



REVIEW

Marta Faustino and Gianfranco Ferraro (eds.), *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. Pp. 304. ISBN: 978-1350134355 (hardback).

This remarkable collection of essays, now available in paperback, brings together fifteen contributions by both well-established and also promising, early career scholars on the ethical and political questions at stake in Foucault's late works – a period of his *oeuvre* that keeps generating a rich commentary to this day.¹ Most of these contributions were originally presented on the occasion of the international conference 'Government of Self, Government of Others: Ethical and Political Questions in the Late Foucault' hosted by the Nova Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA) of Lisbon in 2017. By the titular *Late Foucault*, the editors of this volume intend to refer to that body of work that Foucault developed during his lecturing years at the Collège de France – from 1979 (*On the Government of the Living*) until 1984 (*The Courage of Truth*), the year of his premature passing –, with the notable (but certainly not reprehensible) exception of the *latest or last Foucault* of the posthumously and only recently translated fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality, Confessions of the Flesh* (2022), with which none of the contributors of this volume could significantly engage, given that the French edition by Gallimard appeared only in 2018. Even if that had not been the case, however, the lack of attention that this volume pays to this posthumous publication would certainly have squared well with its editors' approach to Foucault's exit lines, as it were. Far from being themselves 'in search of Foucault's final words' – like those scholars who "wanted Foucault's last word on Christian sexuality to solve a mystery," very much "like a retired detective finally revealing a notorious murderer's name"² –, Faustino and Ferraro would probably agree that there cannot be a *Final Foucault*,³ nor should we evidently expect to find 'The Final "Final Foucault"'⁴ in the *Confessions of the Flesh*, if by 'final' we understand anything like the 'definitive.' Their introduction to the collection ('Another Word on Foucault's Final Words'), which stands out

¹ See, more recently, for instance, Paul Allen Miller, *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth* (2022).

² Mark D. Jordan, "In Search of Foucault's Last Words," *Boston Review*, 19 January, 2022.

³ James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault* (1988).

⁴ Joseph Tanke, "The Final 'Final Foucault'," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 1, 2018.

as an important contribution in its own right, is explicative in this regard: “It is important to be aware that the only reasonable approach to Foucault’s work is not to crystalize those last words,” the two write, “but to let them remain infinitely *other* in the endless task of permeating and transforming present lives.”⁵ The declared aim of the volume becomes thus that of providing ‘a cartography’ of this last stage of Foucault’s work and explore the contribution that its core concepts and ideas (‘care of the self,’ ‘technologies of the self,’ ‘truth-telling,’ etc.) might provide either for a more coherent reconstruction of his intellectual trajectory or for approaching contemporarily significant ethical and political issues, which the several contributions of this collection taken together achieve brilliantly.

The overall architecture of the collection is solid, well-structured, and rigorously thought-through. The volume is organized into five thematic sections, each containing three contributions dedicated to either an ethical, a political, or an ethical-political question connected to Foucault’s late works and lectures, thus implicitly calling into question that assumption of a purely ‘ethical turn’ in Foucault’s late thought that has for so long baffled scholars trying to square his last works with the more clearly ‘political’ ones preceding them – this is arguably the most distinctive contribution of this collection as a whole to contemporary Foucault studies. The first section (‘Philosophical Practices, Philosophy as Practice’) is dedicated to exploring the influence that the writings of Pierre Hadot exercised on Foucault’s late thought and re-evaluating their oftentimes divergent understandings of ancient spirituality. As flagged by the editors themselves, this section occupies a place of honor in the entire collection, given that the latter appeared as part of the series ‘Re-inventing Philosophy as a Way of Life’ edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure for Bloomsbury. We shall thus pay special attention to it, starting from its second and third contributions in order of appearance. Differently from Ure’s, both Sellars’ and Testa’s essays – ‘Self or Cosmos: Foucault *versus* Hadot’ and ‘The Great Cycle of the World: Foucault and Hadot on the Cosmic Perspective and the Care of the Self’ – advance important reserves with respect to Hadot’s criticism of Foucault’s interpretation of ancient philosophy. It is worth noting that both scholars do exactly so, at least in part, by relying on the recent (and rather contestable)⁶ intervention in the Hadot-Foucault *querelle* by Giorgio Agamben in the conclusive volume of his *Homo Sacer* series, *The Use of Bodies* (2016). As Agamben himself puts it in an interview, summarizing his main line of argument:

The idea that one should make his life a work of art is attributed mostly today to Foucault and to his idea of the care of the self. Pierre Hadot, the great historian of ancient philosophy, reproached Foucault that the care of the self of the ancient philosophers did not mean the construction of life as a work of art, but on the contrary a sort of dispossession of the self. What Hadot could not understand is that for Foucault, the two things coincide. You must remember Foucault’s criticism of the

⁵ Marta Faustino and Gianfranco Ferraro, ‘Another Word on Foucault’s Final Words,’ in *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions*, ed. Marta Faustino and Gianfranco Ferraro (2020), 7.

