

BOOK REVIEWS

Philosophy of Foucault (European Philosophy Series). Todd May. Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006. Pp. vii, 170. Paper Edition \$22.95

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People were told centuries ago that to look for permanence is a mistake, and to understand who one is means accepting the notion of change for one's world and for one's self. Philosophers and educators still hold to the belief that self-realization—that there is more than one way of being a human being—is of major importance. Additionally, schools that do not produce self-directed citizens have failed both society and the individual. Michel Foucault, through his projects and throughout his years of creating and recreating himself, tried to help people answer the central question of who they are. Unfortunately, Foucault is not accessible for many. Aside from his plethora of writings, his projects display a re-creation of his prior thoughts, yet not the permanence one might be looking for. Further, not only does Foucault have numerous books and papers to offer, but those works also mirror his notions at various dynamic stages. Therefore, for those interested in sharing in the ideas of Foucault and being able to make an informed decision to accept or reject his writings, one needs an instrument to assist in gaining an insight into what Foucault had, and perhaps still has, to offer. Todd May, in his book *The Philosophy of Foucault*, has attempted to do that. He has done so in a manner that is well structured, clearly presented, and intellectually honest.

In chapter one, "Introduction: Who are we?" May creates a clear and understandable structure. He offers an archive for the reader to understand Foucault's various projects. The query, "What is the reason for reading philosophers?" is raised and then answered: The reason is to follow the elaboration and implications of a "good and rigorous question" (p. 2). The book employs this question to explain Foucault, whose projects are grounded in the question "Who Are We?" May explains that to better understand how Foucault deals with the question, he contrasts him against other thinkers who have examined this question as well. He chooses Descartes, Freud, and Sartre. May's synopsis of these three thinkers is well done. Of particular note is a discussion of "who we are," showing the intersection of Freud's and Descartes' notions regarding the question, employing both the universal and the individual. There is an explanation of Foucault's view of the individual,

noting that people are not generalities: People are not merely individual instances of a larger human character—they are specific beings. However one also needs to consider the world that one lives in. It is the stamp of the world that defines the self. An examination of the concept of individualism that Foucault rejected is provided toward the end of this chapter. Foucault's view of rugged individualism, knowledge, practices, and power is offered through a brief examination.

For Foucault, history is not just a matter of discrete events or movements. It is not repeatable, and individuals are not condemned to repeat it unless it is understood. It does not have autonomous circular movements; it is a part of one's existence. Although history helps to determine who one is, it is not a structure: It is particular—a contingency. This section also offers a discussion of Marx and Hegel, their views of history, and how Foucault's view differs.

May concludes the chapter by explaining that Foucault is involved in a permanent critique of society through his projects. Foucault is not antimodern, not postmodern, but is, instead, modern in the ethos of a permanent critique of our historical era. He is modern and his task asks one who he or she has become in the present.

Chapter 2 explains that Foucault's projects can be divided into three periods: archaeology, genealogy, and ethics. May explains that he does not discuss all of Foucault's work and identifies the works that he uses. The archaeology period includes *Madness and Civilization*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things*. The genealogy period includes *Discipline and Punishment*, and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The final period, ethics, includes the last two published volumes of sexuality: *The Use of Pleasure*, and *The Care of the Self*.

This chapter examines the first period of Foucault's projects in the context of the question. It is entitled: "Archaeological histories of who we are." This chapter has two sections. Section 1, "The history of madness," examines the history of madness and the influence of Phenomenology and Marxism on Foucault, noting that he ultimately rejected both. Section 2, "Words and things," examines Foucault's notion of episteme.

May begins the first section of this chapter by explaining that Foucault's axis of investigation shifts from inside to outside; emphasizing discontinuity. Discontinuity tells people that the history of one's self and one's culture has ruptures. The quest for certainty, for a continuous path to truth, is a phantasm. May also provides an examination of Foucault's consideration of the other. In this chapter, it is noted that, for Foucault, the other of madness is reason (p. 29). There are many ways to think of and define reality and reason: not just those ways as defined by those who dominate society presenting particular views as being the only way to perceive things. Later, there is a discussion of Foucault's view of *confinement*, and *work* as an economic and moral matter within the context of madness. Tuke and Pinel are employed to demonstrate this.

