acknowledged in the confessional table with the confessor, who behaved like a psychoanalyst who listened closely to the sex problem faced by his client. However, Foucault here does not concern himself with sex and sexual acts, for to him talking about sex was boring.¹¹ He is rather concerned with the issue of sexuality as a cultural construction, of how people talked about it in different cultures and times, how people thought of it, analyzed it, and brought it into discourse.

In this volume, Foucault analyzes sexuality experienced by hysterical women from the beginning of the 17th century to the Victorian era, full of repressive hypotheses. However, as the reaction to this, we also experience the glamorous women of modern times. Sexuality was really repressed and could only be carried out with many moral codes and demands. To express one's pleasure of sexuality, prostitution houses were erected, complemented with moral regulations and mechanisms. Men and women who came to these houses had to respect all these moral codes and regulations. We see here that men and women were still objectified by various kinds of mechanisms developed by institutions. Men and women also suffered from psychological problems, and therefore aids came either from the state or religious institutions to normalize them. In Christianity it was known that these people should be taken care of through pastoral care, for example with the confession to a confessor as the representative of God, who had the right to forgive the sins of sexuality and other sins committed.

Then from the 19th century on, the discourse on sexuality started being seen different. Men and women had more freedom to express themselves as sexual beings. They felt far freer to do whatever they wanted.

The hysterical women were no longer there. Most women expressed themselves in a more glamorous way in their speaking and behaving. They had more freedom to manage their clothing, take care of their bodies, and relate to other women and men. The women went shopping more often to find jewelry or cosmetics or, beautiful clothes; they visited beauty salons regularly, taking care of their hair and skin, to exercise, have massages, etc. They would more often shop for groceries to find diets to keep them looking beautiful, keep their skin smooth, etc. They did not do this only for themselves, but also for men. Of course, young men, on the other hand, would also take care of their bodies and all their physical and psychological needs as well. This was really important as young girls and young boys needed each other in a kind of power relations. Such strategy was practiced all the time either by women or men in a mode of power-knowledge relation.

All the above mentioned mechanisms would also influence the development of industries, in terms of economic, social, political, psychological and cultural lives as well. We witness in the modern era the glamorous life expressed in the way people live, what they wear and they behave, enhancing young people's lives, but also causing concern for many. We then ask, "Is that the meaning of freedom that they achieve in their life, or is that something which can ruin them? Do people have freedom in their life and work? Do young people experience joy? In all these we see the power-knowledge relation intertwined in historical and cultural frames.

Foucault's Last Project: Constitution of the Self

Foucault's last philosophical project appears in his *The Use of Pleasure* (volume 2) and *The Care of the Self*, vol.3),¹² and in his many lectures, seminars, interviews, and the courses delivered at the Collège de France shortly before his death. He started discussing about this in 1978-9 and intensified his discussions after 1981-2. In these two volumes he elaborates on sexuality as practiced in the classical Greco-Roman period from around the 5th century BC to the 2nd century AD. Beside sexuality, he also concentrates on the *πάρρησιά* (*parrhesia*: truth-telling) which he discusses intensively in his last seminars.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault discusses the problematization of pleasure, concentrating on the *aphrodisia*, a term understood as acts, gestures, and contacts that produced certain form of pleasure.¹³ There he discloses the *aphrodisia* known in Plato's and Aristotle's works, the practice of sexual acts which enhanced desire that is within human beings, as well as gestures and all kinds of human contacts which are dynamic and enhancing. There he also discusses the moral issues emerging from the discussion of the sexual act, reproduction, sexual withdrawal, how husband and wife should live their married life, and erotic relations with boys, etc. He also discusses dietetics, the ethical practices of sexuality, confession and one's spiritual management in Christianity, erotic life, etc. In brief, I may say that his *The Use of Pleasure* discloses various problems of sex in classical Greek thought.

In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault introduces a set of concepts that are absent in volumes 1 and 2. In this book, he concentrates on the issues of the cultivation of the self through the experience of desire and pleasure, the self and others, the woman and the body, digging out all classical texts that talk about the practice of the self as the ethics of freedom. Briefly speaking, this volume analyzes these problems as they appeared in Greek and Latin texts of the first and second centuries AD. By discussing desire and pleasure, Foucault wants to show that man is a desiring subject. The most important thing seen here is Foucault's conceptualization of ethics, his theoretical elaboration of ethics as a framework for interpreting these Greek and Roman problematizations of sex.

