

Michel Foucault. *About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self.* Trans. Graham Burchell. University of Chicago Press 2015. 160 pp. \$25.00 USD (Cloth ISBN 9780226188546).

In November 1980, Michel Foucault delivered two lectures at Dartmouth College. A few weeks earlier, he presented similar lectures at Berkeley, which were very well attended and were followed by a lively discussion. These materials and an interview conducted at about the same time are published in this slim volume, together with a very informative introduction, footnotes that compare the Dartmouth and Berkeley lectures, and endnotes that provide references to related materials elsewhere in Foucault's work. The title, chosen to prevent confusion between these and the similarly titled lectures at the *Collège de France* given in the same year, follows Foucault's suggestion that 'the title of [these] two lectures could have been in fact...“About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self”' (27).

Perhaps the best way to approach this book is by abstracting away from what we know today about Foucault's late life and work, of his lectures in the *Collège de France* now published in their entirety, of his archives now partly accessible, and to try to imagine ourselves in the position of the listeners being presented with the outlines of Foucault's new project.

Foucault begins the first lecture with a scene taken from the history of 19th century psychiatry: the French psychiatrist François Leuret administering ice cold showers to one of his patients while interrogating him on his illness. What is going on in this scene? Not a 'truth therapy', a common practice in earlier times based on the belief that delirium was incompatible with truth. The truth that Leuret is forcing out of his patient is of a different nature; it is not a truth about the external reality, but about the nature of the patient himself. Leuret requests from his patient an act; he wants him to perform an explicit affirmation of his madness. This example serves as the point of departure for a reflection on 'the strange and complex relationships developed in our societies between individuality, discourse, truth, and coercion' (20) or, in another words, for a genealogy of the 'hermeneutics of the self'. Of this program, Foucault claims to have already carried out an examination of the subject as a speaking, living, working being (a reference to *The Order of Things*) and of the 'practical understanding formed in institutions' (a reference to *Madness and Civilization* and to *Discipline and Punish*). 'Now I wish', says Foucault, 'to study those forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself' (24).

It was in analyzing the experience of sexuality, explains Foucault, that he became aware of the existence in any society of 'techniques of the self', by which individuals can, either by themselves or with the help of others, effect certain operations in their bodies, their souls, and their conduct. Foucault proposes to analyze the genealogy of the subject in the West from the point of view of the 'techniques of domination', of the 'techniques of the self', and of their interaction. Among the latter, the ones oriented towards the discovery and formulation of the truth concerning oneself have a special place. In these lectures, Foucault concentrates on the subset of the techniques of examination of conscience and confession, of which Leuret's story constitutes a meaningful example.

The remaining of the first lecture studies the origins of the techniques of examination of conscience in Greek and Latin philosophies, while the second lecture will study the transformation of the classical forms of examination into the form of Christian confession.

The Greek and Roman philosophical techniques of examination of conscience developed as part of the project of transforming the individual, to assist him in achieving a better and happier life. In this project, the ideal of truth telling about oneself had a very limited role (28). Using two texts from Seneca, Foucault highlights the distinctive features of the philosophical examination of conscience as practiced in the philosophical schools. In the first, Seneca writes about the beauty of examining at night the events of the day. It may look as if Seneca was using a language that evokes a judicial setting, with Seneca as both judge and accused. But on a more detailed examination, we realize that the language Seneca is using is more administrative than judicial; Seneca is conducting himself as a permanent administrator of himself. When he refers to his faults, he is evaluating his behavior according to a set of rules of conduct that he has learned. His self-examination evaluates the gap between those rules and the errors committed. The Stoic subject is a ‘point of intersection between a set of memories which must be brought into the present and acts which have to be regulated’ (31). This is confirmed also by the other exercises the Stoics recommend to their followers: continuous reading of the manual of precepts, the *praeparatum malorum*, the enumeration of the tasks to be accomplished, etc. None of these prescriptions refer to an inner truth that the subject is requested to unearth. Even in the case of the Stoic confession to another, which is seemingly closer to the Christian form of confession, Foucault finds clear differences. While in this case something like a confession is made to another, it is not to somebody invested of a special authority. Also, the content of the confession is completely different. The text that Foucault quotes from Seneca ‘appears as an accumulation of relatively unimportant... details’ (33). But more significant than the content of the confession is the intention that sustains it. The Stoic confession is not oriented towards individualization (36). The Stoic practices that Foucault evokes belong to a type of subject that Foucault denominates *gnōmē*, which ‘designates the unity of will and knowledge’ (36).

