Ethics after Foucault

John Rajchman


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0164-2472%28198624%2F21%290%3A13%2F14%3C165%3AEAF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4

Social Text is currently published by Duke University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Ethics has become central to philosophy again. There are many reasons for this, both within philosophy and without. The century-long debate over the place of ethics in marxist or socialist thought has acquired new importance with the proposal of an ethic of "communicative action" and with discussions of "radical democracy." In the analytic or post-analytic tradition, there has been an erosion of the distinction between meta- and applied ethics, and a challenge to the very idea that there exists a single ethical theory or kind of morality that philosophy might articulate. The philosophical controversies over science and over subjectivity have led to new thinking in ethics. It will fall to some future historian to tell the entangled story of how the great ethical debates of the last century have been defined, problematized, rejected and reformulated in our time.

Since Sartre and Levinas, French philosophy has often been taken at best to exert a negative influence on ethics—to advance a kind of nihilism, cynicism, relativism or irrationalism, that any proper ethical thought would have to overcome. And yet Lacan’s proposition in 1964 that "the status of the unconscious is ethical" formulates a fundamental theme in his work from start to finish; his Seminar on Ethics is to appear shortly in French. It was also in the 60s that Deleuze read Spinoza and Nietzsche for the modern ethical thinking he found in Kafka or Masoch. In 1968, at an international forum in New York, Derrida declared that what characterized "French" philosophy was the theme of the "end of man" or the rejection of "anthropologism." When this claim was taken up again at the 1980 symposium devoted to Derrida, it was its ethical (and political) consequences which captured attention; the symposium has initiated a long series of writings about ethics. Such reflections have been pursued by Lyotard in his own manner. In short, there has been a good deal about ethics in contemporary French philosophy.

At least retrospectively it is fair to say that, along with the question of truth or rationality, ethics was a constant preoccupation in the work of Michel Foucault. In his acerbic analysis of the "humanitarian" reforms of Tuke and Pinel, in Madness and Civilization, Foucault had already made a characteristic incursion into ethical territory; during this period, under the influence ofBinswanger, he was momentarily drawn to Heidegger. Ethics becomes an explicit, if minor, theme in both The Order of Things and The Archeology of Knowledge, and it is well known that he called his Discipline and Punish a "genealogy of modern morals." But it is in Foucault's last writings that ethics became not simply the explicit object of his historical investigation, but a category through which to understand the practical import of his own philosophy.

I have argued that Foucault’s way of questioning "anthropologism" led him to a kind of practical or ethical philosophy whose fundamental category was the category of freedom. It is in this respect, despite their notorious differences, that Foucault can be read as furthering the modern ethical tradition initiated by Sartre. In the following lecture, I have tried to articulate this philosophy through analysis of Foucault’s last books.
L’usage des plaisir and Le souci de soi, the new volumes in Foucault’s History of Sexuality which appeared shortly before his tragic and untimely death last summer, are about ethics. One might be surprised. Foucault was anything but a moralist. He was even reviled as a nihilist, someone who believes there is nothing to moral values.

In fact, there is a paradox in Foucault’s life and work which has struck different people in different ways. Foucault was the opposite of those who find it natural to talk ethics but difficult to take sides. He was someone who supported many struggles and yet found it next to impossible to speak the language of morality. He said the value of his work should lie in its practical consequences and yet he refrained from saying what to do or how to live. Foucault’s life was one of political engagement; his historical research had a practical orientation. And yet he articulated no basic “project” in which his commitments and his research would discover their coherence, be supported by incontrovertible principles, or underwrite a party or movement. For Habermas, this is the contradiction in his work. His “analysis of truth” deprived him of the “normative yardsticks” his work needed to be genuinely critical or practical.

It is with this paradox or contradiction in mind, that I will suggest that Foucault’s work is a practical or ethical philosophy of an unfamiliar kind, which I will call “modern.” Perhaps the great work of philosophy of which his death deprives us would have been on this topic: the question of a modern praxis.

The central topic in the “modern practical philosophy” I want to attribute to Foucault is different from the traditional ones of finding the nature of the good life for Man and how to live it, or determining the principle of our mutual obligations and how to follow it. His was an ethic neither of prudence nor of duty. Rather, it was an ethic of who we are said to be, and, what, therefore, it is possible for us to become. The issues it raises are issues about the various means through which we come to be constituted as the subjects of our own experience.

I call it “modern,” since it fits with the modern sensibility which no longer finds it credible to attempt to find oneself within a prior, given, moral order, or to “construct” oneself in terms of some great universal and transcendental ought. Foucault’s thought was “modern” in this sense, since it assumed that our identity is not fixed by our nature, divine or human, empirical or transcendental. It held instead that being the subject of one’s own experience should never be taken as given—either by religion or by science, or by law or government. It therefore called for a practice which is a matter neither of finding a true nature or of obeying an incontrovertible principle.

A “modern practical philosophy” is therefore one which, instead of attempting to determine what we should do on the basis of what we essentially are, attempts, by analyzing who we have been constituted to be, to ask what we might become. It is the philosophy for a practice in which what one is capable of being is
not rooted in a prior knowledge of who one is. Its principle is freedom, but a freedom which does not follow from any postulation of our nature or essence.

Foucault's monumental unfinished *History of Sexuality* was an attempt to introduce this practical question of freedom into the heart of our modern sexual experience. He wanted to reread inherited ethical traditions in terms of it, asking in what ways we have come to be constituted as the subjects of our sexual experience. He wanted to set aside our preoccupation with repression, and to replace an ethic of articulating suppressed desires and feelings with an ethic of "choosing" the forms of experience through which we constitute ourselves.