In brief, these two volumes concentrate on the issue of the cultivation of the self. The question asked then is, why sexuality and why truth-telling (*parrhesia*)?. Foucault realizes that the classical Greco-Roman practice of sexuality centered on the subject, who is aware of him/her self based on freedom and responsibility. In sexuality, people should talk about the desire and pleasure which is given and implanted in mankind and no body can force it from the outside. Men and women have to be open to themselves without any self-delusion and extreme self-love. All moral codes and regulations are to be obeyed and practiced freely and in full responsibility. Here we see that people are no longer objectified and then made subjects, but how the subject constitutes him- or her- self in the practice of freedom. Or to put it another way, how the subject relates to his/her self (*rappport a soi*).

Foucault's last project of thought is centralized on the constitution of the self. And the history of ancient sex was certainly the history of ancient ethics. He argues that our history of morality should not be exclusively focused on the history of the code of moral behavior, but we must also pay careful attention to the history of the forms of moral subjectivation, to how we constitute ourselves as moral subjects of our own actions.¹⁴

According to Foucault, ethics as the self's relationship to itself has four main aspects: *first*, the ethical substance which is the part of oneself that is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgment; *second*, the mode of subjection, that is, the way in which the individual establishes his or her relation to moral obligations and rules; *third*, the self-forming activity or ethical work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject; and *fourth*, the *telos*, the mode of being at which one aims in behaving ethically.¹⁵

It is clear then that in discussing the ethics of the self as the practice of freedom, one does not evade from the discussion about the governmentality which interested him around 1980-1. We see there the intersection between these two themes: the history of subjectivity and the analysis of the forms of governmentality. The history of subjectivity begins with the study concentrated on the divisions carried out in society in the name of madness, illness, and delinquency, and then the effects of these divisions on the constitution of the subject. We have also seen that the history of subjectivity tries to locate modes of objectivation of the subject in scientific knowledge as concerned with language (linguistic), work (economics) and biology (life).¹⁶

As for the forms of governmentality that had been of interest since 1977, this analysis responds to a "double objective." On the one hand, Foucault wants to criticize current conceptions of power, which was thought as a unitary system, a critique undertaken thoroughly in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. On the other hand, he wants to analyze power as a domain of strategic relations between individuals and groups, relations whose strategies were to govern the conduct of these individuals.¹⁷

The last point that Foucault devotes himself to is the discussion of parrhesia or truth-telling (*veridiction*). This theme becomes the topical point

in his seminars at the University of California at Berkeley, USA entitled “Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia”. Parrhesia is a Greek phrase that consists of two words, namely “pan” which means all and “rhesis” or “rhema” meaning expression, what is said, or speech. This expression also means the speaking skill, openness, politeness, honesty, fairness, and freedom of speech. Parrhesia in its real meaning is understood as the verbal activity to express everything which is in one’s own mind (*action de tout déclarer, tout exprimer*). Implicit in the word parrhesia are one’s freedom of speech, one’s relation to truth, one’s bravery of telling the truth as this calls for danger, and also as an obligation and virtue as well.¹⁸

The importance of the discourse on parrhesia is how an individual is able to tell the truth to other people, and that what he is telling is something that is true. This means that the individual has certain relation with truth and therefore he/she should be true either in words or in deeds. To reach this step Foucault brings his readers to the issue of meditation and the examination of conscience in different spiritual exercises, and ascetics. All these exercises are kinds of the practices of the self which then lead to the care of the self. Through all these spiritual exercises and the examinations of conscience, the individual could govern him or her conduct well, and this also unfolds the mode of being that one already has in his or her life. This is what Foucault calls the art of existence. Life should be seen as a work of art on how the individual builds up his or her self continually in his or her life. This is what Foucault calls the aesthetic of existence.

The discussion on subjectivity finally reaches the *telos* of his project, namely the care of the self. Foucault deliberately brings his readers to the classical Greco-Roman period with all their life styles, and he wants to show that in antiquity ethics was seen as the practice of freedom. People’s freedom was highly respected and everybody seemed mature in his or her own self, in the sense that the individual had a good relation to his or her self.

Conclusion

Foucault’s philosophical project finally ends up with his untimely death as he was busy working on his last work on the care of the self. In that work, he starts with the analysis of several historical facts in the past,

using the archaeological method, digging more and more information. He thus witnesses how the individual (the sick, mentally ill and the delinquent) is objectified by the normal and the healthy. However, at the same time, the mad man and woman also take him-or her-self as subject, who has some self-respect as he or she has been well taken care of. Here we see that there are always power relations working on all different strategies played between the abnormal and the normal.

