

Foucault's Untimely Struggle Toward a Form of Spirituality

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Abstract

In his series of essays on Kant written during the 1980s, Michel Foucault attempted to discern the difference today made with respect to yesterday. As his essays as well as his lectures (especially at the Collège de France and Berkeley) during the early 1980s demonstrate, he was drawn – and devoted the bulk of his scholarly efforts to a renewed form of genealogical work on themes, venues, practices and modes of governing the subject and others – to experiments in new forms of friendship, sociability and transformations of the self and others that he saw taking shape, or imagined were taking shape around him. This work, which has come to be known unfortunately as the 'late Foucault', arose out of deep dissatisfaction with his own life conditions, the broader political climate of the time, and a profound and unexpected rethinking not only of the specific projects he had intended to carry out but of what it meant to think. This article explores some of the elements at play during these deeply (re)formative several years, which as they unfolded were in no way intended to constitute a 'late Foucault', quite the opposite, even if fate would have it otherwise. The article begins with a 'prelude' that introduces the problem of what *mode* is appropriate for giving form to thinking. It proceeds to argue that Foucault engaged in a struggle to redefine the *object* of thinking; that in order to do so he was led to pursue a *venue* in which such thinking could be practised; and finally to an increasingly articulate and acute quest for a *form* that would constitute a difference between what Foucault diagnosed as an impoverished modern problem space and a future in which things might be different and better.

Key words

Berkeley ■ Foucault ■ society ■ spirituality ■ untimely ■ venue

If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject. (Foucault, 2005: 19)

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Prelude

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1983a [1874]; *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, French *Considérations inactuelles*), like almost everything he wrote, was a work in progress, a work on the way. In his notebooks of the period (1872–4), the young Nietzsche outlined plans for an ambitious ‘philosopher’s book’ that would transform the discipline as well as the practice of thinking itself. Although he never wrote precisely that book, it could be said that he never stopped working on it. In 1874, Nietzsche published the series of polemic essays of *Untimely Meditations*; these essays are aggressive; they fit the tone and timbre of his no longer youthful *On the Genealogy of Morals* of 1887, whose subtitle is *Eine Streitschrift*, translated as ‘polemic’ though a better translation would be ‘conflictual’ or ‘contestatory’ writing. The term refers to a German 18th-century genre of

criticism: at its most artful it is a term of agonistic engagement carried out antagonistically.

If Nietzsche's preferred affect was contestatory, the title, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, grouping these disparate interventions together, indicates the mode in which he was operating. That mode is a distinctive and significant composite; it can be pursued in a variety of affective registers. Nietzsche's term *Betrachtungen*, whose English translation as 'meditations', or in French as '*considerations*', misses the refractory intent of the engaged and active state in which Nietzsche worked. Hence, *Betrachtungen* is better conveyed as something more like the purposively oxymoronic '*vigorous contemplations*'.¹ *Unzeitgemässe* literally does mean 'untimely', but the French '*inactuelles*' is more precise in its inclusion not only of a general temporal dimension but in its identification of that temporal dimension as the 'actual'.

Combined, the two terms and their affective stylization yield a mode best captured by the French term '*Vintempestif*'. The semantic range of the term covers not only 'untimely', but 'ill-timed', 'unreasonable' or 'inopportune'. The term captures a striving to bring something forth, something that could be actual but does not yet exist. Of course, this claim does not mean that there is something waiting around to come to fruition but only that, taken up in a distinctive way, the things of the actual and existing world can be made into something appropriate as well as inopportune. Such an event would be appropriate at least retrospectively in that it reconfigures existing things and relations, and inopportune in that it disrupts those existing things and relations and changes their tone, register and directionality.

The striving for such alteration – close to the present, contesting the present, seeking something that might be becoming in the present – is found everywhere in the *Untimely Meditations*. Of the four essays Nietzsche grouped together under that title, the one that is still frequently taken to be pertinent today is the essay 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life'. He opens that essay by asserting:

In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity. These words are from Goethe, and they may stand as a sincere [*ceterum censeo* at the] beginning of our meditation on the value of history. For its intention is to show why instruction without invigoration, why knowledge not attended by action, why history as a costly superfluity and luxury, to use Goethe's word, should be seriously hated by us – hated because we still lack even the things we need and the superfluous is the enemy of the necessary. (1983b [1874]: 59)

Gilles Deleuze (1997), in an interview late in his life, 'Contrôle et devenir', returned to Nietzsche's use of history. He insisted (to his Marxist interlocutor Tony Negri) that historical contextualization can never be more than a partial determination of things; hence an appeal to a method of historical contextualization, while frequently a necessary preliminary for understanding, was not sufficient. Rather, for Deleuze, an adequate account

of an event – its signification, its explanation, its effects, its affects – had to take the critical limitations of the uses and abuses of history into account. Like Nietzsche, although in a different form, Deleuze affirmed the challenge of philosophy as finding a way to produce concepts and affects, ones necessary for our survival and our flourishing. Method alone was not the route to such invention.

Significant events, Deleuze declaims, were always accompanied by ‘a history-less penumbra (*nuée*)’ (1977: 231). This state of affairs arose from the fact that emergent things can be understood as a form of experimentation, or what Deleuze calls a ‘counter-movement’ (*contra-effectuation*). Thus, although historical conditions are necessary for there to be experimentation or counter-motion, because without these conditions there would be only indeterminacy, the historical conditions themselves are not sufficient to explain either events or their eventual effects and counter-effects.

