

MICHEL
Foucault

ETHICS
SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH



EDITED BY
PAUL RABINOW

Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth

Michel Foucault , Paul Rabinow (Editor) , Robert Hurley (Translator)

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Few philosophers have had as strong an influence on the twentieth century as Michel Foucault. His work has affected the teaching of any number of disciplines and remains, twenty years after his death, critically important. This newly available edition is drawn from the complete collection of all of Foucault's courses, articles, and interviews, and brings his most important work to a new generation of readers.

Ethics (edited by Paul Rabinow) contains the summaries of Foucault's renowned courses at the Collège de France, paired with key writings and interviews on friendship, sexuality, and the care of the self and others.

Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth Details

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Kathleen says

overall, this book seems only useful as a supplement to a rather complete Foucault library. a good deal of the chapters are summary remarks on the lectures delivered at the College de France from 1974 to 1982. these summaries are useful, in that they give the reader a sense of what is covered in the lectures, for more targeted reading. however, they are brief remarks and not really substantial enough to read on their own. there are other essays in here, like 'What Is Enlightenment?' and 'Technologies of the Self' that are part of other edited collections. the interview, 'The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom' is esp. helpful, in that Foucault clarifies his thoughts, connecting his early work with his later work. additionally, he answers some criticisms that arise from misreading his work. it's a great interview and very useful to people studying Foucault--however, i am not sure that it's so useful that it warrants buying the book...

Yang says

The first section contains summaries of the courses Foucault have given in the College de France, in a chronological and thematic order; the second section contains a series of important interviews with Foucault during which he elaborates his thinking and intellectual pursuits (i.e. questions and concerns) rather directly.

Rob says

read the article on technologies of the self-- especially important

Blair says

I LOVE this two-volume collection, I really do (especially the second one, focusing on aesthetics). But I still prefer the structure of Foucault's full books to these compilations.

Shannon says

How does this book hold up for those that have not studied philosophy, you ask? I'm a science university student with a reasonable enough attention span, so bear that in mind - but I do find that the insight within this book makes it well worth the slog. It's not a light read. The writing sometimes strikes me as unnecessarily academic - but hey, you can pick this book up at any chapter that takes your fancy and you'll be sure to find something quotable. This book has opened my eyes, especially on the topic of the place of prison in society. If you don't think you can make it, fear not - you can always Google some Foucault quotes, which is how most students deal with these subjects anyway... right?

Bradley says

George Canguillhem once said that once Michel Foucault's Lectures at the College de France were published, only then would the public know the depth of Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis. This book comprises of sections from each of his Lectures, spanning from the early 1970's (Birth of the Clinic, Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish era) until the early 1980's (when Foucault toiled for almost a decade writing History of Sexuality volume 1-4, until his death).

What we see here is an intellectual at the height of his powers, at the apogee of his ability, teaching at an avant-garde college that gave him the freedom to pursue whatever research topics interested him. In short, we see a disciplined French intellectual living a monastic life, spending 18 hours a day, seven days a week with his nose in thousands of books, opening up his workshop for public scrutiny.

For each class, each chapter in the book, he would only give 12 one hour lectures per year in an attempt to let the public know what he was working on. It's fascinating to see how the French culture actually gave status to their intellectuals at the time. Foucault was a public celebrity of sorts. Literally thousands of people turned up to listen to his lectures. They needed 2 auditoriums filled to capacity to accommodate the entire crowd. Each one hour lecture has anywhere between 50-90 footnotes! Talk about rigor!

Not only do these lectures reveal Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis, a discourse that the world can most likely do without, but we see Foucault dealing with a range of issues centering around the discursive nature of (what he called) Power/Knowledge. What we see is an intellectual, typically type-casted as a Philosopher, outraged with 2,000 years of self-indulgent Western Philosophy, inspired by the radicalism of the 1960's, becoming more radical than even Karl Marx, revealing the breadth and depth of how power immerses us all within its grasp, "down to our capillaries," as he so famously said. Mind, Body, soul, there may be no outside to the physics of Power, that is, the Power/Resistance vicious circle that comprises the dialectical nature of Western Society.

All power creates a "bounce-back," in the sense that every physical force creates an equal an opposite counter-force. Power can only be understood in its material forms. Alas, more work to be done as the questions grow deeper and deeper. If only Foucault was still alive. :(

Logan Robert says

Astounding. True, it's a bit disjointed--which is to be expected given that it's a compilation--but the ideas offered up are delightful, surprising, and wide-ranging.

