Notes on Foucault Seminar 10: *Subjectivité et verité* (1980-1981)

----------- *Subjectivité et verité* – a redetermination

Please allow me a philological indulgence as a point of entry.

For a while now, in reading through these seminars, I have become intrigued by the homologous sonority between penance and penalty, enough to do a little digging. Etymological opinions differ on the matter of their linguistic association. No doubt, the whole panoply of words linked to the punitive domain is drawn from the Latin derivation of the Greek *poinē*, which is the fine, penalty, or punishment exchanged for a transgression. The word still enjoys contemporary usage with fully established juridical value. This much is easy.

Penance (and its surrogate, penitence) is thought to derive as well from the Late Latin *poenitēre*, the verb deriving from *poena*, which does mean penalty (and in English will also come to lend significance to the word “pain”) and is, of course, just as much a carryover from the same Greek *poinē*.[[1]](#footnote-1) But contrary to the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that the Latin verb *poenitēre* is a late Latin spelling of *paenitēre*, which is generally thought to be related to *paene* – “almost” – in the sense of signifying something that is regrettable for not being quite enough, for almost being what is meant to be, regretfully nearly achieved but not quite. Indeed, the full ascetic gamut of penitence in Western Christianity is characterized by the desire to repair the whole that has been torn either by specific acts in worldly life or by the fallen condition of human-being as such. Penitence and repentance – the “re” already figures as the sign of the repetition necessary in every ascetic discipline – are meant precisely to repair this tearing, to reverse the regret. As Samuel Weber says succinctly, penance is “the negative expression of faith.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

[Incidentally, notice the similar connection/disjunction in French regarding the word *peine*, which in legal discourse is primarily used to indicate “pain” but in common language is also used to mean “effort” (*ça ne vaut pas la peine*) – in both cases, a disciplinary meaning – and, in a totally different sense, the phrase *à peine*, which means barely, hardly, not quite, almost (*à peine légal*).]

Now, we all know that the history of penance and penitence is inseparable from the history of punishment (indeed, self-punishment, and I will return to this) as well as the history of pain. Whatever may be the simply juridical dimensions of the punitive domain, according to the main exigencies of *poenitēre*, the moral or psychical dimensions of the penitent domain cannot be summarily exempted from juridical attributes. Foucault does not make these connections explicit, but the music of language alone does not allow me to overlook them. Besides, the connection works well to Foucault’s advantage, even if not quite intended.

For, in the most general terms, his grand-scale inquiry into punitive realms of society from the outset of his thinking has been consistently implicated, whatever the specific focus, in regimes of *disciplinarity* – which I take here in all senses of the word, from the ordering of things and modes of knowledge to the practices of self, including the governmentality of the self and the other, the very basics of subjectivation and subjection. I say this as a kind of preamble orientation of myself in the face of navigating through Foucault’s journey into Christian waters, which for me has never been quite easy to come to terms with, especially insofar as it serves as a source of material concerning self-governance.

The seminar oddly titled *Subjectivité et verité* – “pretentiously titled” avows Foucault (27) – follows very much the previous year’s under the title *On the Government of the Living* but, as has been pointed out, also restages some of the earliest interests of Foucault going back to the original lectures on *The Will to Know*. Which was, of course, the title of the 1st volume of *The History of Sexuality*, and it is perfectly apt, since at this juncture Foucault is going back to resume the project of this history, after having interrupted it to develop the thinking on what we now understand as biopolitics and governmentality. I confess I had always thought of this interruption as a divergence – and I don’t mind either interruption or divergence; besides, Foucault taught me very much to appreciate discontinuity in history – but, in retrospect, I realize that, discontinuity being what it is, there is a fantastic consistency of inquiry and research, that is to say, a consistent trajectory of purpose, and in fact – because we’re talking about Foucault here – an extraordinarily disciplined drive toward the exhaustion of a certain subject (topic) of inquiry.

So, these renewed investigations on “the will to know” – or, as he says in 1980s terminology, “the instituted modes of knowing the self” (299) which means the techniques of knowing and self-knowing – come to encounter the already laid out investigations on modes of governing and being governed. Again, as Foucault himself says, the encounter creates “an intersection between the history of subjectivity” (which would go all the way back to *Histoire de la folie*)and “the analysis of modes of governmentality” which I would place – and we can discuss it – all the way back to *Les Mots et les choses*, in the sense that his questioning of epistemological order and its relation to modes of fashioning and sustaining (but also *altering*) knowledge/power in that book already prefigures the later investigations of disciplinarity and the arts of government/governance/governmentality.