Deleuze identified two modes in which one can take up an event. The standard one consisted in methodically delimiting the event in its temporality and scope, its pre-conditions, its consequences and its eventual historicity. He contested that method, arguing instead for a second mode in which one is:

swimming upstream as it were, in placing oneself within the flow of the event in its becoming, to rejuvenate and to age simultaneously, to pass through each of its elements and each singularity. Becoming (*le devenir*) is not history; history designates only the collection of conditions, as recent as they may be, that need to be overcome in order ‘to become’, to create something new. That state of becoming is precisely what Nietzsche called the ‘inopportune’ (*l’impestif*). (1997: 231)²

Exactly what Deleuze intended by his idiosyncratic tropes is not easy to grasp but, at the very least, it directs us to the critical task of the *thinker*: to seize an event in its becoming, while the work of the *historian* is to insist on the importance of historical elements as conditioning whatever takes place. The latter method, of course, produces valid knowledge of a specific sort; the former, the ‘inopportune’ (*l’impestif*), operates adjacently, in a space of becoming where the old and new are available if one approaches them in a mode of vigorous contemplation of the about-to-be-actual.

Thought Must Be Defended Against Society

Michel Foucault took up and experimented with the challenge of critical thought in many different ways over the course of his intellectual life. Almost all of Foucault’s writings could be called an inopportune and vigorous contemplation, a critical contestation perpetually in search of new forms of criticism and invention. Whatever else criticism or critique was for Foucault, it was not the denunciation associated with the speaker’s benefit, e.g. Bourdieu’s Pascalian overview (*surplomb*) of others’ irremediable *illusion* (Foucault, 2005).³ Whatever else critical thought was, it always

concerned one form or another of examining, up close and in detail, an existing (often historical) state of affairs in an affectively engaged yet contemplative way. Like Nietzsche, Foucault almost always in an uneasy and restless fashion – *Pour une morale de l'inconfort* – strove to invent and practise a form of asceticism, by which he meant an active attention to work on the self, on those he worked with and the material he was considering, as well as the price to be paid for forging a different mode of relationship among and between these elements.

Foucault experimented with a number of different forms of criticism and inquiry, almost always attempting to find ways to connect them. As is well known, he frequently recast his previous efforts as if they had ineluctably led him to the work he had just finished. As is equally well known, he changed course multiple times, wary of the complacency inherent in repetition, yet not embracing an avant-gardist stance for its own sake, although writers like Raymond Roussel or Maurice Blanchot did hold an attraction for him during a certain period. For example, Foucault told an Italian interviewer:

Each one of my books is a way of dismantling an object, and of constructing a method of analysis toward this end. Once a work is finished, I can of course, more or less through hindsight, deduce a methodology from the completed experience. (Foucault, 1991 [1981]: 29)

This claim alerts us to the privileged status of objects and of analysis for Foucault, as well as the secondary standing of method as either a guide or a guarantee, a theme he would take up explicitly and to which he would give great significance in his lectures of 1981–2.

One mode of analysis was the 'History of the Present', characteristic of Foucault's work during the middle 1970s, culminating in *Discipline and Punish*. The task of the History of the Present was essentially a diagnostic one: to trace out – *analyse* – the sedimented concepts, practices and organizations of knowledge and power – *objects* – that made it seem coherent and plausible to build prisons and to claim that the prisons were reforming those imprisoned while, at the same time, contributing to defending another new object, *society*. This analytic dismantling, this production of estrangement, entailed detailed work in archives as well as a re-reading of conceptual texts of people like Jeremy Bentham, not as academic philosophers but as producers of programmes for social reform, at the time a distinctive *practice*, with a long future ahead of it. These programmes were the proper objects for Foucault's analysis to the extent that they had established a specific type of rationality as reasonable. Whether a type of rationality had been taken to be reasonable was a question not for the historian to answer but, rather, for the Historian of the Present to pose. The reason for making this distinction and underlining it is that the work to be done was diagnostic, the work of freeing-up the recent past to a concerned objectivity, an untimely attention to objects and practices.

Discipline and Punish occasioned intense, often negative reactions from psychiatrists as well as from some leading historians in France and the United States. Fortunately for us, Foucault's white-hot counters to these attacks, or as he says later these 'reproaches', are of an uncommon directness and lucidity. For example, in 1980 Foucault accepted an invitation to participate in a round-table encounter with a group of prestigious historians assembled by his friend, Michelle Perrot, a historian of women. The encounter was not peaceable. From our perspective, the assembly was an extravagant success; Foucault was angry (*thumic*) enough to generate marvellously scathing demonstrations of his mode of analysis, his chosen objects, his diagnostic practice and his goals.

In a written response to the historians, 'La Poussière et le nuage' (1994c [1980]), Foucault forged the famous analogy according to which what he was doing was deploying 'fragments philosophiques dans des chantiers historiques' (1994c [1980]: 10–19). His elaboration of what precisely he intended by that entrancing analogy is lucid. Primarily and fundamentally, it was a demand that the principles upon which his work and that of the historian-interlocutors proceeded required more careful attention. Technically, therefore, this intervention was a critical contestation, styled in a *thumic* affect, vigorously analytic. To me, the most striking counter-movement is found in the following challenge:

Perhaps we should also investigate the principle, unexamined and taken for granted, that the only reality to which history must attend is society itself. (1994c [1980]: 15)⁴

This challenge to focus on the tacit baseline, the unquestioned and assumed-to-be-self-evident, ontological reality – society – opens up a vast terrain for exploration. The way Foucault laid down the challenge, it was clear that it would be met with a counter-challenge, which, of course, he had anticipated. If the order of things was not social then what was it? Obviously, Foucault was not going to substitute 'power' or 'ethics' or 'governmentality', as some of his followers would later assert with their habitual lack of acuity. The demand for naming the 'really real' required first a refusal: a steadfast rebuff to the mode in which the question was being posed. It then required inquiry.

