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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Introduction to Review Symposium: *On Government of the Living*

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It has been widely claimed that Foucault's 1980 lecture course at the *Collège de France*, *On the Government of the Living* (GL) constituted a turning point in Foucault's thinking, marked by what he describes as his "Greco-Latin trip," with both a focus on Greco-Roman thinkers, and on early Christianity and its penitential and confessional practices. We have been fortunate that three major commentators on Foucault, writing from different perspectives, Colin Gordon (who was present when Foucault delivered one of these lectures), David Konstan, and Jeremy Carrette, have written review essays for the special section of *Foucault Studies* devoted to this lecture course and its significance.

While Christian practices of penance and confession are a focus of Foucault's 1980 lecture course, and would concern him for the last several years of his life, as Mark Jordan has pointed out in his *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault*, in the cluster of lectures, essays, and interviews in this period, and while always "[t]rying to understand the distinctively modern forms of political power over bodies" Foucault emphasized "the historical importance of pastoral power for modern subjectivity."¹ There is, then, a definite link between what is often described as the "final Foucault," and his interest in Patristic Christianity and its own governmental practices, and the broader question of "government," both of the self and of others, as well as the historical modes of *subject* formation, all concerns that shaped the whole of Foucault's *oeuvre*. Indeed, as Foucault says in his conclusions to *On the Government of the Living* that obligation "to tell the truth about oneself," has shaped not just Christianity, but Western modernity too; indeed "the whole social system to which we belong."² Indeed that preoccupation has become central to Western culture and its governmental practices. Here, we want to point to a series of closely linked issues that preoccupied Foucault even before GL, and with which he was particularly concerned in the final years of his life; issues that in our view constitute a framework for understanding his focus on Greco-Roman and Christian ideas and practices over those last years: ethics, ascesis, *parrhesia*,

¹ Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 122.

² Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 312.

freedom, how not to be governed as we have been, and especially self-fashioning, *how* to fashion a novel and unique self. Ethics, for Foucault, was not about knowledge of some a-historical “self,” and the *rules* that one must subscribe to in relations with others, but rather *care* of self; not a code or rule-book, but an *ethos*, a way of life composed of a set of practices, self-relations and relations to others. *Parrhesia* or “truth-telling” [*dire vrai*] is therefore entailed by any project of transforming one’s self. But here, Foucault’s understanding of speaking truth as an ethical quality linked to self-fashioning, needs to be distinguished from truth as knowledge [*connaissance*] and modes of veridiction, especially the scientific knowledge of the object world or a purported knowledge of an a-historical human essence. The latter was the target of Foucault’s critique of Cartesian and Kantian theories of knowledge. Foucault’s project of self-fashioning, then, involves what he saw as a permanent critique of our self, as well as of our historical epoch, a constant exercise of oneself, what he designated as *askesis* or arts of existence. Freedom, then, is an always unfinished work which entails critique; it is the capacity to both think and to act *differently*, which is integral to any political project predicated on not being governed “like that,” on changing the conditions under which one is and has been governed.

These concerns can be seen in a series of lectures that Foucault gave in that same period. Thus in his “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault focused on Kant’s claim that Enlightenment constitutes an escape from our state of “immaturity,” a state where we “accept someone else’s authority.”³ Enlightenment is “the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority;” the moment that extricating himself from that condition, modern man does not seek “to discover himself, his secrets, and his hidden truth.”⁴ Rather, he is the man who tries to invent himself.⁵ What Foucault calls here “[t]he critical ontology of ourselves has to be [...] conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is [...] the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”⁶ In his “What is Critique?” Foucault points out that the government of one’s self needs to challenge any injunction to “obedience, and be linked to a critical attitude, and what he explicitly terms “voluntary insubordination” or more precisely “how not to be governed *like that*”;⁷ how not to be subjugated or subjectified [*assujetti*] and obedient to authority, and its specific historical forms and modes.

Within this framework, now let us turn to an overview of the three essays in this special section of *Foucault Studies*.

³ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, 28.

