Article:

To Obey and to Tell.

Book Review: Michel Foucault, On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, xviii + 365pp., £25.00 (hardback). Paperback (2016).

Foucault is an author whose thought is so pervasive, and who splits opinions so readily, that there will few readers of History of the Human Sciences (HHS) who have never read him. This poses interesting challenges for the reviewer of On the Government of Living (GL). It is highly unlikely that those who view Foucault as a complete irrelevance are going to be convinced otherwise, not least because they won't have read past the title. Foucauldian essentialists need not be targeted either because, firstly, they will read the book anyway and, secondly, they are already well catered (Elden 2014; Landry 2009). This review, therefore, is aimed at those in the middle; those who don't necessarily read Foucault's every word but, to a greater or lesser degree, find some of his themes, concepts, and methods of enough utility that there is interest when a new text emerges. The goal is to cover GL, a text thematically concerned with early Christianity, in such a way that middle-grounders will know if there is something here for them.

Thematics

Foucault's primary focus in GL is upon 'truth acts'; specific actions undertaken by individuals in order for the truth to become apparent. In particular, Foucault is concerned with the 'reflexive truth act' wherein an individual is not only an operator of the truth (turning the cogs so that the truth is revealed), not only a witness to the truth, but also the object of the truth; it is one's own conduct which is under investigation. Foucault sees such reflexive truth acts as being absolutely central to Western subjectivity and asks:

> "Why does power require (and for thousands of years in our societies, has required) individuals to say not only, "here I am, me who obeys," but in addition, "this is what I am, me who obeys, this is who I am, this is what I have seen, this is what I have done"?" (GL: 82)

This, then, can be articulated as a lecture series concerned with "the history of "tell me who you are."" (GL: 146)

The history of 'tell me who you are' begins, according to Foucault, in Christian practices dating from between the second and the fourth centuries and the majority of GL is concerned

with both an elucidation of practices during this time and juxtapositions intended to demonstrate the differences between Christian practices and those of antiquity (e.g., Lecture 10). Three practices come under particularly sustained attention; baptism (Lectures 5-7), penance (Lectures 8-9), and spiritual direction as practiced within monasteries (Lectures 10-12). There are significant differences between these three practices but what they have in common are those two themes, "to obey exhaustively and exhaustively tell what one is" (GL: 266).

What Foucault argues, quite beautifully, is that the profound effects of these institutions - effects which have rippled across millennia - arose in response to mundane, political problems of the time. The invention of original sin and the insertion of fear and uncertainty into the soul emerges in response to individuals "hastening to be baptized without going through a sufficient preparation, or delaying baptism as long as possible in order to be able to sin as much as possible with a peace of mind" (GL: 121). Penance arose, in part, because "Christianity was forced to pose concretely the question: what to do with those who have, in actual fact, fallen?" (GL: 184) – a real problem during a time of horrendous persecution during which significant numbers of Christians were recanting their beliefs. Monasteries were not an 'intensification' of Christianity but rather a response to:

> "…uncontrolled speculative vagrancy and wandering accompanied by a blossoming of exploits, visions, extraordinary ascesis, miracles, and rivalries and jousts in ascetic rigour as well as thaumaturgic marvels… In short, ascesis and the rules of ascesis had to be brought back into the system of the Church itself." (GL: 292)

This is a classic, readable Foucauldian analysis obviously of interest to those studying Christianity and other domains where 'truth-telling' plays a significant role; mental health and legal studies seeming like two obvious candidates. Further, the focus upon pastoral care and the conduct of conduct inherent within these Christian practices (e.g., Lecture 11) makes the book of interest to those concerned with governmentality.

Concepts

GL is dominated by two key concepts. The first of these concepts, alethurgy, is defined as:

> "… the set of possible verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten" (GL: 7)

Alethurgy, then, relates to the procedures that we undertake in order to make the truth appear to us. Importantly, Foucault contests that "there is no exercise of power without something like an alethurgy" (GL: 7).

Alethurgy is introduced by Foucault in Lecture 1 as part of a very deliberate attempt to get away from his well-known concept of power-knowledge and focus instead upon 'the government of truth'. Such a notable shift in terminology is required, apparently, for two reasons. Firstly, Foucault contends that "truth, the manifestation of which accompanies the exercise of power, goes far beyond knowledge useful for government" (GL: 5). There is in every system of government an excess of truth, a truth that exceeds its utility to governors. Secondly, procedures of truth go beyond explicit knowledge claims, for while the procedures of a given alethurgy may take:

> "the form of recorded information, knowledge, information stored in tables, records, and notes… [alethurgy may also] take the form of rituals, ceremonies, and various operations of magic, divination, the consultations of oracles, of gods." (6)

The alethurgy of the scientific method, that procedure of truth based upon logico-experimental procedures which has been increasingly dominant in Western societies from the end of the 16th century, is just one form of alethurgy, one way to manifest the truth. Studies encompassing more than this time period, or indeed different practices within it, requires a discussion of manifestations of truth beyond explicit knowledge and, thus, the shift in Foucault's concern from 'knowledge' to 'truth'.