As Hans Blumenberg has argued in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983 [1966, 1973]), a cornerstone of this anti-substantialist mode of thinking requires the reflective recasting of certain older questions and concepts (as well as objects and practices) that had been honed in a different problem space. Philosophic fragments forged in the workshops of history and historians could not be taken over unexamined. Further, at times it was vital that certain older questions should not be left unanswered. That stance of course is not a general negation of past concepts and practices, but only a reflective and critical questioning, a marking of the problems previously posed to which concepts and practices had constituted answers or solutions.

Thus Foucault's task consisted not only of making what was self-evident contingent, but in analysing how it had been linked in complex ways with 'multiple historical processes, many of them recent' (Foucault, 1994b: 22).⁵ The task was to make visible the appropriate objects of analysis. Among those recent and multiple processes that needed to be taken into account were the histories of the processes in question, then and now:

to make or do a history of 'objectivation,' of those elements that historians consider as objective givens (the objectivation of objectivations, so to say); it is that circle that I wish to follow out. (1994b: 22)⁶

It follows that, in many cases, the parameters of the question needed to be rethought, so as to make them pertinent for addressing a different problem: one susceptible of being investigated, reflected on, experimented with, learned from and recast. High on the list of objectified givens was society.

My problem is not to propose a global analysis of society . . . my general theme is not society but rather is true/false discourse; the correlative formation of domains, objects, and the discourses that are verifiable and falsifiable in relation to them; and furthermore it is not only that formation that interests me but the effects on reality connected to them. (Foucault, 1994b: 23)⁷

For example, in an interview entitled 'Est-il donc important de penser?', conducted in May 1981 with his friend the journalist Didier Eribon, at the time of the presidential election of the socialist François Mitterrand, a time when the Socialist Party was calling for intellectuals to back their programmes or be considered, if not class enemies, at least betrayers of social justice, Foucault presented a theme he would return to repeatedly with increasing urgency in his remaining three years, formulating variants over and over again. The theme was: the defence of thought when the pressing demand was for political action.

To begin from the outset by accepting the question of what reforms I will introduce is not, I believe, the objective that an intellectual should entertain. His role, since he works in the register of thought, is to see just how far thought can be freed so as to make certain transformations seem urgent enough so that others will attempt to bring them into effect, and difficult enough so that if they are brought about they will be deeply inscribed in the real. (Foucault, 1991 [1981]: 33)⁸

For Foucault this challenge followed from what he had gradually come to define as his vocation and his problem: to think. The work to be done entailed leaving totalities behind; specifically, the taken-for-granted totalities to which certain French politicians were dispositionally attached. A critical analytic task, therefore, consisted in changing not society or culture or power but thought. This task, Foucault held, was analytic, certainly, but

the goal of such critical work was pragmatic in the largest sense of the term: to make changes in the near future subject to thought.

We must free ourselves (*s'affranchir*) from the sacralization of the social as the unique instance of the real and stop diminishing that essential aspect of human life and human relations, thinking. Thought exists well beyond the systems and edifices of discourse. It is something that is often hidden but always animates ordinary human action. There is always some pinch of thought in the stupidity of institutions. There is always some thought in the most silent of habits. (1994b: 180)⁹

Critical work is diagnostic and analytic. This work might open up with more clarity that which was a necessity and that which was an obstructive luxury. But where and how?

In Search of a Venue

I do not believe we are locked in by history; to the contrary, all my work consists in showing that history is crossed by strategic relations which consequently are mobile and can be changed; upon the condition, of course, that the agents involved in these processes have the political courage to change things. (Foucault, 1985: 102)¹⁰

The Collège de France is not exactly a teaching institution as it grants no degrees and has no general curriculum, only the lectures of the professors, who are free to explore any topic on which they are doing research. Consequently it is a distinctive kind of institution. Professors are paid to do research and to present their work in public to whoever decides to attend their presentations. An appointment at the Collège de France is the ultimate, and much coveted, pinnacle of academic prestige in France.

In this light, and in stark contrast to his inaugural lecture in 1970, the tone of Foucault's opening lecture of 1976 at the Collège took the form of an odd colloquy, tending toward pathos in tone. 'I would like to be a bit clearer', he wrote, 'about what is going on here, in these lectures' (Foucault, 2003: 1). Somewhat petulantly, yet with a tone of resigned resolve, Foucault was quite uncharacteristically blunt, informing the hundreds of auditors facing him, as well as those listening in an adjoining room:

So, I do not regard our Wednesday meetings as a teaching activity, but rather as public reports on the work I am, in other respects, left to get on with more or less as I see fit. To that extent, I actually consider myself to be under an absolute obligation to tell you roughly what I am doing . . . (2003: 1)

He then asserted that those who attended the public reporting were free to do whatever they would like with the material he presented. His frustration and resignation were clear: '[T]hese are suggestions for research, ideas, schemata, outlines, instruments; do what you like with them' (Foucault, 2003: 2). But Foucault was obviously not entirely comfortable with that

arrangement. Having just told his audience to do as they liked with his public lectures, he admitted that: 'it does concern me to the extent that, one way or another, what you do with it is connected, related, to what I am doing' (2003: 3). But how they were connected, in what way, was not clear to him; given the structure of the situation, he had no way of knowing what was being done with his material, how it was being received, used, distributed, distorted, etc. Given these uncertainties and contradictions, Foucault adopted a tone of resigned consternation.