Three Essays

Colin Gordon, in his “The Christian Art of Being Governed” sees Foucault’s GL as the beginning of “a major new phase in his work,” which he locates in the context of the whole of his *oeuvre*—what Foucault himself termed his “Greco-Latin trip”—in which he concentrated on “regimes of truth” in both the Ancient and early Christian worlds. What Gordon terms Foucault’s “alethic” turn, his focus on “alethurgy” (the manifestation of *truth*)⁸ in the last several years of his life, his focus on a “history of the power of truth,” is based on the whole series of lecture courses at the *Collège de France* from 1980-1984, as well as lecture courses at Louvain (*Wrong-Doing. Truth-Telling*), Berkeley and Dartmouth (*About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self*), the Grenoble lecture on *parrhesia*, among others, as well as the still unpublished manuscript of his volume *Les Aveux de la chair* (*The Confessions of the Flesh*). However Gordon does not describe this phase of Foucault’s work as the “final Foucault,” lest it create the impression that this simply replaced his early focus on “power/knowledge” or his subsequent focus on “governmentality,” and—had he lived—that it would have been the “culmination” of his intellectual and philosophical trajectory, though neither is he challenging the idea that the later work marks a development over the earlier work.

Instead, Gordon sees this lecture course as opening a broader inquiry into how what Foucault tentatively identified there as “acts of truth” or “regimes of truth,” for which Gordon introduces the term “*aletheological* analysis,” one focused on truth acts, which makes the power of truth into a focal point for understanding the very modes of subjectification [*assujettissement*] of the person through what Foucault termed “government through truth.” Here, then, is a link to Foucault’s own distinction between the history of representations and the history of mentalities, through which one focuses on *ideas* (including ideologies) on the one hand, and the history of *thought* under the rubric of which his courses at the *Collège de France* were given, on the other. While Foucault doesn’t question the “quite legitimate activity of most historians of ideas,” his own focus at the *Collège* was the history of thought, which he described in his 1983 lecture course as “an analysis of what could be called *focal points of experience* in which forms of a possible knowledge (*savoir*), normative frameworks of behavior for individuals, and potential modes of existence for possible subjects are linked together.”⁹ In contrast to the history of ideas, then, Foucault’s history of thought is an exploration and elucidation of experiences, “forms of behavior,” the “constitution of the subject’s modes of being,”¹⁰ and its problematizations, the way in which discursive and non-discursive practices become an object for thinking and questioning. Foucault would then go on to discover the origins of government *through truth* in the two distinct modes of *confession* in Christianity, in penitential practices (*exomologesis*), as well as avowal of one’s sins or sinful thoughts to one’s priest (*exagoreusis*) as they arose in the Patristic period, though with pro-

⁸ Though Gordon points out that the term itself, “alethurgy” is little used after the fourth lecture, “its vernacular equivalent, the manifestation of truth,” shapes the whole of the 1980 course.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

found implications for how such a regime of truth might be linked to the constitution of power relations in the modern world.

Gordon's essay is particularly valuable for his excellent summaries of the lectures themselves, though it seems to us that he finds no consistent, strong, or overriding narrative thread in this lecture course such as what one might expect in a book length manuscript that was prepared for publication. As he reads Foucault, these lecture courses were themselves *experiments* in which Foucault tried out new insights and ideas that *might* later find their outlet in a published volume, or might be modified, or even dropped and replaced by other ideas. In the case of Foucault's "Greco-Latin trip," that of course was never to be the case, though, as an example, the existence of a completed manuscript for *The Confessions of the Flesh* may reveal just how his late lectures at the *Collège* might have found their way into published works. That said, one could perhaps, then, see these lectures as a kind of *self-writing*, like the notebooks which Hellenistic thinkers kept, which "also formed a raw material for the drafting of more systematic treatises,"¹¹ to which—happily—we have been granted access. We are then left with the task of determining just *how* we will use these treasures to advance our own inquiries into the historically shaped and variable modes of subjectivation that may be historically possible at a given conjuncture. What Gordon provides, then, are a series of often daring intellectual *probes* or explorations that can assist us in comprehending a complex of historical developments around truth and confession that he cogently argues have shaped not just our ancestors in the Christian world, but *our* own subjectivity today. Gordon's analysis of what "we" have taken to be the truth and its modes of *veridiction* as it emerged in the Christian world, then, elucidates a range of possibilities that can make us governable or potentially open the space for governing ourselves. Indeed, as Gordon reads GL, it is a fascinating *problematization* book, one that investigates *how* a set of practices and relationships historically generated "anxiety, discussion, and reflection"¹² and came to be a matter for intense debate.