This question of the constitution of the subject was also central to his previous work and to the kind of controversy to which it gave rise. He formulated it in contrast to Hobbes. Instead of asking how natural subjects get together to constitute a sovereign state, he proposed to study how the subjects themselves are "gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc." Such an analysis raises practical or ethical issues of a new sort.

Since the 19th century, a great focus of ethical and political debate has been the conflict between universal moral rules and global social visions. Foucault's question distances us from the anthropological framework which gave utopian shape to such debate—from the question as to whether our nature is given in social wholes, or in some rational, supra-historical community independent of them. For it starts from the "modern" idea that our moral or ethical being may not be given at all, either in social wholes or in a rational community that serves as a yardstick to judge them. Thus it asks instead how we have been really constituted, historically and materially, in our bodies and in our souls.

An example of this kind of study is the analysis of what, in Foucault's book on the origins of our prisons, he calls "disciplines." Disciplines are procedures which emerge in a number of interlocking institutions which attempt to constitute us—in the strong sense of actually trying to turn us physically into—individuals of a particular docile and calculable kind. What is important in Foucault's analysis of the disciplines is not the principles used to justify their introduction. Many of the reform projects Foucault analyzes appeal to utilitarian principles. But the practical or ethical question he raises is not whether such principles are justified or right. For Foucault, Bentham's great contribution to ethics was not *The Introduction to the Principles of Laws and Morals*. It was *The Panopticon*. For in that book we can read a program to constitute us as the sort of individuals about whom it would make sense to construct a "calculus of pleasure" and govern on utilitarian grounds. Such "panoptic" or disciplinary constitution is modeled neither on finding a place in a community or social whole nor on a contract among autonomous agents. It is a matter neither of status nor of contract. It raises a new kind of practical or ethical problem, found in the prison-like system of control the disciplines introduce—
namely, the issue of what we might do to “resist” it. It is this issue which leads to Foucault’s controversial picture of freedom as resistance to self-constituting practices rather than as a state-of-being within a society that would accord with our moral nature, noumenal or social-historical. As such it is an issue in what I am calling Foucault’s modern practical philosophy.

Foucault is hardly alone in 20th century philosophy to raise the issue of the constitution of the subject. There is Heidegger. There is also Wittgenstein. Foucault, however, turns the problem into a problem of practice and ethics.

His historical investigations employ a strategy similar to one in Wittgenstein’s philosophical investigations: the attempt to understand what is presented as mental, internal and private in terms of the external, public and linguistic practices through which it is identified and talked about. Thus, for example, in the new books, Foucault argues that Christianity did not discover the sources of morality within us. It invented internalizing procedures of self-identification through which such inner sources were constituted. In analyzing this constitution, Foucault shares with Wittgenstein the sceptical or therapeutic aim of removing what is assumed to be inner from ontology or nature and bringing it down to the earth of changing human practices.

Thus it might be said that Foucault generalizes and historicizes Wittgenstein’s sceptical strategy. The practices we have invented to identify our minds belong to a larger set of practices for constituting the subject, from which there arises a wide variety of consequences. Wittgenstein’s seminal question about the public criteria for mental events belongs to a larger study of practices which determine the kinds of person we can be, or the kinds of actions we can perform, at a time and place. How has there been constituted an authorial kind of person or an authorial nature? How, in various settings, has a Jewish nature been constituted? How did psychiatric medicine constitute a homosexual kind of person or nature? These are precisely the sorts of questions Foucault was asking in the volumes he projected. His practical philosophy was about them: the ethical and practical issues of authorship and writing, of race and population, and of sexual experience.

The English-speaking philosophy Wittgenstein influenced focused on only a narrow range of the practices which constitute the subject—the ones covered by the term “mind” in the discipline called “the philosophy of mind.” But we are constituted as much more than minds.

If Foucault is right, it is thanks to the forensic and medical categories introduced by our 19th-century doctors of deviancy that we have never before had so many ways to be perverted, degenerate, suicidal or criminal. Thus, by the time of Freud, we must worry whether, secretly or unconsciously, in our dreams and symptomatic actions, we might not be those kinds of persons. Along similar lines, Ian Hacking argues that the suicide which existentialists saw as a timeless moral option was a 19th century artifact, a “French obsession.” For it was then and there
there that suicide came under the province of psychiatric medicine, the object of statistical investigation by doctors and the police, which created a whole ethos of suicide, down to the suicide note, a new phenomenon. Thus it became possible for Durkheim, at the turn of the century, to take suicide as a measure of the pathological state of an entire society.  

But these are not the only ways of constituting ourselves. We are not simply constituted from above through expertise but from below through practices of living. Thus there is what experts think of as the degenerate or homosexual kind of person; and then there is the gay person who constitutes himself through such institutions as bars and baths.

There is no reason to think that the subject has always been constituted in the same way. Sartre said the subject was constituted by the glance of the Other. Lacan taught that, more fundamentally, the subject is constituted in language. We find a similar idea in Peirce almost a century earlier. But Foucault stresses the sheer variety of the ways in which we are constituted. No theory of language can contain or explain it. Language may be essential in the ways we are constituted, but the analysis of constitution is not an analysis of language. It is a problem not simply in what we say about ourselves but in what we do to ourselves and our bodies. The constitution of the disciplined individual is the constitution of a disciplined body: of his soul or identity as the prison of his body. We can constitute ourselves by what we wear, where we live and what we eat. In the new volumes, Foucault takes it as a decisive event in our ethical traditions when worry about sex wins out over worry about food and diet.