Paraphrasing again: the techniques of the care of the self are a way of conducting the history of subjectivity (*faire l’histoire de la subjectivité*) not in terms of the contrary pairs of normal/abnormal (the mad, the sick, the delinquent, etc.) as was being done so far, where “scientific objectivity” sets the terms, but rather by way of examining modes of knowing oneself as these come to be formed and transformed in society – knowing oneself: being in relation to oneself, which quite literally means accounting for the otherness in oneself. This latter sense, Foucault tells us, points to a whole other mode of investigating how governmentality is at play – specifically, “the governmentality of the self by the self” (300), with all the pedagogical elements that come with it. In other words, the investigation of the techniques of “the care of the self” are granted a thoroughly *political* significance, and these are the terms (the political) in which the discussion is staged, as far as I see it.

[In this context, I want to mention a brilliant book that does this as well, and in fact in some ways more extensively, especially in that it clarifies the differences between the Greek care of the self in the polis and the Roman/Hellenistic care of the self in the imperial apparatus. I am speaking of John Hamilton’s *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (Princeton, 2013), which is especially pertinent because it links the philology of care to the politics of security, very much a Foucauldian concern.]

But it’s Foucault’s singular contribution – in the wake of feminism in this era, as practice perhaps more than theory (for all the great theory that is already out there) – that this domain of not merely self-knowledge but self-governance is investigated and contemplated in terms and from the standpoint of sexuality.

Sexuality, of course, is a term of modernity and thus, Foucault says, inadequate to account for the practices of self-knowledge/self-governance he turns to in attempting to form a genealogy of the making of subjectivity. Unlike the modern notion of sexuality, the Greek notion of *aphrodisia* is judged on the basis of acts of pleasure not desire; or, on the basis of self-formation according to “techniques of life” not techniques of repression (*refoulement*) in the face of the law, of what is forbidden. These latter aspects – the discursive fashioning of desire as a consequence of interdiction – Foucault traces back to the early years of Christianity, in the Eastern Empire (and I will come back to this), and not in the years of industrialized capitalist modernity (say, Victorian morality).

We know this well; it is the principle of the first instance of the *History of Sexuality* project. But what is innovative, in relation to that early instance to which Foucault returns in order to re-evaluate it and enhance it, is that he pushes back this specific disciplinarity to the last of the pre-Christian years in the Greco-Roman world in this region – Stoic thought and practice – to which in fact he gives a sort of primary agency in shaping Christian institutional thinking.

I can say a lot about this specific conjuncture between Stoic thinking and what soon after developed as Early Christian thought – which interests me a great deal and I have written about in different discursive context (e.g. political theology) – but it would take up a lot of my allotted time. Historically speaking, Foucault is correct – and despite the various critiques, prominent Classicists of this period accept his account. So, no dispute there. It’s only when Foucault easily slides from the account of the Stoic to the account of the Greek per se, as if it is seamless, that some important questions are raised that we need to address. And he does this in many instances, even if not altogether consistently.

Incidentally, he does this also in his later discussion of *parrhēsia*, which isn’t our direct concern in this seminar but in fact, given the centrality of truth-telling, very much in play in our discussion. It’s quite interesting to me that Foucault’s evident investment in *parrhēsia* is less in the terms in which the notion first arose in the democratic city – as the mode of bringing *everything* into the explicit language of the public sphere, of not excluding a priori *anything* from being uttered, heard, considered, questioned, debated, or dismissed[[3]](#footnote-3) – and more in the terms in which it came to be privatized, in the Stoic period, as the philosopher’s (and consequently, the individual subject’s) disclosure of self: *parrhēsia* as the individual truth-telling of self, which is to be measured by the exigencies of the instituted signification of truth against which, in perfectly Stoic fashion, it is exercised.

The fact that this privatization (or individuation, if you prefer) of truth-telling determines how we investigate the relation between subjectivity and truth makes sense, given the rubric of modes of sovereignty and individuality that affect *modern Western* institutions, which Foucault’s research relentlessly pursues throughout. But, as all such investigations of Western modernity that take for granted Christianity as its continuously authorizing force – and they are legion nowadays, in what has become a rather fashionable industry – this specific genealogy is compromised in two ways: 1) it does not take seriously the theologization of political concepts and practices that takes place starting with Christianity’s assimilation of Hellenic signifiers – this is a crucial adversary to Carl Schmitt’s thoughtlessly proliferating thesis of the contrary (see at the very least, Jan Assmann’s work); 2) it ultimately assumes (even if not exactly fully avowing it) that what we call “secularization” – an unfinishable project, as I have argued – is a sham. And I am not talking about secularization as the abolition of religion, which would be nonsense; I am talking about the reconfiguration of religion to what has always been the case but endemically suppressed: namely, that it is one human endeavor among many.