Foucault then moves to the discussion of power. There he uses the genealogical method with his non-discursive practices to find out power-knowledge relations working in the discourse on criminality and prison, as well as on sexuality. He goes through all kinds of repressive hypotheses and sees how the criminals and the hysterical women were treated as objects in the beginning, and then they became aware of themselves as subjects taken care of by others. More than this, the subjects become more conscious to their own obligations and embark on taking care for others. This can be seen in how the prisoners take up their responsibility for all other prisoners by working to earn money for all of them.

Finally, at the end of his life he talked much about taking care of the self. In the discourse on sexuality, the individual is aware of him-or her-self as an historical and moral being, that he or she should function according to all kinds of moral codes and prescriptions until he or she is finally aware of him-or her-self as a desiring subject, who has this given grace implanted in him-or her-self. He is then aware of him-or her-self as a free subject who has the capacity to creatively search for a certain mode of being.

In terms of *parrhesia*, Foucault also goes back to classical exercises of the self through various practices of the self in different historical periods, and how the individual develops a relation to him-or her-self. Foucault shows here the subject who has a relation with him-or her-self through the discourse of truth. The subject actually has a certain relation to truth. This was what the classical Greco-Romans called ethics, which was the practice of freedom. Ethics is something that comes out of one's own awareness of him- or her-self as a social being, how he/she takes care for others. Here Foucault also talks about the capability of an individual to govern him-or her-self well through the governing of one's conduct. He also claims that if one is able to govern oneself, one is also supposed to be able to govern others.

Foucault claims that this ethics as the practice of the self should come to the ability to build a mode of being, a lifestyle, or an art of existence. Life is seen as a work of art that needs to be valorized and re-evaluated all the time. We never come to a full and precise level of maturity. However, one should be aware that human maturity is always temporary, fractured and unstable. Therefore, as a work of art, our life needs to be creatively and continually built. We never accept this kind of life as something given, but something that needs one's own creativity and continual refreshment. That is the reason Foucault addresses life as an aesthetic of existence.

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- 1 Email: konradkebungsvd@gmail.com.
- 2 See Didier, Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, translated by Betsy Wing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 3-5.
- 3 See Jan Goldstein's "Introduction" of *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge,USA: Blackwell, 1994) 2-15.
- 4 See Konrad Kebung, *Rasionalisasi dan Penemuan Ide-Ide* (Jakarta: Prestasi Pustaka Publ., 2008) 166.
- 5 Goldstein, *op. cit.*, 12-15. See also Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, vol 2, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) and *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, vol.3, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
- 6 See James Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force to Flight: Towards an Ethic for Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Humanities Press International, 1992) 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 See Foucault's *Folie et deraison: histoire de la folie a l'age classique* (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1961); republished with the title *Histoire de la folie a l'age classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). English translation by Richard Howard, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

- 9 All these can be seen in his early works such as *Madness and Civilization*, *ibid.*, *Naissance de la clinique: Un archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963, 1972). English translation by Alan Sheridan, *The Birth of the Clinique: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); *Les mots et les choses: un archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). Translated by Alan Sheridan, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973); *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). English translation by Alan Sheridan, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- 10 See Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). English Translation, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Also his *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). English translation *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction*, by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 11 See Goldstein, *op. cit.*, 63.
- 12 See his *L'histoire de la sexualité 2: L'usage des plaisirs*, *op. cit.* English translation *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, *op. cit.*; *L'histoire de la sexualité 3: Le souci de soi*, *op. cit.* English translation *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, *op. cit.* See also his "Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia" (his series of seminars delivered at the University of California at Berkeley, USA in October – November 1983). This seminar was personally edited by Joseph Pearson who then got it published entitled *Michel Foucault: Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2001). This unpublished seminar was also deepened and analyzed intensively by Konrad Kebung in his dissertation entitled "Michel Foucault: Parrhesia and The Question of Ethics" at Boston University, USA in 1994 and was then translated and published in Indonesian under the title *Michel Foucault: Parrhesia dan Persoalan Mengenai Etika* (Jakarta: Obor, 1997).
- 13 See Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*, 38-62.
- 14 See Goldstein, *op. cit.*, 65-66.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 66. See also Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*, *op. cit.*, 26-32, or "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 340-372.
- 16 *Ibid.* See also Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, *op. cit.*
- 17 *Ibid.* See also Foucault's "Subjectivité et vérité, 1980-1," in *Résumé des cours, 1970-1982* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) 134-5.
- 18 See his "Discourse on Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia". See also Joseph Pearson, *op. cit.*, and Konrad Kebung, *Parrhesia dan Persoalan mengenai Etika*, *op. cit.*