But Foucault not only expands the range and variety of the practices that constitute us. By analyzing them, he introduces them into ethical reflection. As Richard Rorty remarks, the philosophical discovery that mental states may be identical to physical ones leaves our ethical problems pretty much as they were. But this is not the case for Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, or, if Foucault is right, for the 19th century discovery of the criminal, suicidal, or degenerate personality. Foucault’s analysis is about such “discoveries,” their practical conditions and their consequences. That is why his philosophy leads not to a meta-ethical or conceptual analysis of a timeless moral language, but to real ethical issues in the historical practices which make us who we are; and why it leads not to the formulation of a philosophical psychology, but to an analysis of how psychologies figure historically in the practical constitution of our experience.

Thus, in the last volumes, Foucault proposes to analyze the history of one particular way we have been constituted as subjects, and to raise practical questions about it. It is not like the disciplinary constitution of individuals. It is not like the normalizing control of populations. It is our constitution as ethical or moral sorts of persons within a long tradition which Foucault calls, borrowing a term from Plutarch, our “etho-poetic” tradition.
Etho-poetic constitution is not a matter of fitting us into systems of disciplinary categories, but of inciting us to make ourselves into morally correct kinds of beings. It refers to the practices through which we acquire our moral nature. It raises a different sort of practical question. In discipline, the problem lies in the fact that the categories introduced to classify us also make us docile or susceptible to control. In ethics, the problem resides in the fact that our etho-poetic practices have become oriented to discovering our true or essential nature. The analysis of disciplines leads to the issue of resisting disciplinary power. The analysis of ethics leads to the issue of dissociating our ethical or self-forming practices from the obligation to say the truth about our nature. In both cases, Foucault’s “genealogy” attempts to free our choice of possible experience from forms of knowledge or truth: the expertise of technocrats and doctors of deviancy, the inner truths of moralists and therapists. It is a mark of Foucault’s “modern practical philosophy” to propose a freedom of choosing possible experience outside a prior knowledge or truth about ourselves.

In the history of sexual experience, it is the figure of the “man of desire” whose genealogy Foucault proposes to find in our etho-poetic tradition. In sexual experience, the man of desire would stand to our ethical tradition as the disciplined individual to our disciplinary one. It is the product of a different kind of self-constitution involving a different and much longer expanse of time. Its occurrence in the 19th and 20th centuries would inherit from a long Christian tradition. Indeed Foucault thinks that for centuries people have been brought to recognize themselves as “subjects of desire.” But, if the constitution of the “man of desire” differs from that of the “man of discipline” both in its sources and its techniques, Foucault thinks it is no less an unnoticed or unexamined assumption in many of our modes of thinking and living. If people have been brought to discover what Freud called the “core of their being” in their desires, then Foucault’s genealogy would show that instead, this “core” is a singular product of their history.

Foucault’s last volumes are works of elaborate textual demonstration. They are low-keyed and devoid of apocalyptic pronouncement. Their tone is serene and scholarly. Their object is familiar, even canonical texts: Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine. And yet these familiar texts are read from a most unfamiliar angle: one meant to run against the grain of our conceptions of both sex and morals. Like his previous works, the new volumes are exercises in contrast between different historical organizations of discourse that determine domains of possible thought and experience. Thus, instead of trying to understand ancient ethics in terms of our ideas about sex and morals, Foucault attempts to reconstruct ancient ethics in such a way as to make our ideas about sex and morals seem peculiarly singular and strange.

For example, according to Foucault, in Greek ethics, there was nothing like our 19th-century categories of deviancy. Despite an elaborate code of courtship to
regulate the relations between men and boys of good families, nobody was constituted as a homosexual, nor, therefore, as a heterosexual, kind of person. In pursuing boys, men were not thought to envince a nature that distinguished them from those who did not. Thus our ethical principle of being tolerant towards people with such a nature could never arise: it was not an “ethical possibility.”

Foucault argues that what the Greeks thought was sufficiently problematic about their sexual experience to require the elaboration of an ethic, is unfamiliar to us. As is, therefore, the kind of morality they devised to deal with it. Greek ethics was not a morality of normalizing populations. Nor was it a Kantian morality of obedience to universalisable rules.

The central conjecture in Foucault’s genealogy is then that the kinds of description under which sexual experience has become morally problematic have varied with the kinds of morality proposed to deal with it and vice versa: the ways sexual experience has been “problematized” has given rise to different sorts of morality. In reading Foucault’s analysis, one gradually starts to wonder whether the familiar domain of ancient ethics has not been so encrusted by centuries of academic piety that one can no longer recognize it for what it was.

Foucault compared the book *The Anti-Oedipus* to the 17th century manual of the Swiss bishop François de Sale: *The Introduction to a Devoted Life.* He refers to the latter work again in his introduction to the new volumes, citing the passage where Saint François exhorts us to emulate elephants. For elephants never change their mates, and they mate only every three years, during only five days, in secret, after which they purify themselves in the river. This elephant pattern, or the attempt to narrow proper sexual experience to infrequent, conjugally legitimated, reproductive acts, is apparently a rather constant norm in our ethical tradition. It is the invention neither of capitalism nor of Christianity. Foucault even finds the same reference to the mating-habits of elephants in the Natural History of Pliny the Elder.

We may pride ourselves on having conquered the elephant complex, but that is not what concerns Foucault. He finds it very boring. He remarks that people have been hardly more inventive in restricting than they have been in varying their pleasures. He complains of the terrible monotony of sexual interdictions and prescriptions throughout the ages. His history will not be about them; they are, on the contrary, what remains constant. Underneath their apparent continuity, he discovers a long history of ethical transformations.

