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The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984: vol. 1, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.
(book reviews) *Richard Shusterman*.

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At the time of his death from AIDS in June 1984, Michel Foucault was 57 years old. But he was already a famous and controversial philosopher--even in the English-speaking world, where most of his important research on sexuality and the ethics of self-styling had not yet been translated. This later work now commands a great deal of attention, partly through its association with Foucault's advocacy of a gay ethic. The polemics such an ethic inspired (not least among scholars uncertain how to appraise his avid fascination with consensual sadomasochism) have kept Foucault in the academic headlines. But they risk diverting interest from the different kind of philosophical inquiry that first established his reputation in the rest of the world.

of our most respected sciences and
education.

Impressed with the rich political import of his work, many were disappointed when Foucault turned toward the ethics of self-care. From the vast fresco of grand social institutions and impersonal forms of scientific knowledge, Foucault's philosophy seemed to shrink into the private sphere, courting a frivolous narcissism through its celebration of aesthetic self-styling and the pleasures of creative sex. Those who refused to choose between early and late Foucault still faced the question of how to bring his different philosophies together into a coherent picture.

Now comes the first substantial anthology of Foucault's ethics of self-care and sexuality that convincingly links it to his critical analyses of knowledge and power. Culled eclectically from the posthumous four-volume miscellany of *Dits et ecrits*, Paul Rabinow's collection on Ethics exhibits Foucault's development of thought and rich range of textual exercises. Beginning with his 1969 statement of purpose as a candidate for professor at the College de France, the book contains Foucault's official summaries of his yearly courses there, never before published in English. In contrast, the second part's fifteen texts are more diverse (interviews, essays, lectures, a seminar transcription, even an unused book preface), and almost all have appeared in previous English anthologies of Foucault. Concentrating on his ethics of self-care, this section highlights Foucault's interest in self-fashioning through writing and sexual practices, including some of his most important accounts of S/M. The first of three projected volumes based on *Dits et ecrits*, Ethics will be followed in the next two years by collections (on Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology and on Power) whose contents will further demonstrate Foucault's fascination with self-transformation through textual and somatic disciplines. By turns scholarly and scandalous, coldly cynical and passionately utopian, Foucault's disciplinary efforts may be fascinating, but what is the philosophical point of all such exercise?

Though conventionally defined as a quest for knowledge, philosophy has had a long tradition that subordinated cognitive ideals of truth and self-knowledge to a higher, more comprehensive

ethical aim of self-care. In Seneca, Epictetus, Cicero and Montaigne, philosophers would echo Socrates' warning that the zeal for seeking knowledge dangerously distracts us from applying the knowledge most useful for the conduct of life.

Foucault describes how philosophers, from antiquity to modernity, developed the practice of self-care through different literary genres: keeping notebooks of useful thoughts and quotations, exchanging letters of self-disclosure and advice between friends, composing texts of self-examination and confession, drafting meditative and exploratory essays. Such writing of the self was not just a way of discovering who one was but "an attempt at modifying one's way of being" through "askesis, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought." The ancient dietary and sexual regimens that Foucault studied, like his experiments with drugs and S/M, were somatic analogues of philosophy's textual disciplines of exploratory self-fashioning for better self-care.

Philosophy's notion of self-care connotes improvement rather than mere maintenance, but what kind of improvement? Two models that have been dominant since antiquity find expression in Foucault. The first is therapeutic, analogous to medicine. As the physician cares for the body's health, so the philosopher seeks to improve the soul's. While the physician faces inevitable defeat in the body's death and decay, the philosopher can remain triumphant in the health of the soul, conceived as immortal. Revived for today's scholarly circles by Pierre Hadot, this medico-therapeutic model thrives more robustly in the popular literature of self-help.

In contrast (though not necessarily in conflict) with the medico-therapeutic ideal, ancient philosophy also offered an aesthetic model of self-care. Greek philosophy drew many of its founding orientations from poetry and the arts, even if it polemically turned to insist on its own superiority. Praising love's desire for beauty as the source of philosophy, Plato's *Symposium* celebrates the philosophical life as a continuous quest for ennobling beauty through which one can achieve a kind of immortality by leaving beautiful memorials in words and deeds. This is the aesthetic model that Foucault champions as his ethics of self-care, "a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence," directed by "the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence." Foucault traces this idea of aesthetic self-fashioning from ancient philosophy through various Christian transfigurations and into its most striking modern form, the Baudelairian dandy, who makes his life a work of art.