While Gordon, then, locates GL within the whole of Foucault's work, with an overview of all of the last series of lectures, David Konstan and Jeremy Carrette in their essays focus primarily on the 1980 lecture course itself.

One of the features of David Konstan's essay is that it *both* points to the power of Foucault's interpretation of the emergence of a new understanding of confession in the Church in the second and third centuries, one that constituted a departure from even earlier Christian beliefs, upon which he instructively elaborates, even as it questions and disagrees with several of Foucault's interpretive moves. The care with which Konstan defines *alethurgy*, which he sees as a "new term," at the very outset of his essay is a case in point. As Konstan reads Foucault, *alethurgy* is the complex of verbal and non-verbal procedures by which what is true, as opposed to false,

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Self Writing" in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 209-10.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 24.

is set down. As Konstan reads Foucault where there is power there is also truth; indeed the government of human beings occurs *through* truth.

As Konstan claims, if we accept the idea of truth as being historically variable, then its power over us will assume very different forms in different societies. For Foucault, truth is a *practice*, and to understand it as such, at the very outset of *GL*, Foucault coins a new term, *alethurgy* to capture that understanding, and his conviction that “truth” and “power” are inseparable. Yet Konstan’s focus is less on the relation between truth and government, than on the changing conceptions of *conversion* [*metanoia*], change of heart, and penance [*paenitentia*] in Patristic Christianity and its monastic life in particular; a change or transformation that is linked to grief and especially to *pain*. Here, Konstan shows how Foucault focuses on the link between confession, as it arises especially in the writings of Tertullian on baptism, and the obligation to acknowledge and recognize the truth that it discloses, as well as how those practices became “the basis of a new subjectivity, one that Foucault relates to a new regime of truth that will endure until our own times.” It is a vision that entails a constant fear of always lapsing into sin, or to make it more contemporary for a secular world, of always lapsing into untruthfulness about oneself. Konstan is especially sensitive to semantic or lexical shifts in the Greek and Latin texts, as when he discusses how *paenitentia* is actually a translation from the Greek of *metanoia*, which refers not to penance strictly speaking, but rather to the obligation to speak the truth about oneself, which constitutes a conversion. Here Konstan’s reading provides an elaboration on Foucault’s own lecture.

Konstan’s reading of Foucault also highlights the importance of *friendship* which in the Christian monastery arose through its communal dimension, one that contrasts with friendship as a more exclusively *individual* relationship of “student” to “guide” in the Greco-Roman world, exemplified by the letters of Plutarch and the writings of Epictetus, or in contemporary friendship in the modern world, for example.

When Konstan elaborates on Foucault’s reading of the Patristic texts, as in his discussion of *metanoia* as providing the truth about oneself, the question is posed as to whether this is how it was actually understood by a penitent in the third century or whether Foucault’s focus on self-examination here also pertains to subjectivity and its “production” in our own world. It seems to us, that Konstan in elaborating on how the Greeks and early Christians understood their existence in their *own* world, in bringing their world to life, as in his discussion of “friendship” in the monastic world, provides insights that supplement Foucault’s own treatment in *GL*. So, in discussing the relationship of the confessor to his spiritual director, with its imperative to explore one’s thought and verbalize it, to tell the truth about oneself, which was central to Christian asceticism, Konstan agrees with Foucault’s interpretation, even as he raises the important question as to whether this relationship might involve a situation in which the confessing person does not—as Foucault claims—“continue to will,” but rather might have his *will* “broken or crushed,” and give up his volition. It is precisely that ongoing *dialogue* between Konstan and Foucault that we find so intellectually stimulating. Konstan has the ability to actually put us into the world of a penitent in the Fourth century, while Foucault, who admitted that he was a relative newcomer to that “world,” perhaps just because of that could forge daring links between it and our own. Indeed, it

seems to us that Foucault too would have probably appreciated the care and rigor of Konstan's reading of GL, and the powerful insights that it affords.