It is one thing to issue an interdiction; another to determine whether people actually obey it. Still another is to invent a way for people to become not simply moral agents, but moral kinds of being or person. That is what Foucault calls “ethics.” Given a more or less explicit set of prescriptions and interdictions—what Foucault calls a moral code—one can examine the practices through which people were incited to acquire a moral nature.
As Foucault uses the terms, "moral" refers to the prescriptive code one is obliged to follow on pain of sanction, internal or external. "Ethical" refers to the kind of person one is supposed to aspire to be, the kind of life one is incited to lead, or the special moral state one is invited to attain. There are thus "moral" problems about the code, its principles, and its applications: and then there are "ethical" problems about how to turn oneself into the right kind of person. Foucault then proposes to analyze such ethical problems and their transformations in terms of a scheme in which there is an image of the right sort or person or life or soul, then the authority which incites, and the practical means provided, to become such a kind of person, and finally, the sort of description under which one’s experience becomes relevant for such a self-transformation. Thus "ethics" can be analyzed in terms of practices to constitute people as moral beings, or as "practices of the self."

Foucault argues that ancient morality was oriented primarily towards ethical not moral problems. And then he asks under what description sexual experience became problematic for the ancient practices of the self.

Central in Foucault’s reconstruction of Greek ethics as a “practice of the self” is a concept still very much discussed in English-language moral philosophy and philosophy of action: the concept of *akrasia*, the lack of self-mastery, translated as “incontinence” or “weakness of the will.” Philosophers are still debating Socrates’ famous claim that it is only through ignorance that one can act contrary to what is best for one to do. Thus, R.M. Hare, taking *akrasia* as a species of what he calls “moral backsliding,” offering a way out of what he views as Socrates’ conceptual muddle. But, if Foucault is right, to classify *akrasia* as an instance of “backsliding” is to misunderstand the kind of problem it was; and to try to clear up Socrates confusion by introducing a distinction between wants and universalisable value-judgments is to compound the misunderstanding, by injecting a post-Kantian scheme quite irrelevant to the Greek problem.

In Foucault’s reading, *akrasia* was a problem of “ethics,” of becoming the right kind of man. It is true that the problem was to have a long history. For centuries it would preoccupy philosophers and moralists, but not always in quite the same ways. The incontinent fornicators in Dante’s Hell are not really like the intemperate guardians in Plato’s *Republic*. There is a change in practices of self-control and the kind of threat sex is thought to pose to them—a change, therefore, in ethics.

In Foucault’s view, ancient ethics was a practice addressed to free males. *Akrasia* was a problem in it because of the kind of virile self-mastery these males were incited to acquire—the state of temperance which was the image the Greek practices of the self held out for these men. It was thus a problem for the dietary, medical, poetic and erotic means provided for Greek men to attain the state of active self-mastery.
Thus, *akrasia* was thought to be the most extreme form of ugliness, since, as Plato remarks, there is no thing as beautiful as the self-mastered or temperate soul. It was a form of disease for a medicine concerned with conducting one’s activities in an appropriate and temperate manner. It was a form of shame in one’s erotic conduct. In short, it was a negative image or form of failure within a self-forming practice that incited free men to attain a beautiful virility. It was a loss of the active freedom of a virile man, the slavery to his pleasures.

But *akrasia* was not a matter of being commanded by an inner duty of conscience to refrain from, or to perform, actions ruled good or bad in themselves. It was not a matter of the divine or rational part of the soul specifying which actions one is entitled to perform. It was not a matter of overcoming temptation for forbidden acts. It was not, in other words, an instance of “moral backsliding.”

For *akrasia* raised an ethical problem, not a moral dilemma: it was not about applying principles to cases, or about a weakness in doing what the principles direct, but about the dangers one encountered in attempting to acquire a masterful self-possession. Thus the erotic pursuits of boys was a source of worry not because the acts involved were inherently sinful, but because the pursuit might compromise the capacity of a young man to form himself into the masterful sort of person, commensurate with his birth.

Sexual experience was problematized within this practice to attain virile active temperance. There was no catalogue of sinful acts, no search for the sinful intentions to perform them, and no idea that sex itself might symbolize an original sin. Sexual experience was problematic not because of sin, but because of the dangers of an excessive indulgence. The description under which it was placed was that of *aphrodisia*: an interlocking of desires with acts and the pleasures which they procure, which threatened to undo one’s beautiful virility, sexual pleasure being, in Plato’s words, the most keen and frenzied. What made *aphrodisia* morally problematic was not the temptation to succumb to actions forbidden by the code; it was problematic because in indulging oneself beyond one’s natural needs, one might fall into a passive relation to one’s own pleasures and so lose one’s self-control. Sexual activity threatened a freedom which contrasted not with a natural causality or a divine will, but with a slavery of surrendering oneself to one’s pleasures.

One’s sense of virility demanded that one overcome such slavery to oneself. But such proud self-mastery was not conceived along the same models found in Stoic denial or Christian spiritual struggle. It was not a matter of extinguishing desire in stoical indifference, nor a matter of discovering guilt by identifying evil thoughts. Rather it was a matter of keeping desires or pleasures in their proper place in the household or city of the soul, by indulging them only in appropriate times and circumstances.

*Akrasia* was therefore pictured as a case in which one’s indulgence in pleasure
exceeded the wise rule of one’s reason. But such “reason” did not consist in an insight into universal principles, but in a wisdom that told one when, where and with whom it was best to indulge oneself.