Megan says

Think I'll put this aside for now. Read Part I ("The Courses"), and I've read pieces of Part 2 before but would like to take a slower pace in reconsidering essays like "Technology of the Self" and "What is Enlightenment?"

Robert says

This thematically-focused compendium of lectures, essays, and interviews is too disparate to be reviewed systematically, but its variety is one of its chief attractions. I'll focus on a few elements that intrigued me most.

Foucault, like Nietzsche, was a profound student of the classical world. His scope of knowledge is breathtaking. As he said in one of his interviews, this was attributable to the fact that he worked like a dog. (Others, like Solzhenitsyn and Kant, were just as assiduous in researching and analyzing things that intrigued them; all they did was work. And so, too, almost, Foucault.) I found his observations on the care of the self in the classical world most compelling. He argued convincingly that from Socrates to Seneca to Marcus Aurelius various forms of self-contemplation were disciplines like sitting zazen. Seneca, for instance, would devote hours to the solitary contemplation of his death. He also carried on epistolary relations in which he regarded understanding his own ethics and motivations as crucial to his existence. The Socrates we receive from Plato did the same thing but right out on the streets of Athens, challenging acquaintances with the question: What are you doing to know yourself?

What's intriguing here is that self-preoccupation, narcissistic behavior, is both commonplace and criticized today. We think we ought to think about others, not ourselves. This may be a Christian corruption of human possibility, for how can we think about others if we do not first think about ourselves? Ethics, Foucault contended, are the foundation of freedom, or its prerequisite, and ethics in the classical world meant self-knowledge, self-mastery, a refined sense of judgment about what one ought to do to play one's responsible role in one's home and city. Without perfecting oneself (an impossible task) one could not be free (an impossible condition), one would always be hostage to the darker corners of one's soul.

Foucault's interest in homosexuality has proven prophetic. He argued that real progress for homosexuals, like himself, would be to move beyond the chance, passionate encounter to more enduring forms of friendship energized by the erotic but not chattel to it. This year in America we have fully entered the realm of gay marriage. Foucault understood that that was where gays really wanted to go, deeply wanted and needed to go--perhaps not to marriage, per se, but to unchallenged lasting relationships, not subject to unjust laws and social opprobrium. And here we are, with so many homosexuals coming not out of the closet as homosexuals but as pairs and partners who have been hidden away sometimes for decades.

Foucault's mode of thought is difficult to grasp unless one accepts it as interested in the dynamic and the relational. In other words, he was an historian/philosopher of transformations, not truths. Thus, there is no fixed point in his work; in fact, he rejected fixed points. To Foucault knowledge was not static. All knowledge was relative but within hard won frameworks of understanding. This was not "anything goes." Far from it: it hinged on assiduous examination and deep reflection. Truth might be mutable--had to be mutable--but it was not accidental or capricious.

I realize this comment is exceedingly abstract, but so was Foucault, who warrants continuing attention.

Rose says

Reading these shorter articles and interviews helped make Foucault's thinking process a little clearer to me, and see the various changes his thinking went through over the course of his career.

Mike says

"Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth", A collection of Michel Foucault's writings—all manner from lectures, papers to articles to interviews—on the topic of ethics gathered into one handy anthology. This is one volume of a three-volume set: the others are on "Power" and "Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology". The latter volume I found to be most interesting but the Ethics one is superb in its coverage and depth. There's so much on and by Foucault that these three volumes make a good way to read a variety of his core writings and to reference these writings as needed. The organization and presentation of these book is superb, with sparse yet pleasing graphic design. They have the weighty feel you'd expect to match the author they contain. The editor, Paul Rabinow, did a great job in selecting and contexting these writings, too.

Mario says

"What is Enlightenment?" remains, some twenty-five years after it was first written and presented, one of the most compelling short accounts of our present.

Ali Jones says

Ethics by Foucault is a series of interviews, lectures, and excerpts, following the ethical aspects of Michel Foucault's philosophy. I managed to pick up three concepts by Foucault, which the book accentuates the most: (1) the distinction between polemics and problematics, (2) Foucault's analysis of what it means to "know yourself" and, lastly, (3) his reflections on sexuality. I read this as a tool to write an essay about his distinction between polemics and problematics. I also managed to get more information than I expected at first, as it became clearer (when I came near the end of this book) that his philosophical concepts can be tied, associated and used together, to form an understanding of the subject.