In any case, it is my sense that at this stage in his thinking Foucault’s Catholic formation is returning as a contested terrain versus his developed affinity for a pagan pre-Christian sensibility through which he hopes to articulate a radical politics of praxis – and this has a whole range of dimensions, including what we can call a critical governmentality, as well as a radical sexuality that would succeed in outmaneuvering the traps of interdiction in the making of desire. Two things, however, need to be teased out: 1) the fact that he seems not to have managed to overcome the fascination with the Christian imaginary of penitence – which carries all sorts of disciplinary demands, most significant of which is ascetic self-punishment; 2) the fact that, for all his far-seeing reconceptualization of critique and Enlightenment ethos that he ventures into in this late period, he does not seem to overcome his fascination for those late-Hellenistic/Roman practices that, at the very least (historically speaking), carry with them the mark of a depoliticized society: as the exigencies of the polis and its essentially contested, precarious, and literally *political* terrain has given over to the stable reproducibility of social practices, in those Hellenistic monarchies that after all welcome the structures of Roman Imperium, where private asceticism has triumphed over public agonism.

It isn’t that he doesn’t recognize these fine differences. It’s that he hedges – and occasionally slips, in revealing fashion: One telling instance is when he talks about the “massive differences between pagan ethics and Christian morality” in order to reverse it in the very next sentence to “pagan morality and Christian ethics” (39). Later on, he makes the stunning statement that “the appearance of Christianity made absolutely no rupture” (257), in order to go on to discuss, just a couple of paragraphs later, of “a mutation internal to Christianity” that disrupts this “continuum” so that, in fact, “the problem evidently is to know where we draw the line of the break [*coupure*]” (258).

But let’s see more specifically. Almost all of Foucault’s references to Greek texts are post-Aristotelian – this is especially important in terms of his discussion of *bios* (to which I will shortly return). He correctly speaks of the “philosophical monotheism of the Stoics” (40ff); yet, he still includes it in the inventory of paganism, where the key attitudes of the care of the self and the techniques of life, as they pertain to sexuality, remain for him the coveted objects of ‘modern’ subjectivity after its formation by Christian morality. He goes on to say that Christianity has concealed this inventory; that it has buried it deep in the ground from which ‘modern’ subjectivity emerges; that it has condemned it to oblivion (41). And he concludes: our critique as ‘modern’ subjectivities – our own project of reflection that is to be the care of the self – means to excavate this forgotten core which is both foreign and yet our own: “Paganism is the other, and yet a certain grounding of ourselves. And if we want to return to this ground of ourselves, it is indeed this paganism, this absolutely other, absolutely lost paganism, that we must rediscover” (42).

A way to measure how foreign, or how other, this core grounding condition has become – how profoundly it has been forgotten, repressed, covered over by Christianity, so as to become other – is to understand that the “techniques of life”, the arts of living developed by the Stoics (especially insofar as these techniques pertain to sexuality), are not in fact tantamount to “rules of conduct”, codes of behavior or “comportment” (253). This would mean that they would obey a set of institutionalized values – they would be mere repetition of what is already constituted and remains uninterrogated. Rather, these techniques of life are not rules of conduct precisely because their object is not conformity to a standard but the transformative work of the subject itself, the living being itself body and soul, as it were, for this work pertains to both somatic and psychical practices – soul having no transcendent meaning whatsoever. [Foucault: *régime du corps, régime de l’âme*]

From this account, Foucault goes on to determine the significance of *bios* in the Greek world – but what Greek world? His examples of the three different modes of Greek life for men – political, economic (chrematistic), philosophical (p. 254-255) – are historical manifestations of an imperial era. Such division would be inconceivable in the polis – and not only in the democratic polis. This is particularly significant insofar as the domain of truth is solely reserved for the third, the philosopher. As if the political life is not engaged in regimes of truth; as if the enormous history of ostracism in Athens is a matter of mere whim; or worse, as if Antigone’s other regime of the law is mere insubordination, false presumption, contempt of court.

But – to continue with this see-saw, this hedging – Foucault correctly argues that, in the absence of any notion of subjectivity in the Greek world (in any archaic society, I am sure he would add), “*bios* is [tantamount to] Greek subjectivity” (255) because the subject is a project – it is made, it is an object of *technē*. And “*technē* is not a code as to what is permitted or what must be defended; it is a systematic ensemble of actions and a certain mode of action” … “destined to work upon a determined object toward a certain number of transformations” (253). This technical apparatus is possible because of two distinctive social-imaginary conditions – distinctive in opposition to ‘modern’ ‘Western’ Christian-derived subjectivity.