The model and the function of reason do not remain constant in the history of moral psychology. Foucault draws a distinction even within Green ethics. To master one’s indulgence in pleasure was to submit to wise rule, and so to reason—on this there was wide agreement. But in Plato, in the Pheadrus and the Symposium, reason figures in another singular way, one that points ahead to what Foucault calls the constitution of the “man of desire.” In Foucault’s history, Plato introduces the principle that we must control our pleasure in order to find out who we really are, to attain our ontological nature. Akrasia becomes an obstacle to discovering oneself, something to be overcome in the struggle to attain a higher reality. It could be thought, after all, that one might learn to wisely control one’s aphrodisian indulgence without ever taking a Platonic flight into the higher spheres.

Foucault analyzes how Plato, in the Symposium, transformed the erotic of honorable pursuit of young men into an erotic of the search of each soul for its essential being. In the dialogue, one learns that more basic than the failure to know how and when it is appropriate to indulge is the failure to know the nature of the eros that possesses one. It is then that one discovers that the real object of this eros is Truth itself, and that it is in pursuing it, that one finds one’s own true nature. Thus the love of truth becomes prior to the love of others, and the honorable pursuit of young men is turned into a pursuit, on the part of young men, for a truth of which the philosopher, no matter how old and ugly, becomes the subtle and erotic master.

In this way the art of mastering oneself becomes the art of finding oneself by attaining a higher reality, a matter not simply of the wise usage of pleasures, but of the difficult path one must follow to discover who one really is.

Here we have something rather different from moral backsliding. But it is also something which anticipates our modern ethical problems. It is after all remarkable that for centuries it would be taken for granted that sexual experience and inner moral truth should be inherently linked one to another—that finding a truth about that nature should be a central part of the way people conceived of their sexual experience; and, conversely, that sexual experience should be the target of so many techniques to discover and to speak the truth about oneself.

Foucault’s “genealogy” is about the long series of transformations that would lead from such Platonic views to our own. It is the story of the processes through which desire was severed from its ancient interconnection with activities of pleasure, and associated instead with a truth one was obliged to find within oneself. The practices of self would be turned toward extracting and avowing an inner truth about desire. In an interview, Foucault puts the result of this history in a formula: we moderns are obsessed with our desires; acts don’t matter much to us, and pleasure—nobody knows what it is any longer!\footnote{12}
Without the further volumes in Foucault's history we are left, as it were, with
the before but without the after picture in his contrast. I would nevertheless like to
illustrate what I think Foucault intended by contrasting two famous books of
dream interpretation, both extremely influential in their day. One is the Oneirocro-
ritica of Artemidorus, of which Foucault offers an analysis. The other is the
Interpretation of Dreams of Sigmund Freud.

In the second century, A.D., Artemidorus of Daldis wrote a book of dream
interpretation which was widely used. It taught how to tell one's fortune by reading
one's dreams. In particular, several chapter are devoted to sexual dreams, and
Foucault provides an analysis of them. The principle of interpretation he isolates is
based on an assumption central, though not specific, to ancient views about sexual
experience: the analogy between hierarchical social roles and the positions or roles
one assumes in sexual acts—active or passive, on top or on bottom, and so on. It is a
conception in which the act of penetration, and thus the male member, is what
counts in sexual experience, since it provides it with its social significance. Sexual
dreams can then symbolically confirm or reverse proper social relations and so
augur well or poorly. Thus the sexual dreams in Artemidorus' book are ones in
which someone dreams about himself in a little drama of penetration and passivity
or of pleasure and the expenditure of energy, which tells of his fortune. The
meaning of the dream depends on the social status of the dreamer. If, in one's
dream, one finds oneself in a passive position with an inferior, things don't augur
well. If, however, it is with a superior, the dream counts as a favorable sign.

By contrast, in the Interpretation of Dreams, as Wittgenstein noted with some
astonishment, there are no sexual dreams at all, though, in Wittgenstein's words,
such dreams are as "common as rain." On the other hand, it is non-sexual dreams
which tell of hidden sexual desires. The meaning depends on the dreamer no longer
in virtue of his status, but in virtue of the web of associations which link the dream
to his desires. Thus, were Artemidorus moved from sexual dreams to one's fortune
in social life, Freud moved from non-sexual dreams to a discovery about one's
sexual desires.

In a footnote, Freud explains why he included no sexual dreams in his book. It
is not that they are shameful or an improper topic for scientific investigation. Freud
says he finds it laughable that, in the German translation of Artemidorus, the
chapters on sexual dreams were censored. The reason he offers for not including
sexual dreams is rather what he calls "the still unresolved problems of perversion
and bisexuality."14

What was important in such dreams for Freud was thus not, as with Ar-
temidorus, what they tell about the fortune of a man with a particular position, but
what they tell about a dreamer's deep sexual nature, his bisexuality or perversion.
In this respect they are no different from non-sexual dreams. But, if Foucault is
right, such a concept of bisexuality was completely foreign to the conception of
sexual experience embodied in Artemidorus’ book. It may have been assumed that men pursued partners of both sexes. Nobody referred this fact to a deep bisexual nature or tendency. By contrast, what Freud called a bisexual nature or constitution typically belonged to a person who did not pursue both sexes, who did not have a sexual practice or activity with both sexes. In the ancient conception where such activity was taken for granted, it occurred to no one to imagine that outside of it, a person might harbor a hidden bisexual or perverse constitution.

The two dream-books thus reflect two different ethical worlds. In one, there is the problem of proper sexual acts given one’s social position. In the other, there is the problem of overcoming one’s deception about one’s hidden desires. The contrast illustrates a general claim in Foucault’s research. He takes the word “sexuality,” coined in the 19th century, to refer to an historical invention, a constituted entity. He thinks that it is only very recently that people were brought to understand their experience in terms of an inner sexual nature or “constitution.” Only since the 19th century have we identified ourselves in terms of the curious thing we call our “sexuality.”