The book is written in a difficult language and uses a lot of academic words, which I had to search the definition of. This does not mean that I had a hard time because I learned a lot throughout the reading. I didn't only learn about Foucault's concepts, but also about Foucault himself. And I've learned to admire this academic character a lot since his strategy of approaching concepts is very productive and nuanced.

I also would like to share a quote from one of the first lectures presented in the book, about "the will to knowledge", where he says:

"These principles of exclusion and selection – whose presence is multifarious, whose efficacy is concretely demonstrated in practices, and whose transformations are relatively autonomous – do not refer to a (historical or transcendental) subject of knowledge that would invent them on after another or would found them at an original level; they point, rather, to an anonymous and polymorphous will to knowledge, capable of regular transformations and caught up in an identifiable play of dependence."

To sum it up, I found this book utterly informative for me who is very interested in the ideas and concepts of Michel Foucault. But in contrast to being so fun and informative, I would only recommend the book to those who want to get to know Foucault on a more specific, nuanced and deeper level. The chronology was very thought through and the last two excerpts were quite inspirational on both an intellectual and personal level. (Especially the last interview – it was very beautiful.) The only thing I can say something against is the print

itself: it contains so small letters that one can get a headache of reading it for too long.

Nathan Satterlee says

(adapted from "What Is Enlightenment?" and "The Masked Philosopher")

How is it that one may think otherwise, do something else, become other than what one is? For Foucault, this growth always requires reflecting on the ways that economic, scientific, religious, and political principles have determined what we take for granted as normal or assume to be obvious. We must grasp the forms of power that are being exercised upon us, the ways that discipline and normalization in the educational system and family life, for example, have pre-determined our expectations, also the ways that we contribute to those traditions by exercising or submitting to these power relations as individuals. Only then will we experience a natural and authentic growth of capabilities disconnected from the intensification of these systems of control and oppression.

This is not about conditions that supposedly determine us without our knowledge -- social, spiritual, or otherwise. We must in fact refuse everything that might present itself as simplistic and authoritarian. Instead we must realize how we participate in the various forms of rationality that organize our ways of doing things. Such a focus on what we do and the way we do it reveals the freedom with which one acts within these practical systems. The realization of this freedom is at the heart of growth and change. To find our own paths to freedom, we must therefore not attempt to determine what is true and false, but rather we must reflect on our relationship to what we think of as truth.

This work involves a critical change of focus. We must no longer search for formal structures with universal value. No longer seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action. We have to give up hope of ever acquiring a complete and definitive point of view of history. Instead we must analyze and respond to questions of general import by identifying their historically unique aspects. As individuals, this involves a personal genealogical and archaeological investigation that will treat what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. Investigating the limits of ourselves in order to grasp where change is possible and desirable.

The ways that we experience our limits and the possibility of moving beyond them are invariably pre-determined by our upbringing and indoctrination into a particular culture. Rather than assuming what we are and concluding what is impossible for us to do or know, we must investigate the events that have led us to define ourselves as we have. For everything that is presented to us as universal, necessary, and obligatory, we must ask what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?

Foucault dreams of a new age of curiosity, a sharpened sense of reality, a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd. A lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. A movement by which one detaches from received values and seeks other rules. The heroic courage of uncertainty. A determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and look at the same things in a different way. Finding a new tone, a new way of looking, a new way of doing. A kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring a book or an idea to life, that would multiply signs of existence. The life of philosophy. A philosophical life. Mature adulthood.

We have to move beyond rejection -- the alternatives of being inside or outside -- we have to be at the frontiers. Instead of postulating necessary limitations, we must form the basis of a possible crossing-over. This will mean, for example, exploring our assumptions about the relationship between sanity and insanity, sickness and health, crime and the law, the role of sexual relations, etc. A way of interrogating ourselves that takes the form of an open series of questions, an indefinite number of inquiries, which may be multiplied and specified as much as we like. This is work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. Experimental, often involving scintillating leaps of the imagination.

This pursuit is not transcendental or metaphysical. In fact we must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical, intended to produce another society, culture, or vision of the world. Instead, the project outlined here involves personal work and effort that results in actual changes in behavior, in people's real conduct, their way of being. These persons will never need to lament that the world is error, that history is filled with people of no consequence. They will have a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing. The approach is a philosophical attitude that will give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the as-yet-undefined work of freedom.

Leonardo says

Discutido en Imperio Pág.64 y Pág.139-140