He observed to his audience that they, the large throngs that attended his lectures punctually and regularly, for whatever reasons, were obliged to arrive early, and half or more of those attending had to sit in a different room and listen to the lectures over a sound system. He proposed shifting the time of his lectures from the late afternoon to 9:30 in the morning, because, as he remarked, he was told that students had trouble getting up that early. Clearly, the situation was neither a source of pleasure nor gratification for Foucault. Again, uncharacteristically, he spoke frankly about his unhappiness with the arrangement.

The problem for me – I will be quite blunt about it – the fact that I had to go through this sort of circus every Wednesday was really – how can I put it? – torture (*supplice*) is putting it too strongly, boredom (*ennui*) is putting it too mildly, so I suppose it was somewhere in between the two. (2003: 3)

The 'circus' atmosphere stood in stark opposition to the spirit of the lectures he spent so much time and care constructing: research in progress, forays in thinking and clarification, unsettling of certitudes, unexpected ramifications. What was supposed to be a venue characterized by the utmost freedom to conduct and report on current research in progress, the Chair in the History of Systems of Thought, had increasingly become the obligation to perform, at least in part, so as to please or amuse or simply distract an anonymous overflow audience over which he had no control and with whom he had no contact. Although there were no registered students at the Collège, there was also no procedure for excluding anyone. Whoever showed up, the public, has a right to attend.

So I said to myself: It wouldn't be such a bad idea if thirty or forty of us could get together in a room. I could tell you roughly what I've been doing, and at the same time have some contact with you, talk to you, answer your questions and so on, and try to rediscover the possibility of exchange and contact that are part of the normal practice of research and teaching. (Foucault, 2003: 3)

Although Foucault had sought an appointment at the Collège, increasingly he felt trapped by its form. In Paris, there was no other obvious outlet with which he felt comfortable. Apparently obtaining a position at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales was not something he seriously entertained, even though Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes (among

others) accumulated positions, as the French say, at both institutions. Foucault did have a small research seminar at the Collège for a number of years, which yielded a certain amount of collective work such as *I, Pierre Rivière* or work on the birth of the hospital. But, for reasons that are not entirely clear, petty personality disputes among them, the seminar seems to have exhausted itself (Macé, 2006). During this period Foucault attempted to start a publishing series of scholarly ‘works’, and although after a series of rebuffs he ultimately succeeded on a smaller scale than he had hoped for, the experience of trying to establish it had been discouraging and the results limited (Eribon, 1989: 310, 311). The discouragement was not only a product of the limited results but of the lack of response, of enthusiasm, of a sense of adventure among those in a position to support new things.

Of course, in order to contextualize Foucault’s mood, his growing sense of feeling trapped and ground down, it would be necessary to describe the broader political situation of France in the late 1970s (and the biographies provide the elements to do so), as well as some of the restlessness he was undergoing in his personal life. Foucault’s political activity during the late 1970s and early 1980s basically took the form of direct protest. He spoke out, joined demonstrations, appeared on panels with other Parisian figures, and even signed petitions. Among the causes he championed: he took a stand against what he took to be the French government’s arrogant refusal to back the Polish Solidarity movement; he expressed his dismay and anger at what he took to be the Socialists Party’s political programme and its media attacks on independent intellectuals – Jack Lang referred to Foucault as ‘a clown’; he displayed an unexpected affirmation of the political importance of human rights campaigns as well as the nascent humanitarian movements in France. That being said, Foucault experienced political activity during this period as deeply frustrating and judged the harvests of his and others’ efforts to be at best frugal.

By the late 1970s, Foucault was thoroughly fed up with France, discouraged by the French political scene as well as by all the petty obstacles to his scholarly work that he encountered regularly. He had stopped using the one great public library in France, the Bibliothèque Nationale (BN), because of the impediments imposed on accessing materials there (Eribon, 1989: 309). At the BN, one submitted request slips for the books one wanted to use and then had to wait until they were delivered. There were limits to the number of slips one could submit at one time; the unions were not infrequently involved in job strikes or go-slows that extended delivery of materials beyond even the habitual delays. In frustration, Foucault shifted his routine to a Dominican library where all the primary texts in Greek and Latin that he was beginning to work on were readily available for his use.

Although these and other such blockages and impediments appear petty in and of themselves, they are not insignificant. Micro-practices, as Foucault had demonstrated in *Discipline and Punish*, can be used as dividing practices, as insidious annoyances, as techniques of subordination,

etc. Lest these details appear anecdotal and trivial, it is worth underscoring that this period was one, for example, in which Foucault was discussing suicide as an option worthy of praise as an ultimate act of freedom (Szakolczai, 1998: ch. 9). Thus, remembering Deleuze's admonitions about the uses and abuses of history, these conditions of existence were, of course, not determinative of Foucault's personal and political actions or of the extraordinary twists and turns of this thinking. The fact that these conditions were not causal, however, does not mean that they had no importance. Without determinations, both local and general, after all, actions would have no constraint and would be thoroughly inchoate. Without conditions, no becoming. Without context, nothing to be inopportune about. The effort to derive something singular requires counter-motion and there is no method to decide how to accomplish that.