After reviewing the care of the self in Greek and Roman philosophy, Foucault turns to Christianity in the second lecture. He repeats that his project is to study ‘how was formed in our societies... the interpretative analysis of the self... the hermeneutics of the self’ (53). In this process, the influence of the classical world is much smaller than generally assumed. The hermeneutic model of the self originates in Christianity, and is different from the Greek ideal of ‘know thyself’ (53; Cf. ‘Introduction’, 12, for a summary of the different forms of Self, and for some interesting differences between the Dartmouth and Berkeley’s versions). Christianity is a confession, i.e. a religion that imposes on the believers ‘obligations of truth’. Besides the dogmatic requirements, Christianity requires from the believer an additional form of ‘truth obligation’, the duty to know about one’s nature, temptations, and faults committed, and to unveil these aspects to a third person, bearing witness against himself (54). Furthermore, Christianity establishes, according to Foucault, a relationship between the dogmatic and the individual’s category of truth, without effacing their difference (55-6).

According to Foucault, confession in its technical and restricted sense (auricular confession) is the result of a long and complex development, in which two different early Christian practices—penance and *exagoreusis* or exhaustive verbalization—become intermingled. Penance was originally a status rather than a practice required of the whole congregation. Foucault describes briefly the nature of the penitent status, but what really interests him is to show what penitence was not, i.e. that it did not involve primarily a confession of sins and temptations. Penance is connected to a truth game, a form of dramatic self-revelation central to the ritual of reconciliation of the penitent with the congregation. This truth obligation carries an aspect of punishment in the form of self-inflicted pain and public humiliation. Nevertheless, the penalty does not obey a code of equivalences, but rather ‘a

law of dramatic emphasis and of maximum theatricality' (59). It is also a point at which there is a coincidence between the truth about oneself and the renunciation of oneself (61).

The next section of the lecture turns to the origins of organized confession (*exagoreusis*) in monastic communities. This is a different kind of ritual, reminiscent of the examination of conscience in the philosophical schools, which is not surprising as the monastic institution presented itself as the most elevated form of philosophical life and adopted several practices of pagan philosophy. But these practices were adapted to the two fundamental principles of Christian spirituality: obedience and contemplation (64). Christian spirituality is more concerned with thought than with actions, and first and foremost with the danger of the mobility and wandering of the soul. Foucault quotes from Cassian's *Institutes*, a text concerning the monk's duty to permanent examination, which makes three comparisons. First, Cassian compares the examination of one's thoughts to a miller who separates the good grain from the bad, then to an officer who classifies his soldiers according to their capacities, and finally, to the money changer who measures the worth and value of a coin. One must examine one's thoughts, see if they allow us to contemplate the glory of God, if they have a divine or an evil origin, and if they have been tampered by evil sentiments. This kind of examination, concludes Foucault, is at the same time new and historically important (67).

Confession, in addition to examination, requires verbalizing our inner thoughts. Foucault exemplifies the importance of verbalization with an example of a young monk who suddenly confesses he was stealing bread. The importance of this confession is neither the revelation of the fact, which his confessor may have suspected already, nor the restoration of the stolen bread. It is the act that 'makes appear...the truth, the reality of what has happened' (71). Verbalization is a token of the good or evil of our thoughts, because evil thoughts resist their verbalization, and conversely, verbalization in itself has a redemptive value. But verbalization requires the presence of the confessor. Confession is also a form of renunciation of the self, and in this form it rejoins the form of penitence that Foucault evoked at the beginnings of this second lecture.

Foucault completes his lecture with some general remarks that illustrate the importance of the preceding considerations. With Christianity we witness the emergence of a new kind of self. This self, constituted through the imperative to knowledge, which we may call a 'gnoseological self' (75), demands also the sacrifice of the self. This Christian self remains very much the dominant model of self in our culture, in spite of modernity's attempts to free the self from the self-denial ingrained in it. Foucault names the failed attempt to produce a secularized form of hermeneutic of the self 'the permanent anthropologism of Western thought' (75). Instead, he proposes that we rid ourselves of these technologies and replace them with a 'politics of ourselves' (76).

In the Q&A that follows—corresponding to the Berkeley lectures—we can appreciate the response of the public to Foucault's exposé. A few of the questions refer to Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy of the subject and to Foucault's claim that we need to get rid of the hermeneutics of the self (104-109). Foucault amplifies his earlier remarks, and refers to the practical social and political consequences of the hermeneutics of the self, using pedagogical institutions as an example. He also clarifies his position regarding the status of the human sciences; while there is a constitutive relation between the will to govern and the will to know, this does not necessarily affect the validity or lack thereof of the social sciences (108). Using Piaget as an example, he claims that we need to differentiate between Piaget's evolutionary psychology of the child, which needs to be

evaluated on its own terms, and the belief that evolutionary psychology may give us ‘a piece, a part, an element of the science of human being’ (119). Furthermore, it is plausible, claims Foucault, that a better foundation for the applied human sciences (e.g. pedagogy, psychiatry, etc.) could be found in biology, informatics, etc. (118).

About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self represents a point in time in the elaboration of the ‘final Foucault’. Thanks to the detailed notes added to this text, we learn about the connections between these lectures, the ones that preceded them, and the ones that will follow. Almost all of these writings have now been published and translated. The material obstacles for the reception of Foucault’s late thought have been steadily removed—only the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* remains, and probably will remain unpublished—and his work continues to influence numerous disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences.

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