In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud takes issue with the elephantine conception of sexual experience as legitimate, adult, reproductive acts. Noting the many exceptions to this conception in the sexological literature, he then proposes to expand the concept of sexuality to include them. Thus he elaborates his famous story of the development of the sexual drive through the stages of childhood, with its zones, partial objects, frustrations, regressions, and symptomatic returns. The result is that “sexuality” becomes a truth about tendencies or desires buried in a childhood we refuse to recognize, but which return in our neurotic sufferings. Thus Freud arrives at the startling claims that a patient’s symptoms are a form of his sexual activity, and that neurosis is the “negative of perversion.” It might be said, therefore, that Freud “de-medicalized” the 19th-century theory of degenerate sexuality, but only to discover its characteristic desires locked within each of us.

It is this conception of inner desires and tendencies which would place Freud’s theory of sexuality in genealogical descendence to the interconnection between *eros* and truth proposed in Plato’s *Symposium*. The Christian doctrine of the flesh and the procedures of confession would transform this link; through them the task of saying the truth about oneself, and, in particular about one’s desires, would assume the force of a moral obligation. Psychoanalysis would inherit this obligation. It would extract it from a theology of the flesh and place it within a “theory of sexuality.”

Thus, I take it as Foucault’s view that “desire” is the kind of description under which we place our sexual experience, when it is assumed that what is morally problematic about it is the truth about our nature that it harbors. But to see it in this way is to question the modern obsession with self-transparency by enabling us to
Ethics after Foucault

ask whether we still want to make saying the truth about our desires into a fundamental obligation, and if not, to ask under what conception our sexual experience is ethically or practically relevant for us.

This brings me back to the problem of a modern practical philosophy and the role of sexual experience in it. Nearly twenty years ago, in *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault declared: “For modern thought, no morality is possible.” What Foucault was then calling “modern thought,” is roughly coextensive with what we now call “Continental Philosophy.” It is characterized in Foucault’s famous phrase by the attempt to think what is unthought—_penser l’impensé_. It is the attempt to provide a deep interpretation for something unrecognized in our modes of thinking, the recognition of which serves to alter them. It demystifies, disalienates and undoes repression; it frees as it uncovers and uncovers as it frees. It is therefore itself an action or practice—“a perilous act,” said Foucault. But this sort of connection between philosophy and action, or theory and practice, precludes previous ones. In particular, it is no longer possible for philosophy to articulate the true world or society which gives action its moral meaning, and so it can derive no moral code, no _morale_. Bad faith, repressed desire and ideological mystification are, in this sense, “modern” problems: they can not be resolved by the formulation of a prescriptive code of action. They are practical problems in a “modern” world without a transcendent moral order. Modern philosophy can articulate no such order, and so can formulate no morality.

I think that Foucault’s last research tends to the view that, while modern _praxis_ may not be able to formulate a moral code, it nevertheless introduces an ethic, when it is directed to the “unthought” ways in which we are constituted as the subjects of our own experience. One such way would be our constitution as men and women of desire, and I have tried to illustrate it in my brief discussion of Freud’s dreambook.

It is easy to see how Freud would belong to “modern thought” as Foucault described it. Freud would take unconscious desire as what is unthought in our thinking. But he remained part of a much older tradition: the tradition of uncovering and stating a truth about our sexual nature. What Foucault proposes is to take, as what is unthought, not desire but our constitution as subjects of desire. To analyze _that_ kind of _impensé_, however, is not to arrive at a basic truth about the “core of our being.” Rather, somewhat in the manner of what Aristotle called a “practical syllogism,” the conclusion of his analysis is not a proposition but an action. It raises the question of a practice that is _not_ based on a discovery about the basic truth of our nature.

In fact, in his early writings, it was not Freud to whom Foucault looked for the conception of sexual experience in modern life. It was Georges Bataille. He took what Bataille called “transgression” as a sort of surrogate for ethics in a world in which no morality was possible: the world God and his substitutes had deserted.
Transgression would be the form eroticism assumes when God is dead and the subject no longer has a moral center.

In his last work, however, as we have seen, Foucault was concerned with another kind of problem: the problem of our constitution as ethical subjects of our sexual experience. Transgression no longer seems to matter. For it is still a matter of codes and desires, not of self-constitution within a domain of possible experience. Transgression began to appear to Foucault as a continuation of the Christian constitution of a man of desire in a world in which it no longer fits.

We see this in the model of sexual liberty Foucault proposed in a late interview. The ethic of our sexual experience should not be based on the freedom to perform acts, however transgressive, any more than it should be based on the freedom that comes from articulating the inner truth of our desires. Rather a form of sexual experience is free when the practices which constitute it are in principle open to change. Foucault thus advances a liberty of “choosing” or “inventing” oneself within a kind of experience not fixed through the dictates of religion, state or law.

In introducing his conception of self-forming practices, Foucault refers to Walter Benjamin’s great work on Baudelaire. And, in the figure of the dandy which Benjamin analyzes, we find an urban practice of styling one’s existence or of turning one’s body and one’s life into a work of art. We find therefore a practice of the self, an ethic in Foucault’s sense of the term. As in ancient ethics, it is not a matter of the acts ones duties prescribe or forbid, but of styling one’s activities in an effort to become a beautiful sort of being—an etho-poetics independent of religion and state. It is as though the story of Socrates and Alcibiades were the story of two Parisian dandies transported into a world structured by the identity of virile heads of households.