Berkeley: Care of the Self

Foucault's visits to the United States, which increased in regularity during this period, gradually, and no doubt inchoately at first, can be seen to demonstrate a growing eagerness to find a different way of practising his thinking and a nascent programme in which the care of the self, his own as well as those close to him, began to emerge. Foucault being Foucault, he explored this theme both existentially and conceptually. The question of a venue – a scene or setting in which something takes place – a place to come to work with others, to undertake research, to teach, learn, question, contest findings and methods with some earnestness and excitement, unquestionably formed a problem of concern. It was in the United States, and especially in Berkeley and San Francisco, that Foucault committed himself to the programme of the care of the self and its inextricable reformulation of relations with others.

As Didier Eribon pithily puts it: 'The United States for Michel Foucault was the pleasure of work' (1989: 336).¹¹ To his great pleasure, the classical texts were readily available at the Berkeley library or through inter-library loan. Furthermore, in Berkeley, he could actually take them out of the library. Additionally, many people were eager to help him. Berkeley provided him with eager students at all levels – the man insisted on having 'office hours' – imagine! He had extended discussions with Hubert Dreyfus and me that provided him a venue in which he could examine his work from a different perspective and with a different ethos. There were as yet basically no Foucauldians, or for that matter anti-Foucauldians, in the United States, although that would change rather rapidly.

During this period of 1979–83, the great sexual revolution was taking place in San Francisco, just before the dawn of AIDS. As Foucault wrote in a number of essays at the time, his previous battles to argue to himself and to others that sexuality was not the deepest meaning or the key to the self was being demonstrated, before his very eyes. Sex was practised openly, defiantly at first but soon casually, as was the identity politics constructed around it, both unimaginable in Paris at the time. Foucault was fascinated

by these events, yet his dry humour (in English) – ‘There are so many gays, and I am a homosexual!’ – revealed him to be seeking the locus of significance elsewhere than in the clubs and sex discussions. ‘Every gay is writing a book’ – again, his humour was deployed not so much to distance himself from what he was seeing *per se*, but rather to think about the distance he felt. Again, Eribon, only slightly ironically, concludes:

Foucault’s American happiness: a reconciliation with himself finally realized. He is happy in his work. He is happy in the pleasures of his body. From the beginning of the 1980s Foucault was seriously considering leaving France and Paris, which he tolerated less and less well, to move to the US. (1989: 338)¹²

Of course, the Golden Age of American Happiness in the California Paradise was not to last very long. It was fated, tragically, in San Francisco, or, more banally, in Berkeley, for more somber times.

In Search of a Mode, Practice and Form of Spirituality

Unexpectedly, the concept that Foucault settled on to characterize the dimension missing from modern philosophy, the component whose elimination (or marginalization) had produced centuries of misplaced assurance arising from and instantiating (quite literally) a quest for method – that theme was ‘spirituality’:

... the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. (Foucault, 2005: 15)

Foucault’s introduction of the term ‘spirituality’ in the 1981–2 lectures at the Collège de France was unanticipated, even startling. Although he had used the term ‘political spirituality’ briefly in his journalistic writings about Iran, and although it is true that he had intended to return to it as a central theme (along with governmentality) of a proposed longer-term research project on the 16th century and the 1920s with colleagues at Berkeley, he had not found an occasion to return to it during the late 1970s. Rather, during those few years he had devoted himself to analysing other topics and concepts (liberalism, governmentality, security, population, etc.) (Foucault, 1994a: 302).¹³ By the early 1980s (and to a degree in the late 1970s), however, the growing consideration Foucault was giving to ethics, to practices of the self, to questioning the function, mode and purpose of thinking, to the worth of his work, drew him into an exploration of different conceptual terrain (half-existent and half-imagined). Initially at least, Foucault did not realize as he entered into these explorations that they would occupy and preoccupy him during his few remaining years of life.

This article is not the place to survey the vast and varied riches of the last three sets of lectures Foucault gave at the Collège de France. It is worth

underlining, however, the importance Foucault gave to two of the major organizing themes (eventually concepts) that he identified as significant during this historical period: 'frank speech' (*parrêsia*) and 'care of the self' (*epimeleia heautou*). Foucault hypothesized, argued and, to his own at least partial satisfaction, demonstrated that both terms had been important themes around which many of the practices guiding philosophic activity in the period (roughly following Plato and up until Gregory of Nyssa and the rise of Christian asceticism) turned. Foucault's own attention to these themes, and to the long-since marginalized practices associated with them, at the very least shows his absorption with them. It also indicates, it is safe to say, that these themes constituted for him a possible way forward – an *Ausgang*, an exit toward maturity, to use Kant's term – in his own life and work. To be more precise, these themes (in relation to the turmoil and transformations he was undergoing in his own life), as well as his analytic and genealogical work devoted to explicating and delineating them, allowed Foucault – in many ways for the first time – to pose to himself, and for himself, the question: what form would a philosophic practice take that would be salvational (Szakolczai, 1998: 246–62)?¹⁴

The cornerstone of his lengthy explorations of the rise and fall of the care of the self as an integral part of Western philosophic practice proved to turn on the concept of spirituality. The identification of the significance of the term led Foucault to delineate how and why it had been understood conceptually, but more importantly, how it had been transformed into a series of practices. This exploration constituted his primary research terrain during the 1980s.