As discussed in the thematics section, Foucault's focus in this lecture series is upon the insertion of reflexive truth acts, such as confession, into alethurgy, "the constitution of an alethurgy that revolves around the autos, the myself, himself, I" (GL: 49). There is, however, no reason why the framework could not be taken to other spheres, as Foucault's discussion of modes of alethurgy in Oedipus Rex (Lecture 2) demonstrates. While we'll have to wait on the uptake, or otherwise, of alethurgy as a concept, reading GL it is apparent that the vocabulary might provide insights for historians or sociologists of science; the famed cases covered in Shapin and Schaffer's Levianthan and the Airpump (1985) or Knorr-Certina's Epistemic Cultures (1999), for example, could be read in such terms.

The second piece of conceptual apparatus deployed at length in GL is the 'regime of truth' (see, in particular, Lecture 5). Foucault defines a regime of truth as "that which determines

the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestations of truth" (GL: 94). It is, "the connection between what is traditionally called the political and the epistemological" (GL: 102). A regime of truth, in other words, is what binds the subject to a particular form of alethurgy at any particular moment.

Readers of HHS are likely familiar with the notion of a 'regime of truth' following its general uptake in the wake of usage by relevant and widely read authors such as David Armstrong, Adele Clarke, Kurt Danziger and Nikolas Rose. Indeed, I suspect, it will be for its elucidation of regimes of truth that GL will ultimately be of the most use to the casual Foucauldian. Certainly, the pages devoted explicitly to the topic here (94-102) will be of great value for those attempting to grasp the nuances of the concept.

Methods

The one explicit consideration of methodology in GL comes during Lecture 4 when the term 'anarcheology', a deliberate riff on Feyerabend's work, is introduced. Foucault attempts to clarify what is meant by anarcheology by differentiating this form of analysis from ideological analyses. Consider a question like the following: 'given that this person is mad, are the practices of the State legitimate?' Foucault contests that this is a question typical in analyses of ideology. A particular truth of madness is taken for granted and the State's practices of power (incarceration, for example) are judged based on their legitimacy given that truth; are those practices on madness based upon "truth or error, truth or falsity, ideology or science, rationality or irrationality" (GL: 77)?

In anarcheological analysis, Foucault inverts the relationship between truth and practice, and asks: 'given the reality of the state's practices of power, what sort of subject-bound-to-truth appears as a madman?' The madman here "is only the correlative of practice" as his colleague Paul Veyne says (1997: 155) and it thus makes no sense to talk of the legitimacy of power practices (as one might in an ideological analysis) because, as Foucault says elsewhere, practices "systematically form of the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 2002: 54). It is not that incarceration is (il)legitimate because this is a madman; rather, it is through this practice of incarceration that the madman takes their form.

So the archaeological method foregrounds that "the essence of objects is fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (Foucault 1977: 142) and highlights the discursive practices which made particular objects intelligible, even thinkable, at a particular moment.

The genealogical method compliments archaeology by discussing changes as a consequence of particular forms of power. "Anarcheology", therefore, adds another layer to the onion via its radical questioning of all forms of legitimacy.

If the discussion of method in theory is diverting, Foucault's method in practice is wonderful. Lecture 6, for example, flows from a sentence of Tertillian's (a Christian scholar writing in the 2nd century) in which he stated "We are not bathed in the baptismal water in order to be purified, but we are bathed in the baptismal water because we are purified" (GL: 117). From this sentence emerges an analysis of the shifting meaning of baptism and the conclusion that this was the moment where fear and uncertainty was placed into the soul of the Christian; a place it has remained ever since. It is a further reminder that, to truly understand Foucault's methods, it is fruitful to spend less time worrying about the terms archaeology, genealogy, and anarcheology than it is to read his patient, scholarly textual analysis of the sort offered here. His lecture series remain among the best places to find such analyses and GL is no exception in that regard.

Acknowledgements

References

Elden, S., 2014. Confession, flesh, power and truth. Berfrois. Available at: http://www.berfrois.com/2014/11/stuart-elden-confession-flesh-power-truth/ [Accessed June 3, 2015].

Foucault, M., 1977. Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In D. F. Bouchard, ed. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interveiws. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, pp. 139–164.

Foucault, M., 2002. The Archaeology of Knowledge, London: Routledge.

Knorr Cetina, K., 1999. Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Landry, J.-M., 2009. Confession, obedience, and subjectivity: Michel Foucault's unpublished lectures On the Government of the Living. Telos, 2009(146), pp.111–123.

Shapin, S. & Schaffer, S., 1985. Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Veyne, P., 1997. Foucault revolutionizes history. In A. I. Davidson, ed. Foucault and His Interlocutors. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 146–182.

Author biography

Greg Hollin is a postdoctoral fellow based at the University of Nottingham. His research has been published in History of the Human Sciences and elsewhere.