One is the separation of *bios* from *zoē*, which is fundamental to the cosmological universe of the Greeks. The living substance of being (*zoē*) is not adequate to account for a person’s life. Something else takes place in addition, and it is this project, *the making of a life*, that matters. This project is resolutely worldly, and it can be nothing else because one’s *bios* (and the *technē* one employs to make it) has no transcendent principles that authorize it and no transcendental significance outside the very finite experience that it itself produces.

Which brings us to the second distinction: What Christianity brings into the picture, Foucault tells us, is a whole other separation to the one between *bios* and *zoē*: the division between life in the world and the after-life in an otherworldly, transcendental Elsewhere. (This is all *zoē* on both counts; *bios* slowly drops out of the picture, or relegated to mere history, biography.) Because the first *zoē* is but a preparation for the second, which is the life that really matters, the non-life that is eternal life, you would expect that to a certain measure the *technai peri ton bion* of the pagans would get passed on, even if just formally. Except that there is a fundamental disconnect, because these pagan *technai* are entirely outside the framework of a beyond: “they don’t think in terms of a beyond, or in terms absolute and common; they think in terms of ends that each poses to oneself” (256).

I will continue with Foucault’s thinking on this immanent *technē* in a minute, but to round out my point about the difficult intersections, both backward and forward from the standpoint of the Stoics – to the world of the polis and to the after-world of Christianity, respectively – I would like to just mention (and only mention) two unexamined issues, which may become threads for discussion:

First: Missing in Foucault’s otherwise correct account is some sort of reflection on the significance of Aristotle’s notion of *zōon politikon*, that is to say, the fact that the political dimensions of life are already set to embody the very substance of living being, *zoē* before it becomes *bios*, or *physis* before it is crossed by *nomos*. Admittedly, Aristotle’s notion is strange in Greek writing, even if there is a great deal of preceding ground to justify it (pre-Socratic cosmology), but I mention it here because it’s relevant to the problem of *biopoetics* to which I will shortly come to.

Second: the question of Christian *technē*, if we choose to continue to call it that. The development of the troublesome Christian category of the “flesh” and the disciplinary measures taken to combat it, even at the limit to efface it – chiefly, the entire machinery of penitence and repentance as self-punishment/self-cleansing that I mentioned at the outset – surely derails the aspirations of a “care of the self” that is to bring back to modern subjectivity its lost forming and transforming (or governing and self-governing) capacities in order to combat the structures of institutionalized governmentality.

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Let me conclude, by further examining this matter of *technai peri ton bion* by the one crucial element I have only just mentioned: the issue of truth.

I go back to the beginning of the seminar. The matter of truth, in addition to all the dimensions discussed, also carries a crucial methodological weight. Foucault begins by asking, what he interestingly calls, the ‘positivist question’: “How can there be truth of the subject when there cannot be truth except for *a* [specific] subject?” (13). Recognizing that, historically speaking, there is always – unavoidably, in all social and cultural situations – a regime of truth that one inhabits, a regime of truth that already determines what subjectivity (as a category) is and means, in language but also in practice, Foucault raises the question of possibility as to how, within this regime, one may seek, or indeed one may tell, the truth – one’s truth – as if it were not already (pre)determined. This “how” is the key, the crucial point of inquiry: what makes that happen?

“What mark, that is to say also, what wound or what opening, what constraint or liberation, produces in the subject the recognition of the fact that there is, concerning him/her [specifically], a truth to be told, to be sought, rather than a truth already told, a truth imposed?” (14)

This “what” – which is also a “how” – is the point at which we can speak of governmentality not in terms of *instituted* modes of control but as *instituting* terms of self-governance. (In broad terms, this is also the gist of my recent attempts to speak of a “left governmentality”.) Now, we recognize that whatever may be the parameters of *instituting* – the opening, the thing to be sought, to be acted upon, the pursued “care of the self” – they cannot evade the domain of the *instituted*: what is imposed, what is already established as mode of knowing (including self-knowing), what “wounds” you with its mark of power, what subjectifies. The interplay between wound (*blessure*) and opening (*ouverture*) cannot be outmaneuvered, but Foucault here chooses to focus on those parameters of subjectification that lie in front of the subject, not already established within: parameters that open up the space of the truth of the subject to be told. So, truth is a “system of obligations” as he tells us, independent of the question of what is or is not true from this or that perspective, and subjectivities, as experiences of self and other, are constituted by means of encountering these instituted bindings, these parameters of obligation.