In his lectures of 1981–2, Foucault formulated a series of broad, general hypotheses – in logic, the antecedent of a conditional statement – (accompanied by detailed explications of philosophic texts) concerning the relations of philosophy and spirituality. Pivotal among the claims Foucault posited was his contention that in the pre-Christian philosophic tradition of the West, a defining principle of philosophic activity had been that 'spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right' (2005: 15). Although the Christian tradition did something quite different theologically and practically, beginning with approximately the same starting point, both the pre-Christian and Christian corpus can be seen to concur on the assertion that gaining access to the truth always requires transformative work on the self. Such work, grouped under the rubric of ascetic practices, consisted in means and modes of changing, transforming, shifting and modifying the individual so as to make him into a subject capable of receiving the truth. Foucault chronicles and analyses (in the literal sense of breaking something down into its elements) a large array of techniques and practices developed historically to perform this preparatory transformational work on the subject.

These ascetic techniques were not exercises in virtuosity (as Max Weber described in other traditions), nor were they ends in themselves (as they have frequently become today). Rather, these ascetic techniques

functioned to make the subject susceptible to return ‘effects’. Foucault names these ‘effects’:

... ‘rebound’ (*de retour*) effects of the truth on the subject. . . . The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul. (2005: 16)

Foucault’s introduction of this terminology is surprising, even disconcerting. Today, we contemporaries might readily imagine that we could understand what ‘enlightens’ means; we might offer respect to others’ search for ‘beatitude’; and we might even imagine ourselves, with appropriate updating of the concepts, desiring to attain a ‘tranquility of the soul’. Such a range of topics, however, was hardly familiar terrain for Foucault. Even in his series of essays on Kant, Foucault never posited a state of Enlightenment or maturity, only the affect driving certain citizens of the world to imagine a way forward – hope, enthusiasm – or preventing them from doing so – laziness or cowardice.

Foucault did not return to beatitude or tranquillity of the soul but he did insist on the importance of ‘salvation’ as the goal of spirituality. Again, this claim is startling at first hearing or reading. During his lecture, it is as if Foucault realized how bizarre these terms must sound to the sleepy students (at 9:30 in the morning) populating the overflow auditoria, in which his amplified voice reverberated. Foucault hastened to reassure them; he was not talking about Christian salvation. ‘Salvation’, he said, was simply ‘no more than the realization of the relationship to the self’ (Foucault, 2005: 192). He then concisely distinguished the Christian thematic of salvation and the one at issue among philosophers such as Seneca or Marcus Aurelius. The meaning of ‘saving oneself’, Foucault wrote, ‘is not at all reducible to something like the drama of an event that allows one’s existence to be commuted from life to death, mortality to immortality, evil to good, etc.’ (2005: 183). That semantic field and those meanings were, of course, the Christian ones.

Having cleared that ground, Foucault proceeded to present a philological exercise, a technique that was gaining increasing importance as a technique of exposition and demonstration in his later lectures. It was through his calm examination of terms that Foucault apparently sought to loosen them from the accretions of meaning and affect they had accumulated over the centuries, thereby allowing a different understanding and apprehension of past historical forms. No doubt such an exercise had as its horizon the intention of making future historical forms possible as well. As opposed to the strategy of the *History of the Present*, the goal was not to show the contingency of naturalized or taken-for-granted terms, concepts or practices, but rather to trace their previous branchings or ramifications as a partial guide to their historically variable potency as well as their contemporary potential (virtuality).

Thus, the Greek term *sozein* (to save) or the substantive *soteria* (salvation) covered a range of different meanings, all of them this-worldly. Thus,

for example, *sozein*, had a wide range of meanings, some of them quite ordinary – for example, one could be saved from a shipwreck or an illness. The verb could also mean ‘to guard, protect, or keep a protective shield around something’ (2005: 182). Shifting from that rather literal or material sense of protection, the verb could also mean ‘to preserve or protect something like decency or honor’. Further, the verb had a juridical meaning: to acquit or exonerate. Finally, and this was the most pertinent of the verb’s meanings for the problem Foucault was addressing, ‘*sozein* means to do good. It meant to ensure the well-being, the good condition of someone, or something, or of a collectivity’ (2005: 183). In sum, the verb denoted a type or form of activity: a pro-active taking care of, guarding and perhaps nourishing the goods of one’s life, material and spiritual. Understood in that manner, there was nothing exotic about the semantics or the practices directed at facilitating these quite worldly goals.

Foucault provided a synthetic overview of the functions of the techniques more or less coherently assembled into the ascetic and/or spiritual practices. He devoted many of his lectures, parts of the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, as well as a number of lectures and interviews on various occasions during the 1980s to the technologies and practices of spirituality, salvation, asceticism that had been developed in the Ancient world.

In the 1981–2 lectures, for example, he identified several functions of the care of the self. First, was the ‘curative and therapeutic function’. Perhaps one could say that Foucault’s experience in California had set him on a curative trajectory, or, at the very least, had helped him to recognize that such a trajectory was conceivable. Second, Foucault identified a ‘critical function’. By critical here he did not mean anything like the Kantian sense of inherent limitations or the more current sense of denunciation of evils or abuses. Rather, the critical function at issue turned on the demand to ‘unlearn’, *de-discere*, what one had been taught or the way one had been trained. Likely, one had had bad teachers, perhaps bad parents, and many other practices and understandings no doubt needed to be examined with an eye to ‘unlearning’ them if one was to proceed toward an adequate transformation of the self.

