

Michael C. Berent. *Becoming Foucault: The Poitiers Years*. University of Pennsylvania Press 2023. 000 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover 9781512825145); \$45.00 USD (eBook 9781512825138).

Michael C. Behrent's *Becoming Foucault: The Poitiers Years* traces experiential matrices of Michel Foucault's early life in the French city of Poitiers that likely influenced the development of the philosopher's perspectives. Through rigorous archival document analyses, Behrent illustrates this overlooked period of Foucault's life as impactful in Foucault's identification of the ways in which power-knowledge relations were imposed on subjects, the destructive potential of these relations, and his critique of philosophical anthropology. By proposing genealogies for these aspects of Foucault's ideas, Behrent offers current philosophers an opportunity to come closer to viewing these experiential matrices through Foucault's eyes while simultaneously contributing to understandings of how environmental dynamics can help foster philosophical thought.

The book's primary purpose is to supplement the existing literature on Foucault that focus on the philosopher's later years with largely cursory analyses of the philosopher's earlier life. By presenting these early years in the form of consequential matrices, Behrent situates Foucault as a "philosopher of experience" who was "intrigued by the relationship between experience, knowledge, and truth" (5).

The book contains four chapters plus a brief conclusion and a note on relevant historiography. Chapter one tracks Foucault's lineage back to late eighteenth century, revealing long and intersecting lines of medical doctors within a close-knit collegial community firmly embedded in France's bourgeois class and academic discourse (17-47). Behrent draws from academic and practice-related writings of these ancestors, including Foucault's father who was a surgeon, to illustrate the ways in which their methods required imposing meanings of pathology onto patients, which in some cases could label individuals, such as those with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, as perverse (40-71).

Chapter two explores familial and local understandings of interpersonal relationships, romantic and otherwise. These understandings are presented against a backdrop of bourgeois social identity as achieving societal standing through advancement in professions and participation in public life as knowledge producers, such as when medical doctors served as expert witnesses in court cases to answer questions regarding matters such as patient sanity (72-83). In these roles, the bourgeoisie made substantial contributions to norms and values that were imposed upon societal groups to



reinforce power hierarchies (82-84). These impositions included understandings of marriage as both alliance-making and units enforcing particular types of sexual expression (83-103). An incident where a woman in Poitiers was confined to her room by her family for twenty-five years and cases of asylums in the area may have raised concerns in Foucault regarding society more broadly that he would write about later in life (103-117).

Chapter three examines changing experiences with death Foucault was exposed to during World War Two and life under Vichy France. Behrent outlines the ways in which Poitiers was affected by the Nazi occupation, such as its existing institutions being co-opted into becoming twisted, fascistic versions of themselves, a transition that must have been horrific for those who experienced it (118-155). Foucault “witnessed German troops marching into Poitiers in June 1944 and imposing their authority on its citizens” (121), the construction of camps in the local vicinity for populations deemed undesirable by the Nazis, the degradation of the local press into a propaganda machine, bombs being dropped on the city and his family home being damaged (141-184), and would have heard about one of the teachers at his school being arrested and transported to a death camp (201-217). Behrent interweaves ideas from Foucault’s writings and interviews to illustrate that “Overcoming fascism was thus a crucial element of Foucault’s thought and the experiential matrix from which it emerged” (184).

Chapter four considers influences from Foucault’s philosophy education and notable educators he encountered. These mainly involve Catholic clergy who, through Christian asceticism, foregrounded the conflict between theocentric and anthropocentric understandings of morality (185-211). One notable figure was Father Georges Duret who was part of French resistance activities during the Nazi occupation and who was eventually arrested and executed by the Nazis (212-217). Another was Ligugé monk Marcel Pierrot who was known for arguing that France was in decline due to increased “individualism” and “the rise of secularized habits of thought, the rejection of authority, and science’s emergence as the dominant intellectual idiom” that resulted “in confusion about” life’s “purpose” (219). In addition to these theocentric educators were those more on the anthropocentric side “who viewed the idea of God as reflecting the human mind’s need for order and coherence, rather than any transcendental or supernatural principle” (225) and drew from philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (223-227).

The conclusion and historiographical note outline Behrent’s main takeaway through comparisons with three types of Foucault biographies that the book complements. Behrent

commends Didier Eribon's 1991 biography as providing a personal glimpse at the philosopher from someone who with shared identities and social circles (235-237). David Macey's 1993 biography is presented more systematic and comprehensive but would benefit from a more decisive stance to clear up more contradictory perspectives about characteristics of Foucault's personality (236-237). James Miller's biography, also published in 1993, strives to situate Foucault within larger philosophical contexts and focuses more on Foucault's writings, albeit with some claims regarding the significance of the philosopher's alleged limit-experiences that have been "seen as controversial and even inflammatory in the eyes of Foucault enthusiasts" (237-239). Behrent connects a central theme between these three biographers, the importance of experience in Foucault's philosophy, in using an approach similar to Miller's to trace potential origins of Foucault's thought to formative experiences in the philosopher's early life that may have inspired Foucault's initial topics of focus (228-234, 239-240).

The book has a difficult task of searching for evidence of experiential matrices' influences on the part of Foucault's life that is the least researched. At times, there is no choice but to make unconfirmed suggestions about who Foucault may have interacted with from his family's extended network and which texts he may have read. This is understandable, as we will likely never know the answer to these questions with certainty, but Behrent's thorough analysis is likely the furthest that can be reached in this regard with the sources available. To visualize these experiential matrices, Behrent not only consults archives from Foucault's life, but also sources that reveal the contexts of those who may have had an early influence on the philosopher. The book is not just a biography of Foucault but a collective biography of Foucault's Poitiers network. It demonstrates an impressive level of detail while maintaining a focus on the development of Foucault's thought in a way that elevates it from a standard biographical text. It conveys plausible genealogies of Foucault's ideas not entirely unlike Foucault's own attempts to construct genealogies of broader societal power-knowledge constructs.

In addition to its obvious value to Foucauldian scholars, the book has a greater significance for the history of philosophy more broadly. Can the methods used in this book be applied to biographies of other philosophers? Would it be a useful methodology for attempting to understand the origins of any philosopher's early influences, or just philosophers whose lived experiences are more foregrounded or otherwise evident in their writings? Reading this book invites reflection on what a philosopher of experience is and what differentiates them from philosophers who would not

fall into this category. For future research, Behrent's insights on methodological and metatheoretical considerations regarding the history of philosophy and philosopher biography writing, perhaps coupled with an overview of the current state of this kind of literature, would be a welcome contribution to advance the field and help scholars deepen their understandings of how philosophical thought is developed.

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