Jeremy Carrette, in his essay, points out that theology and philosophy are brought into "creative engagement" in GL, precisely because Foucault has displaced "theological knowledge to the body-power-truth-subjectivity dimensions." Yet Carrette also points out "that Foucault's claim that Christianity is a confessional religion is somewhat limiting." It is the pronounced critical dimension to Carrette's essay that will catch the reader's attention, and potentially give rise to an important discussion. Already at the very outset, Carrette questions "Foucault's lack of appreciation of the notion of 'sacramentum,'" the inward, spiritual, domain and links that to his claim that "Foucault's thinking is shaped by an 'expressionist theology'" and "operates on a false binary distinction between faith and practice." Has Foucault left out an important dimension of Christian theology in his investigation of penitential practices in GL? Has Foucault missed a crucial dimension of Christianity in this lecture course? It would seem that for Carrette, Foucault's expressionist vision of theology privileges techniques of the self in penitential practices, both penance and confession as *rituals*, at the expense of faith, and of the penitent or confessors actual relation to God. That inwardness, so central to Carrette's own understanding of Christianity, gives way in his reading of Foucault's lectures to an almost exclusive focus on its external manifestations: to *acts* at the expense of that "inner world" that was so important to Augustine, for example. Here Carrette is both clear and assertive: "it is wrong to assume that Christianity valued the 'external act' above the 'inner word'."

Indeed, for Carrette, what he sees as a "belief-practice fallacy haunts [...] Foucault's own logic," so that the "entire structure of the 1980 lectures is an attempt to 'decouple' faith and truth-acts, for the 'tell me who you are' foundational rationale." This concentration on the latter, the truth of who I am, the focus on one's subjectivity and its acts, leaving too little room for that inner relation to God, needs to be challenged, according to Carrette, if the several dimensions of Christian theology are to be brought together, as Carrette seeks to do: acts, rituals, *and* belief, faith, two distinct processes, need to be brought together in order to grasp the actual *experience* that the penitent, the Christian, instantiates. Without that dimension, Carrette claims, we get "a kind of anthropology of Christian practice, acts, rather than beliefs;" what he designates as a "behaviouralist Christianity." Is Carrette here pointing towards a putative Foucauldian vision in this lecture course that corresponds more to a history of ideas than a history of thought, with its emphasis on experiences?

Yet no sooner than Foucault has decoupled practices from belief, than—as Carrette points out—he very substantially qualifies that binary: "this differentiation does not mean dissociation and separation. [...] The two processes are interlocked. It is precisely this interlocking that is, I think, absolutely fundamental in the history of Christianity and, more generally, in the history of subjectivity in the West."¹³ And despite the pronounced "decoupling" of the two processes that

¹³ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 143.

he sees in Foucault, Carrette points out that “Foucault cannot avoid entangling himself in the belief system and we repeatedly see how his theoretical ‘decoupling’ seems to ‘re-couple’ through the lectures.” Throughout his essay, Carrette takes great care to show that: “Christianity has both expressionist ‘truth-act’ dimensions of ‘obligation’ and inner counter-discourses of ‘resistance’ (due to the inner connection with God), it is neither one or another, because Christianity is not a single tradition, but a multiple array of different forms, expressions, and inner explorations.” It is that very tension between acts and faith in Christianity to which Carrette has called our attention, and the numerous examples to which he points in GL, both of that tension, as well as of Foucault’s efforts to resolve it, that can stimulate new research into the important role that Christian theology played in his Greco-Latin trip.

Carrette, then, finds in GL “problem” but also “illumination.” Indeed, he finds Foucault’s overall contribution to the study of religion both here and elsewhere to be a positive one, replete with daring and thought provoking insights. Thus in citing Foucault’s 1978 lecture “Michel Foucault and Zen: A Stay in a Zen Temple,” he points out that “the force of inner piety” in Christianity shapes a “counter-conduct,” a set of practices “that redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power,” constituting a mode of resistance *within* Christianity to its outer acts. Christianity, then, in Carrette’s reading of GL, means that “historical ‘truth-acts’ always emerge within a wider theological *belief* system” (our emphasis). As Carrette points out, citing GL, there is an “interlocking” of expressionist truth-acts and a deeply felt and held belief system. The interlocking of practice and belief, as Carrette cites Foucault in GL, is “absolutely fundamental in the history of Christianity and, more generally, in the history of subjectivity in the West.”¹⁴ It is the very tension between these rival demands, the open-endedness of Foucault’s reading, that Carrette sees as the “brilliance of Foucault’s 1980 lectures” which open “more than they resolve.”

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¹⁴ Ibid.