Telos: Which Struggle?

In addition to the curative and critical functions, Foucault identified the prominence within this tradition of ‘a function of struggle’. This function did not consist in either the Christian preparation for the one last struggle to save one’s soul or the struggle to free oneself from illusion or pollution. Rather, this Hellenistic struggle had entailed a mode of lifelong practice and exercise, a form of perpetual vigilance and training. The object of the struggle consisted in part in focusing attention on and unlearning the myriad bad habits and dispositions that one had accumulated and continued to accumulate. It consisted in part in the therapeutic or curative dimension mentioned above.

More appositely, such struggle aimed at providing the subject with a mode of vigilant preparedness for encountering any and all events throughout his life. Its goal was to bring those events into the present and to live with them as actualities, not eventualities. To the degree that the philosopher accomplished or approached this goal, he would be able to know, as Foucault quotes Seneca: 'I await the day when I will pass judgment on myself and know whether virtue was only in my words or really in my heart' (Foucault, 2005: 505). Significantly, this sentence closes his course summary of 1981–2, a summary we know to which Foucault had devoted careful attention (Gros, 2005: 507–50).

Seneca's world obviously was not Foucault's. We are given a strong sense of the distance between them in Foucault's presentation of the goals of these Hellenistic philosophers. The purpose or telos of these practices, these exercises, these principles, these modes, these techniques, turned on:

the two great themes of *ataraxy* (the absence of inner turmoil, the self-control that assures that nothing disturbs you), and *autarchy* (the self-sufficiency which ensures that one needs nothing but the self) . . . the two forms in which salvation, the acts of salvation, the activity of salvation carried on throughout one's life, find their reward. (Foucault, 2005: 184)

Although scholastically the identification of *ataraxy* and *autarchy* as central goals of Hellenistic thought is uncontroversial, their status in Foucault's own life and works is far from obvious and deserves more attention. It seems obvious to me that these goals, at least in their Hellenistic form, were not shared by Foucault. After all, if the challenge had been to achieve *ataraxy* and *autarchy*, there would have been no need to leave France. Quite the opposite, France would seem to have offered Foucault an exemplary field of aggravation and disturbance in which to put himself to the test. One thinks of Seneca faced with the well-trodden Roman alternatives of retreat to his villa (remember Foucault had sought to purchase an abandoned abbey in Poitou) or returning to face the fate Nero's crazed sovereignty held in store for him. For Seneca there were no other choices (although he fantasized about returning to the Athens of his youth where he had been schooled in rhetoric, he knew full well that returning to the Athens of old was an unrealizable fantasy in the present). Nero ordered Seneca's suicide (Foucault returned insistently to suicide as a topic and ultimate act of freedom during this period) as well as that of his wife; Seneca complied, his wife – having failed in her initial attempts – was spared.

The Hellenistic options in a literal sense made no sense as their meaning would have been totally different then and now. The challenge of 'struggle', however, perhaps could be given a contemporary form. For Foucault, salvation could be thought of not only as a deliverance from sin but also and rather as an activity of self-transformation. It consisted in:

... the subject's constant action on himself ... the vigilant, continuous, and completed form of the relationship to self. ... The self is the agent, object, instrument, and end of salvation. ... Salvation ensures an access to the self that is inseparable from the work one carries out on oneself within the time of one's life and in life itself. (2005: 184–5)

Although to contemporary ears such claims can sound individualistic, nothing could be further from the original subject matter itself or from Foucault's reasons for bringing it back to light. Perhaps the simplest proof of this claim can be found in the fact that Foucault's 1982–3 lectures were devoted to explorations of 'the government of self and others'. His final lectures, the following year, dealt with a genealogy of the critical intellectual, specifically a series of lectures on the cynics, who spoke truth to power, in public, at the risk of their own well-being and even their lives. All of the genealogical and archaeological work on Hellenistic philosophy provided a means of re-introducing a set of concepts and terms (salvation, care of the self, equipment, etc.) that held the promise of being useful today. It provided a vast thematic panorama with parenthetical digressions that could clearly have become courses or books in and of themselves (on Hegel, on Faust, on the 19th century, on the 16th and 18th centuries, on science and theology, etc.).

We should be clear, however, that what Foucault did not provide was a solution. During the time when Foucault was working in the mode of the History of the Present, the refusal to outline solutions or propose directions for others was an ethical and political principle. By the 1980s, Foucault was uneasy with that mode of subjectivation. He was in quest of a different way forward when time ran out. What we do know is that, at least in his lectures and discussions, during the 1980s, Foucault was once again problematizing philosophy as a practice and a way of life. The questions that Foucault posed and reposed during the 1980s remain challenging: what difference does today make with respect to yesterday? How to find an exit towards maturity? How to give form to our impatience for liberty? It is certain that, had Foucault lived longer, these and other unexpected questions would indeed have drawn his attention and concern. What that work would have looked like, we will never know.