Again, we can choose either to remain focused on the binding or instead to focus on the opening. Foucault’s work has been essential in our understanding of the first, but in this phase of his work, he is drawing attention to the second. (As he also does with critique and Enlightenment ethos, from the texts that have become famous and discussed extensively). I repeat, these are not two phases or two moments but part of the whole package, if you will. It’s just that the emphasis here is on *the act* rather than the form, on the making (or the telling) than the made or the told. I consider this an essential *methodological*, if I may put it this way, component of this phase of Foucault’s work, which does not, however, contradict the genealogical project. On the contrary – and this, if I may say, is unique to Foucault: What’s remarkable about this methodologically is that he conducts an inquiry of praxis/performance as opening to doing, telling, seeking in terms of a resolutely historical account of what has been done, told, established, and achieved. [To me this matters a great deal as a matter of reflection on how we work – how we think and judge (*krisis*), how we imagine and take account – and I would like to invite discussion specifically on it.]

So back to *bios* and *technē*, to conclude.

Truth becomes institutionalized as an element of *bios* specifically in the domain of sexuality. This is how Foucault stages the problematic: his question is “what type of subjectivity is tied to the fact that we always exist within the possibility and the right (*droit*) to say: ‘Yes, it is true, I desire’” (17). The truth then, which is indissoluble from being (he says), invokes in this specific sense – the sense of desire, the sense of the sexual – an otherness, which is both within and without the self-in-the-making. This art of living is also always an art of dying – Foucault acknowledges this explicitly (30-31) and it is quintessential to the Greek social-imaginary of *bios*; in this sense this art of the self is unavoidably implicated in an encounter with the other.

But it would be too simple (and inaccurate) to imagine this otherness to exist in some transcendental elsewhere – Christian asceticism presumes this, and this is why it lies ultimately very far from the *technai peri ton bion*. Rather, it would be more accurate to understand this otherness to emerge into the scene as the very essence of this *technē*. “The arts of living [are] essentially centered not around the question of how to do [*comment faire*], but how to be [*comment être*]” (33). “Modification of being, passage toward the other from an ontological standpoint, opening to modalities of experience: this is what the arts of living are about” (34).

Because the significance of the arts of living is “the transformation of being” they cannot be ultimately reduced to mere technique. If we are going to insist on the term *biopoetics* – which Foucault uses in the margins of the seminar but does not elaborate on – then we need to differentiate it substantially from *biotechnics*. No matter the essential, the required, dimension of *technē* involved, the ontologically transformative making of the self cannot be reduced to mere discipline. To do so would mean, in my mind, to revoke this radically formative and transformative power, the sort of embedded *political* capacity to contest established forms and to create as of yet *other* forms. Biotechnics as an end in-itself is to *depoliticize* the subjectivity that makes itself in this fashion, much like the use of *oikonomia* as a mere governmental figure – I’m thinking here of Agamben’s use of the Aristotelian and then Early Christian notion – renders the politics it creates a matter of mere administration.

A biopoetics is both predicated on and seeks to find and fashion an anthropological otherness that resides both ‘within’ the field of the subject-in-the-making – for how could self-transformation (what I call *self-alteration*) take place? – and ‘within’ the field of the world in which *technai peri ton bion* are exercised and truth is told – for how could this truth-telling *be truth*, if not externalized, expressed, performed?

To illustrate exactly what I mean, I end by quoting extensively again, from one of those moments where Foucault draws a definite line of separation against the Christian parameters he otherwise flirts with in the process:

“Greek *bios* does not define itself, like Western or Christian subjectivity, around the possibility or the injunction toward a conversion, but around the continuous work of the self upon the self. And indeed, Greek *bios* does not define itself in relation to some hidden authenticity that would have to be discovered in the very pathway toward the absolute term and movement of conversion. It defines itself like an approach, or perhaps more like an indefinite seeking, or finite only in the very form of [its] existence, of an end, an end that is at the same time achieved and not achieved” (256).

An inconvertible self then: because otherness does not exist out there in advance for one to convert to it. But nonetheless very much a transformable self: insofar as it inhabits otherness, even if never quite fully, therefore otherness ever sought – in the world.

1. Such is the claim by Julia Cresswell in the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, 2nd edition, OUP, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Weber, *Inquiétantes singularités* (Paris: Hermann, 2014), 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I find useful here Derrida’s use of the term *tout dire*, which means not only to say *everything* but to say *anything*, whereby anything would include things that remain unsaid, not quite (yet) sayable, but in principle potentially sayable, even if as yet unthought in the specific terms of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)