While the medico-therapeutic model implies an essential norm of health, Foucault's aesthetic model of self-care shares two tenets of pragmatist anti-essentialism. The self has no fixed essence that defines its aesthetic care; and art has no essence that confines it to the art world's fetishized objects. "From the idea that the self is not given to us," Foucault argues, "I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art." And: "Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?"

Even if we agree to see self-care as aesthetic, debate will erupt because of the very different values with which art has been identified--unity, harmonious form, pleasure, novelty, uniqueness. Which, then, should be given preference in the aesthetic fashioning of our lives? If the Greeks stressed the first two, Foucault seems to prefer novelty and uniqueness, not simply through his critique of unity but by his celebration of avant-garde dandyism and gay S/M for the "invention" of entirely "new lifestyles." If ancient lives and artworks could satisfy by being

creative variations on conventional models, Foucault's Modernist aesthetic is perhaps excessive in demanding something so radically new as to be "still improbable" and "unforesee[able]."

Sharing the ancients' respect for pleasure, Foucault offers a refreshing alternative to the puritanical cognitive fixations that today dominate even the discourse of art, though he insists that knowledge also gives pleasure and that joy exacts its own demanding discipline. But in hedonism as in aesthetics, Foucault's taste too exclusively tends toward the radical, transgressive and spectacular. Rejecting what he calls "those middle-range pleasures that make up everyday life" (dismissed as the American "club sandwich," "Coke" and "ice cream," or the good "glass of wine"), Foucault insists that "a pleasure must be something incredibly intense" or it is "nothing": "the real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it. I would die." In championing strong drugs, S/M and even suicide as the best means for such limit-experiences, Foucault projects a sensationalist aura of transgression that can obscure the deep seriousness and traditionalism of linking philosophy's arts of living and dying. Even before Socrates defined philosophy in terms of both these (perhaps inseparable) arts, Solon's dictum "Call no man happy until he is dead" argued that death's final act could ruin the harmony, meaning and beauty of the whole life it ended.

But even if historically grounded, isn't Foucault's ethics of aesthetic self-fashioning vitiated by his preferred practices of pleasure? Different strokes for different folks affirms a vernacular wisdom apt for more than S/M's disciples. One merit of the aesthetic model is that it prescribes no rigid rules or perfect character to conform to, even when urging us all to make our selves more attractive. It realizes not only that each self has its own particular contingencies, talents and taste in self-fashioning but that the very diversity of lifestyles provides its own aesthetic pleasure.

Foucault's "ethics of pleasure" is most usefully criticized neither for its transgressive methods nor for its hedonism per se but for its failure to recognize the full spectrum of pleasure, both in theory and in practice. Charged by Hadot with confusing sensual voluptas with spiritual joy, Foucault certainly provides no comparative analysis of pleasure's different forms and values from titillation to bliss, pleasantness to rapture. His exclusionary emphasis on the spectacularly intense and transgressive betrays his explicit goal of making "ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure" by reducing pleasure's range and variety. The same sort of contradiction haunts his celebration of gay S/M. Praised for desexualizing pleasure by displacing the genital focus, it is contrastingly advocated for its intensifying concentration on "the sexual act" (rather than the pleasures of courtship) and for using "every part of the body as a sexual instrument"--hardly a promising recipe for desexualization.

Foucault's aesthetic model of ethics is too rich and problematic to capture in a brief review of

For Foucault, ethical self-care is structured by the systems of knowledge and relations of power in which the self is situated. The extensive genealogical studies of his earlier work show how our sciences relating to disease, madness and criminality were shaped by institutional powers seeking to govern populations. Within this context of sociopolitical government through systems of knowledge emerges the distinctly ethical problem of self-government. The College de France course summaries start from the most general questions of knowledge and power before turning to specific historical inquiries with respect to the penal, medical and mental health systems and their production of truth. A short account of liberalism as a strategy of better social rule through minimal state government provides the logical transition to the individual's ethics of self-government, defined as self-care and construed ultimately in aesthetic terms.

Can placing Foucault's aesthetic self-fashioning in this wider context adequately respond to charges of narcissistic selfishness and apolitical self-absorption? If the self is a product of repressively normalizing systems of "power-knowledge," then its aesthetic refashioning into something radically novel and nonconformist may be a useful act of resistance. But are the dandy and the druggie today's best hopes for political reform? Could group suicide prove even more effective and fun? Pragmatists like John Dewey have urged different ways to link politics with aesthetic self-care, emphasizing the enrichment of the self that comes from caring for others through participatory democratic praxis. While not excluding these good old altruistic strategies of self-fashioning, Foucault's alternatives usefully problematize them; and problematization rather than smug solution is the fruitful banner of his philosophy.

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