Notes

1. Thanks to James Redfield for his precision on the German meanings of this term as well as his overall reading of the text. The term 'remediation' follows the general sense of the term, e.g. as discussed in Jean Starobinski's *Le Remède dans le mal* (1989). The term, however, has a more specific use: see Rabinow and Bennett 'Ars Synthetica' (2008).
2. All translations from French sources are by Paul Rabinow. The original is given in the notes:

... à passer le long de l'événement, à en recueillir l'effectuation dans l'histoire, le conditionnement et le pourrissement dans l'histoire ... à

remonter l'événement, à s'installer en lui comme dans un devenir, à rajeunir et à vieillir en lui tout à la fois, à passer par toutes ses composantes ou singularités. Le devenir n'est pas de l'histoire; l'histoire désigne seulement l'ensemble des conditions si récentes soient-elles, dont on se détourne pour 'devenir', c'est-à-dire pour créer quelque chose de nouveau. C'est exactement ce que Nietzsche appelle *l'Intempestif*. (Deleuze, 1997: 231)

3. Foucault (2005: 281–3) provides a partial genealogy of this '*surplomb*' as the act of looking down on one's one life in order to judge it rather than in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of others' self-understanding.

4. In the original: 'Il faudrait peut-être aussi interroger le principe, implicitement admis, que la seule réalité à laquelle devrait prétendre l'histoire, c'est la société elle-même' (Foucault, 1994c [1980]: 15).

5. In the original: 'des processus historiques multiples et, pour beaucoup entre eux, récents' (Foucault, 1994b: 22).

6. From *Table Rond* (1978, pub. 1980) and again in *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV:

Analyser les 'régimes de pratiques', c'est analyser des programmations de conduit qui ont à la fois des effets de prescription par rapport à ce qui est à faire (effets de juridiction), et des effets de codification par rapport à ce qui est à savoir.' Faire l'histoire de 'l'objectivation' de ces éléments que les historiens considèrent comme les données objectivement (l'objectivation des objectivations, si j'ose dire), c'est cette cercle que je voudrais parcourir. (Foucault, 1994b: 22)

7. In the original:

Mon problème, ce n'est pas de proposer d'analyse globale de la société. . . . mon thème générale, ce n'est pas la société, c'est le discours vrai/faux; c'est la formation corrélatrice de domaines, d'objets, et de discours vérifiable et falsifiables qui leurs sont afférents; et ce n'est pas simplement cette formation qui m'intéresse, mais les effets de réalité qui leur sont liées. (Foucault, 1994b: 23)

8. From 'Est-il donc important de penser?' (entretien avec D. Eribon), first published in *Libération* (no. 15, 30–31 May 1981), then *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV.

Se dire d'entrée de jeu: quelle est donc la réforme que je vais pouvoir faire? Ce n'est pas pour l'intellectuel, je crois, un objectif à poursuivre. Son rôle, puisque précisément il travaille dans l'ordre de la pensée, c'est de voir jusqu'où la libération de la pensée peut arriver à rendre ces transformations assez urgentes pour qu'on ait envie de les faire, et assez difficiles pour qu'elles s'inscrivent profondément dans le réel. (Foucault, 1994b: 33)

9. From 'Est-il donc important de penser?' (entretien avec D. Eribon), first published in *Libération* (no. 15, 30–31 May 1981), then *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV.

Il faut s'affranchir de la sacralisation du social comme seule instance du réel et cesser de considérer comme du vent cette chose essentielle dans la vie

humaine et dans les rapports humains, je veux dire la pensée. La pensée, ça existe, bien au-delà, bien en deçà, des systèmes et des édifices de discours. C'est quelque chose qui se cache souvent, mais anime toujours les comportements quotidiens. Il y a toujours un peu de pensée même dans les institutions les plus sottes, il y a toujours de la pensée même dans les habitudes muettes. (1994b: 180)

10. From *Michel Foucault, une histoire de la vérité*:

Je ne crois pas qu'on soit enfermé dans une histoire; au contraire, tout mon travail consiste à montrer que l'histoire est traversée de rapports stratégiques qui sont par conséquent mobiles, et que l'on peut changer. A condition, bien entendu, que les agents de ces processus aient le courage politique de changer les choses. (1985: 102)

11. 'Les États-Unis, pour Michel Foucault, c'est le plaisir du travail' (Eribon, 1989: 336).

12. In the original:

Bonheur American de Foucault: la réconciliation avec soi-même enfin réalisée. Il est heureux dans son travail. Il est heureux dans les plaisirs du corps. Depuis le début des années quatre-vingts, il envisage très sérieusement de quitter la France et Paris qu'il supporte de plus en plus difficilement, pour s'installer aux Etats-Unis. (Eribon, 1989: 338)

13. The term comes up first as a problem to reflect on, as a possible concept whose genealogy would be worth exploring, in relation to Foucault's journalistic foray in Iran.

Dans cette volonté d'un 'gouvernement islamique', faut-il voir une réconciliation, une contradiction, ou le seuil d'une nouveauté? . . . Ce petit coin de terre dont le sol et le sous-sol sont l'enjeu de stratégies mondiales, quel sens, pour les hommes qui y'habitent, à rechercher au prix même de leur vie cette chose dont nous avons, nous autres, oublié la possibilité depuis la Renaissance et les grandes crises du christianisme: une spiritualité politique. J'entends déjà les Français qui rient. Mais je sais qu'ils ont tort. (Foucault, 1994a: 302)

14. A detailed account of this period, both personal and conceptual, can be found in Szakolczai, especially Chapter 10, 'New Focus and Recovery' (1998: 246–62).

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