Next there is an examination of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. For Foucault, *Archaeology* described discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive. Within this is an examination of the structures revealing history. For Foucault, the historical structure of knowledge in a given practice or group during a given period of time (and it can be changed by an individual) and the change to its structures is epistemic.

Another work examined in this chapter is *The Order of Things*, where Foucault discussed archive. May explains an archive as “that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, so many things to be dealt with and manipulated” (p. 39). It is not just a collection of records from the past; it is a system that is active and controlling. It gives form that emanates from the discursive formation and has a set of meanings that changes with the mental frame that one brings to it. Finally, Foucault’s definition of *truth* is defined: It is of this world and it is what people allow it to be—each society has its rules for truth—those mechanisms that allow a society to distinguish between true and false statements.

In section 2, “Words and things,” May examines Foucault’s notion of *episteme*, which is similar to archive. For Foucault, it is not so much what is said, or the truth of evidence for what is said, but rather how what is said arises from what can be said, or at least legitimately said at a particular time and place.

There is a discussion of the evolution of *episteme* and order with humankind being the center of the *episteme*. Humanity is simultaneously the source and object of the investigation; the being in depth that creates the paradoxes inherent in the modern framework of knowledge.

Foucault examined who people are through human science in *The Order of Things*; he specifically used biology, linguistics, and economics. He showed that views are historically situated. These sciences do not tell people who they are definitively, but are rather an investigation into who they are as situated within a particular way of approaching them—a certain *episteme* and its specific orientation. He saw no patterns in history, and historical change is contingent. Who people are is a matter of both acting and of knowing.

The chapter ends with a transition to the second period of Foucault’s projects: genealogy. The reason for Foucault’s movement from the first to the second period is that he believed that he was unable to justify his discourse in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

Chapter 3, “Genealogical histories of who are we,” examines Foucault’s genealogical period. Foucault’s genealogy is a method that reveals how series of discourse are formed through, in spite of, or with the aid of systems of constraint, specific norms for each and their conditions of appearance, growth, and variation. His genealogy is a project of revealing who people are. It tells individuals who they are without reference to the framing assumptions of much of the history of philosophy. May offers a comparison of Foucault and Nietzsche, showing that

they were similar in that they both criticized mindless conformity. Further, descent and emergence from Nietzsche are found in Foucault and, together constitute a historical approach that abandons the notion that history has a goal or aim, and that its practices are unified.

The first section of this chapter, entitled "A history of prisons," discusses Foucault's notion of *inversion*, which is different than Nietzsche's. Foucault's inversion does not view things improving throughout history, but instead views things being able to improve or get worse as time progresses. Another practice defined is *supplice*, which is, for Foucault, a manifestation of torture. There is an analysis of discipline, being the first element of *hierarchical observation*, *normalization*, and *examination*. Also discussed are *binary operation*, *power-knowledge relationship*, and *power*. This section contains a plethora of Foucault's concepts that are framed within a context that reveals their relationship in the genealogical method. The section closes with a discussion of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's five theses of power.

The second section of chapter 3, "A history of sexuality," explains how Foucault used the method of genealogy. In *The History of Sexuality*, genealogy leaves behind the ambiguity of archaeology's relation to complexity. In archaeology, the archives were too ambiguous for Foucault. Questions beg to be answered such as: Do they range over a particular period or many periods; are there other knowledges outside of the theories of value, etc? For Foucault, these questions and this ambiguity are not so with genealogy. For Foucault, the genealogical works resist the temptation of traditional philosophy and the archaeology to discover the core of who people are and "to see the rest of who we are as expressions of that core" (p. 96). Genealogy is not reduced to a particular archive.