In his early writings, Foucault linked the theme of transgression to at least one strand in literary and artistic modernism. Modernist culture may be said to have invented heroes and authors “of desire.” Thus it saw in Oedipus the story of a “man of desire,” whose secret wishes, and therefore whose destiny, was given, tragically, prior to his self-knowledge and self-control. In distancing us from the modernist “man of desire,” Foucault finds a model for modern life not in Greek tragedy, but in Greek ethics: in the etho-poetics of Plato, in Aristotle and Xenophon. Thus, if in identifying our deepest nature with an “impossible” desire, modern thought constructed a tragic sexuality, Foucault offers us a picture of a more pleasureful, more gay, and more possible form of sexual existence—one we are now free to invent in modern practices of the self.

To Foucault’s study of ancient ethics there thus belongs a series of new questions. There is the question of an ethic in which freedom would be modeled not on transgressive acts or on the liberation of repressed truth, but on choosing forms of possible experience: the ethic in which forming ourselves would not be based on
a prior knowledge of our nature. There is also the question of the description under which our sexual experience would matter in such an ethic: the question of a conception of sexual experience based neither in a science of normality nor in a religion of guilt, neither sexological nor puritanical. There is thus the question of what kinds of sexual experience are possible for us other than the ones based on the virile model of penetration and status, the Christian model of sin and confession, or the therapeutic model of hidden emotion and desires.

To such ethical questions I have no solutions to propose. Rather I have sought to show how they emerge from Foucault’s philosophy. Thus I return to the paradox in Foucault’s life and work with which I began. Foucault may not have provided us with what Habermas thinks of as philosophical yardsticks. But he may be said to have invented another use for philosophy. It is not universalist: it does not appeal to people irrespective of who they are. And yet it is not for any one group. Foucault’s philosophy was a philosophy neither of solidarity nor of objectivity. It was based neither in determining who we really are, nor in identifying with some one embattled group. Rather in analyzing the problematic ways we have been constituted as who we are, Foucault sought to raise questions about who we might become—in our thinking as in our lives. I think this is the great question his work leaves us. It is the question of a modern practical philosophy.

POSTSCRIPT

There has been some discussion about the role of women in Foucault’s history. In the new volumes he asks (i) whether a morality or ethical practice was for women (or for women in the same way as for men); and (ii) which conceptions of femininity or of the sexual experience of women figured in it. Thus he argues that Greek ethics was primarily addressed to men, and was based on a male or virile conception of sexual experience in which penetration and the conservation of vital fluids played a central role. For example, in Artemidorous, sexual acts between two women, but not between two men, count as inherently “unnatural,” since in them penetration can only be an artificial usurpation of the male role. In Stoicism and Christianity there are changes. Stoicism extends ethics to women through a certain reciprocity of conjugal duties. In Christianity, virginity is introduced as a model of sexual innocence (lack of sin), while Freud’s contention that the “libido” is essentially male can already be found in a striking way in Augustine: if erection is the symbol of Adamic pride, virginity is the symbol of innocence. In volume I, one also learns that 19th century medicine and statistical control of populations introduces many of our modern categories of female nature: women begin to “count” because of the ways doctors and technocrats registered and literally counted them.
particular, Foucault refers to the “hysterization of women’s bodies” (History of Sexuality, p. 104), through which women’s bodies were constituted as “saturated with sexuality,” pathologized, and then inserted into mothering roles.

More generally there seems little doubt that many categories of the “nature” of women are entities constituted in different ways in various times and places, not all of them, of course, being categories of sexual experience. “Femininity” is therefore an obvious topic for the kind of analysis and ethics I am attributing to Foucault. But, from the fact that “femininity” is historically constituted, it does not follow that gender is irrelevant to our being as moral persons, or that we have a moral obligation to treat each other as though we had no gender, like sexless Kantian noumenal selves, neutral and neutered (the results in Kant’s own writings are lamentable). Of course we might make it a rule that gender should not determine profession (any more than “gay” identity). But people can also make “femininity” the aim of an “etho-poetic” practice, an invention of a beautiful existence for those who choose it. Foucault would oppose a “disciplinary” or coercive constitution of “femininity” as well as a moralistic or therapeutic one of finding and articulating a true inner female desire; “femininity” should rather be a matter of practical invention.

Thus, I think Foucault would have been quite sceptical about attempts to construct a morality on purported truths about the nature of women or their psychology. He would not have been prepared to extend what Kohlberg says even about men to Green morality. Similarly, I think he would take the issue of a literature or writing of “femininity” as an ethical or practical one. He argues that the reason there is such explicit and concrete description of sexual acts in modern gay literature is because it comes from a sexual life of anonymous encounters rather than of the sort of elaborate seduction we associate with Casanova. It is a literature of the sad memory of fleeting acts not of expectant anticipation of conquest. To analyze it in terms of a relation between an inherently homosexual kind of desire and linguistic representation, he says, would be like analyzing money-lending in terms of an inherently Jewish kind of desire. Similarly modern “feminine” writing may be analyzed not in terms of the discovery of a deep essential link between feminine desire and language, but as an etho-poetics of a new femininity. For Foucault, “the real strength of the women’s liberation movement is not that of having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted under the apparatuses of “sexuality” (Power/Knowledge, p. 220). Thus one might say that the kind of “femininity” invented by feminine writing which was one which departed from the “hysterization” of the female body, and invented another image than that of “the Mother with the negative image of ‘nervous woman’” (History of Sexuality, p. 104). As such, “femininity” would become an ethical issue of the choice of a beautiful existence not a moral issue of universal obligation or duty.
This account of "feminine writing" should be distinguished from the constitution of a woman's canon or tradition in literature: from telling women how they are obliged to read and to write.

