

Confess and Obey

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In the lecture delivered between January and March 1980, Michel Foucault, after completing his studies of “power-knowledge,” attached new importance to the subject—specifically, to a form of subjectivity experienced in the injunction to speak of oneself, to better submit oneself to others.

Reviewed: Michel Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants*, ed. Michel Senellart, Seuil-Gallimard, Hautes Etudes, 2012, 400 p., 26 €.

The lectures that Michel Foucault delivered at the Collège de France between January and March 1980, entitled *Du gouvernement des vivants* (On the Government of the Living) is a key moment for understanding the shift that led Foucault from the study of the major forms of power in the West (sovereignty, discipline, reason of state, and neoliberal governmentality) to an examination of ancient structures of subjectification. These lectures are complex, even sinuous, consisting less of a serene presentation of established conclusions than of an anxious effort to advance an open-ended project. We should first note the quality of Michel Senellart’s editorial work, which is precise, rigorous, and accurate. The delicate balance between preserving the lectures’ spoken character and ensuring their readability is perfectly achieved. His annotations are particularly rich and valuable.

Enter the Subject

As is often the case, the series’ title corresponds poorly to the lectures’ content. It might lead one to believe that Foucault intended to continue his studies of the contemporary modalities of biopolitical governmentality. Instead, Foucault expresses a desire to redefine his own concepts and to re-center the historical framework of his research. In the early lectures, he makes many new—and false—starts, as if he were seeking balance and direction, or at least some kind of general clarity. Yet by asserting that he had overcome his own concept of “power-knowledge” with that of the “government of truth,” Foucault sheds light on an important dimension of his own conception of truth. The idea of “power-knowledge” implied a twofold critique: first, of the foundational or transcendental subject, and second, of the notion of dominant ideology, which reduces the discourse of truth to a mere “cover.”

Beginning with the first lectures, Foucault’s emphasis on the “alethuragic” layering of power allows him to also denounce the utilitarian conception of truth. The manifestation of a truth is something more than the effects of power’s inscription into a logical system. It is this alethuragic excess that summons the “subject” onstage. Indeed, the concepts of “alethurgy,” “government through truth,” and “truth regime” allow for a more positive problematization of

an active “subject” who compels the truth to manifest itself. To study a truth regime does not (simply) mean studying the articulation of knowledge (*savoirs*) onto forms of governmentality, but also the “truth acts” through which the subject, following precise procedures, constructs a specific relationship to the truth. We are still far away from Antiquity’s “practices of subjectification,” in that these techniques do not demarcate subjectivity as its own tangible realm; even so, the subjective moment becomes the vital center of truth’s manifestation. The truth appears *in* and *through* the subject, yet it does not yet arise *from* and *for* the subject. Thus the study of truth acts will still be one of “obligations” and “constraints,” of the way in which the subject “binds itself” to the discovery or declaration of a truth, this *bond* being less that which gives it consistency than that which keeps it in a state of obedience. Yet the fact remains that, for the first time, the truth appears in an extra-discursive form, one that is alien to knowledge (*savoirs*): that of the subject’s own experience of itself.

Baptism and Penitence

The intellectual rebalancing that occurs in the lectures of January 1980 is decisive, laying the groundwork for Foucault’s analyses of February and March. Turning away from methodological issues, Foucault dedicates himself to studying specific “truth acts” notably baptism and penitence, in the form of exomologesis and exagoreusis. In his “Course Context,” Michel Senellart rightly emphasizes the importance of the lectures Foucault devotes to Tertullian’s new doctrine of baptism. Tertullian no longer considered baptism as the way to achieve salvation through the internalization of a new light, but rather as a form of purification that is the final outcome of a pedagogic initiation. Baptism is directed at a subject that is not a subject of knowledge, but rather the subject of an ordeal, a way of testing itself to which it submits itself. Truth is no longer the knowledge that transforms a subject purified by divine illumination. It is a process through which the subject exerts itself and constantly tests itself as it engages in a perpetual struggle against that which, within it, comes from the Other (demons, Satan), while striving to gradually become other than itself (less sinful, more holy) through ceaseless inner struggle and never-ending mortification. The structure of this truth act, through which a subject constructs itself by continuously dying to itself in its struggle with the Other, is central to understanding Christian subjectivity. It is particularly transparent in Tertullian, in whom life and death, self and other are engaged in an unmediated exchange that takes the form of a perpetual ordeal.

Following the 1980 course, Foucault studied two more traditional forms of penitence (which must in this context be grasped in its broadest and most varied sense, as the effort to achieve inner transformation, self-imposed suffering, and the verbalization of one’s sins), in which inner effort is supplemented by the subject’s exhibition and externalization of his truth as a sinner. The first form, exomologesis, consists in a sinner, having confessed to his bishop a particularly serious offense, assuming the status of a penitent. This requires him to accept mortifications and privations for a required period of time, until he is reintegrated into the Church community through a public ceremony. Foucault insists on this form’s ritualized and “theatrical” character, which requires the penitent to externalize everything through his body, his conduct, his clothes, and his distinctive condition. The subject’s truth is *mise en scène* and depends on the exhibition of its body. The second kind of penitence, known as exagoreusis, which was practiced in the West’s first monastic structures, is examined through Cassien’s recommendations for directing consciences. In this case, emphasis is placed on the continuous verbalization of states of consciousness. Truth acts consist henceforth in regular, exhaustive,

and continuous confession. In this instance, Foucault insists on the way that responsibility for speaking is reversed compared to the traditions of Antiquity. In ancient rules of living, particularly in Hellenistic philosophy, it is the master who speaks, while the disciple remains silent.

Yet within the Christian *dispositif*, Foucault's focus remains on the problem of the subjected subject, even if this subjectification does indeed imply an initiative (the governed produces his or her own "truth acts"). This explains the provocative charge made at the conclusion of the 1980 course: the point is to show that the practices of self-verbalization established in the first monasteries (from whence the injunctions of modern psychologists derive) were ultimately designed to achieve indefinite and perpetual obedience; by contrast, Antiquity's rules of existence completed an education in liberty. To ask "who we *really* are" and to attempt to reply by producing, in the silent presence of another person, a discourse about oneself, to place within oneself the interval of a secret that must be unveiled is the way in which we obey. The subjective structures that incite us to better know ourselves lock us into a *dispositif* of obedience and self-renunciation. The first time that the Western individual makes himself the object of his discourse and objectifies himself by verbalizing his secret thoughts, he binds himself to the Other in a relationship of never-ending dependence. Not until Foucault, in his 1982 course on *The Hermeneutic of the Subject*, patiently described Greek "care for the self" was he able to imagine a subject that could relate to itself through a form of ethical self-elaboration that is liberating, yet requires no introspection.

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