The last period of Foucault's work, Ethics, is examined in chapter 4, "Who we are and who we might be." In this chapter, May discusses Foucault's second and third volumes on sexuality, mentioning new themes, new chronology, and a new approach, sometimes using the label *ethics*. This chapter has two sections. In the first section, "Ethics," May explains that what Foucault emphasizes is not his focus on the legacy of the Greeks and Romans to modern people but their difference from modern man. This new focus, for Foucault, was important. He did not believe that the question of who people are is enough. He is concerned about freedom; the ability to "stray afield of ourselves" (pp. 98–99). People have gone from who they are to who they might be. He is now looking at practices of what might be called *true living*. Further, Foucault felt that the concern for care of the self has been obliterated.

Philosophical practice has moved from a spiritual one to an epistemic one. What underlies Foucault's concern is the relation of what he called the subject and truth. This is a lens, according to May, where one can read all of Foucault's works.

May explains that the subject and truth caused Foucault to reject his earlier use of the phenomenological tradition that is found in his archaeology. Genealogy also rejects a phenomenological approach.

An important distinction is the truth that Foucault was concerned with. It is the truth of the so-called human sciences: psychology, linguistics, economics, medicine, psychoanalysis, and biology. It is not so much a matter of a subject's relation to truth as their relation to their own truth. Finally, there is a discussion of Foucault's four elements of the ethical.

The second section of chapter 4 is "Ethics in ancient Greece." May focuses on Foucault's concern about how ethics is seen for the ancients—the historical direction that it has taken, the ethical problematization, specifically the shape of ethics as it bears upon sex. Foucault's four elements of ethics are used in looking at the ethics of ancient Greece and, specifically, aphrodisiac pleasure. There is also a discussion of Foucault and a criticism of his view of the ancient Greeks by Hadot.

May chooses five characteristics of Foucault to assess his work on ethics: (1) commitment to collective determination, (2) who people are cannot be just ignored or dismissed, (3) the question of complexity, (4) intimacy of acting and knowing, and (5) historical contingency of who people are. The chapter ends with a clear explanation of Foucault's idea of freedom.

In chapter 5, "Coda: Foucault's own straying afield," May offers an examination of the question of who Foucault is, although, according to Foucault's own words, one cannot ask this question. However, May is able to make him definable by placing Foucault into an epistemic framework and through using history. The chapter asks if one can see who Foucault is by looking at what Foucault means by straying afield of oneself, given who one has been made to be.

There is discussion of Foucault and how his writing was a way of creating himself. However, there are other activities Foucault that engaged, which helped him to create himself: politics and sexual experimentation. For Foucault, to create oneself is an experiment.

The sixth and final chapter, "Are we still who Foucault says we are?" is also divided into two sections. Section one answers the question "Are we now different?" It begins by asking if Foucault is still relevant. Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Lyotard are used to look at Foucault's relevance.

Deleuze's *Postscript on Control Societies* is used to show how he argued against Foucault's view of disciplinary societies. Baudrillard's *Forget Foucault* is employed, in which he argued that Foucault's concept of power is outmoded. Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* are also used, and through them the position that who people are now depends on performativity and exchange, and one must forget about history and meta-narratives.

May does not criticize these three thinkers, stating that they are not wrong but are, instead, incomplete in their views. Each one only looks at who people are through one lens. They miss Foucault's multiplicity.

The final section of this chapter is "Governmentality," in which readers are shown how Foucault viewed the practice of government. His definition of *governmentality* is discussed. Foucault's project of governmentality was

continuous with his genealogical method. It is not about political philosophy but is about issues of power and “positing the creation of objects through power rather than accepting their pre-existence” (p. 154). Other concepts that are also discussed are the power of the state versus the freedom and rights of the individual, early liberalism, and neoliberalism.

It has been asked what would happen if teachers became courageous and free to insist that educating children means creating discriminating minds, instead of minds that are able to be duped by others. When this happens, the schools will become the dangerous outposts of a humane civilization: interesting places (Dewey 1922). Todd May’s book shows that Michel Foucault is still a useful tool to bring this about.

REFERENCE

Dewey, John. 1922. Education as politics. In *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953. The Electronic Edition Folio Bound VIEWS ver 3.1a*. Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex.



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