NOTES


5. A similar sort of question is raised by Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue (Notre Dame: 1981). But the terms of his historical analysis are different, as is his conception of the role of philosophy in formulating the question of a modern praxis: he is "Hegelian" in ways Foucault is not. Thus, in "Philosophy, Power and Relativism," he takes Foucault as an adversary. He seems to assume that the view that there are many kinds of morality entails that no kind is rationally justified and so each can only be instituted through force—the position he attributes to Foucault (as though "absolutism" of morality were unconnected with power!). Foucault does distinguish kinds of morality in our tradition without arranging them in an evolutionary or teleological scheme; and his ethics neither universalist (or meant to preclude all others), nor "political" (in the sense of providing for the just regulation of a State). He thinks there may be no "philosophical" answer to the question "what is the correct kind of morality?" But philosophy can question the assumption that there must be only one right kind. That there are different and "incommensurable" moralities in our tradition need not be the source of an Hegelian worry about the loss of unity in the modern Zeitgeist. MacIntyre seems to believe that if philosophy can't provide people with the correct kind of morality, then they must become nihilists or emotivists. He thinks we need an Aristotelean response to Nietzsche's moral scepticism. For Foucault, however, Nietzsche is a positive thinker, and scepticism a positive practice. The question of a modern praxis is not the question of how to overcome the diversity in kinds of morality; it is the question of how we are constituted in them. See note 11.

6. I take "modern" as a deictic expression, as referring to "we, now." What one takes as "modern" therefore depends on who one thinks one is. It is because Habermas thinks we should be Enlightenment thinkers that he identifies "modernity" with "The Enlightenment." MacIntyre thinks we are dissatisfied moralists suffering from a lost vision of community, and so takes modernity as a post-Kantian condition. What is distinctive about Foucault is that he takes the modern "we" as something that should come after, not before, philosophical analysis: "The problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a "we" in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or is it not rather necessary to make the formation of a "we" possible? ... Because it seems to me that the "we" must not be previous to questioning; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of a question as it is posed in the new terms in which one
formulates it.” (Interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow, Pantheon, 1985.)


11. R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1969. MacIntyre also argues that Hare misunderstands “differences in moral and cultural context” in his account of *akrasia* (“The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past” in *Philosophy in History*, Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, eds., Cambridge Press, 1984). But for MacIntyre the problem of *akrasia* was a problem of political justice: how could someone who is not an unjust kind of person nevertheless commit unjust acts? It was a problem of “one’s contribution to the form of political community which was the moral arena.” For Foucault, however, it was not simply an issue of the virtues that enable one to perform one’s civic duties. What made the erotic pursuit of young men so morally problematic was precisely that it occurred outside the arena of the “functions” each was to do in the well-ordered polis. Unlike the case of wisely mastering oneself so as to master one’s wife and household, it was precisely not prescribed by social roles. More generally, MacIntyre’s contrast between virtues and rules is patterned on Hegel’s great contrast between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. Foucault’s contrast between “ethics” and “morals” does not match with this Hegelian one. A “poetics of the self” is not the same thing as the constitution of a civic community; it resembles the self-styling of Parisian dandies more than German Romantic visions of *Gemeinschaft*; it does not require us to tell coherent narratives about ourselves and our place in society. (For Foucault’s account of the theme of “civic virtue” in modern societies, see “On Governmentality” I&O #6, Autumn 1979). Foucault’s historical analysis of *akrasia* also differs from the ahistorical, conceptually neutral, conceptual analysis exemplified in Donald Davidson’s paper “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” (in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1982). For Foucault *akrasia* is not a conceptual paradox in a timeless “ordinary life” from which one can infer truths about the self in a philosophical psychology. It was rather a case of a proposal of an idea of the “true self” within a practice which raised ethical problems for an historically specific form of life.

12. Interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow. (op.cit.) With his characteristic languid irony, Roland Barthes presents just this “formula” a decade earlier in the Résistances section of *Le plaisir du texte*. He complains we have entire “epistemologies” of Desire, the Law and its contestation, but know nothing about its real nullité. He notes that the very idea of Desire may be class-bound with no popular roots. He says that so-called erotic books are books of Desire and not Pleasure, or, more pointedly, that they dramatize Pleasure “as seen by psychoanalysis” (in both cases there is the sense that “all this is very deceptive and disappointing”). Thus, we must overcome a “mystique of the text” by turning it into “an object of pleasure like any other,” and so abolish the “false opposition between the practical and the contemplative life.” Indeed *Le plaisir du texte* may be read as a sort of program for a modern “practical life” of pleasure. It calls for the constitution of a Society for the Friends of the Text, united not by theoretical agreement but by practical opposition to the enemies of modern pleasures of the text. It makes the practical question of pleasure central to the “history of our modernity.” The “art of life of which ancient books are a part” would attach such Friends to traditional culture, even in their modernist impulse to “destroy” or “deconstruct” it, and thus they would distance themselves from *textes terribles* such as those of Georges Bataille. Modernity may split “the moral unity society exacts from all human products”; it can nonetheless lead to a modern art of living, reading and writing.


16. To call it “Continental” is to distance it from our own traditions as something “European.” The possibility of morality was not much in doubt in the analytic philosophy of the same period. But, during this period, the sense that no morality is possible was found in a literary sensibility at first also thought European: the “modernist” sensibility. Thus, for example, Irving Howe thought “nihilism lies at the center of all that we mean by modernist literature . . .” (Introduction to The Idea of the Modern, Horizon, New York, 1967, p. 39). It is noteworthy that with the passing of this “modernist” sensibility, there is renewed discussion of the morals or ethics of literature and its study. Now we are told that in each of us resides an inherent desire to find coherent narrative of self and origins.

17. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, op. cit.