⁶ See on this Matthew J Sharpe and Matteo J Stettler, “Pushing against an Open Door: Agamben on Hadot and Foucault,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 14:1 (2022).

notion of author, his radical dismissal of authorship. In this sense, a philosophical life, a good and beautiful life, is something else: when your life becomes a work of art, you are not the cause of it. I mean that at this point you feel your own life and yourself as something “thought,” but the subject, the author, is no longer there. The construction of life coincides with what Foucault referred to as “*se dépendre de soi*.” And this is also Nietzsche’s idea of a work of art without the artist.⁷

It does not really take much to dismantle Agamben’s take on this coincidence between the paradigm of an aesthetics of existence and a dynamic of self-dispossession that would putatively hold in the case of Foucault’s reading of the ancients. Suffice it here to note the contrast that Foucault himself acknowledges between the two “models of the rapport subjectivation-writing” that are discernable, respectively, in his own philosophical practice and in the philosophical practices he himself studied in the ancient philosophers: that is, to use Lorenzini’s terminology, the model of a “writing-experience” and that of a “writing-exercise,” the former being essentially a practice of de-subjectivation, the latter one of subjectivation.⁸ Importantly, the first model – the one that Foucault declaredly inherited from authors the likes of Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille – will find its first theoretical elaboration precisely in his 1969 essay ‘What is an Author?,’ to which Agamben appeals. According to this model, the activity of writing is a “limit experience [*expérience limite*], which tears the subject away from itself” and ensures that the “[subject/writer] is no longer itself or that it is brought to his annihilation or dissolution.”⁹ Whence Foucault’s later recurring motto, of which Agamben is fond: “to get free of oneself [*se dépendre de soi-même*].”¹⁰ *A contrario*, the second model, as Foucault retraces it in the first two centuries A.D., conceives the writing of *hypomnēmata*, for instance, as the “long process which turns the taught, learned, repeated and assimilated logos into the spontaneous form of the acting subject.”¹¹ Significantly, in this ‘writing-experience’ whereby one “make[s] oneself permanently capable of detaching oneself from oneself,” Foucault himself recognizes elsewhere “the opposite of the attitude of conversion”¹²: namely, that fundamental attitude the he found characteristic of the entire apparatus of the techniques of the self, including the art of self-writing (the ‘writing-exercise’ *par excellence*), in effect in the Imperial era and that had precisely in the constitution of the subject its overarching endgame.¹³ To reduce the writing-subjectivation model that Foucault himself practiced (‘writing-experience’) to that which, according to Foucault, Hellenistic-Roman philosophers practiced almost two millennia

⁷ Ulrich Raulff, “An Interview with Giorgio Agamben,” *German Law Journal* 5:5 (2004), 613.

⁸ Daniele Lorenzini, “Michel Foucault: Scrittura Di Sé E Sperimentazione,” *Le parole e le cose*, April 8 2016. Translation mine.

⁹ Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, *Michel Foucault, Dits Et Écrits, 1954-1988*, vol. II (2017), 862. Translation mine.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality* (1990), 8.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-82* (2005), 529. De-emphasis mine.

¹² Michel Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interview and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (1990), 263. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality* (1990), 64.

earlier ('writing-exercise'), as Agamben does, helplessly trying to defend Foucault from Hadot's accusations, amounts to rendering either Foucault a Stoic (as far as Foucault's own understanding of Stoicism goes) – and he most surely was not one of those! – or (Foucault's) Seneca a Nietzsche, a Blanchot or a Bataille, which is possibly an even more absurd proposition. Importantly, for the purposes of the present review, the distinction between Foucault's own philosophical practice as a genealogist and the philosophical practices that he himself studied in the ancients is what stands out as the single most relevant contribution of the excellent opening essay of the collection by Michael Ure ('Foucault's Reinvention of Philosophy as a Way of Life: Genealogy as a Spiritual Exercise').

Strictly connected to those of the first section, the essays contained in the second ('Care of the Self, Care of Others') explore new interesting possibilities opened by Foucault's isolation of the Greek *epimeleia heautou* ('care of the self') as the cardinal principle of ancient spirituality, either by comparing it with the notion of 'technics' of Bernard Stiegler ('Foucault According to Stiegler: Technics of the Self' by Amélie Berger Soraruff) or by applying it to thematic domains that were undeservedly neglected or only superficially treated by Foucault himself, such as music ('Notes Towards a Critical History of "Musicalities": Philodemus on the Use of Musical Pleasures and the Care of the Self' by Élise Escalle) and time ('Foucault's Ultimate Technology' by Luca Lupo). The latter might well have deserved a more systematic engagement with Heidegger. After all, it is starting precisely from Heidegger that, by his own admission, Foucault set up the question of truth and its relationship with the subject in his late period, especially in the 1981-82 lecture course *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*,¹⁴ with which all contributions of this section deal. The third section ('Ontology of the Present, Politics of Truth') attempts to reshape our understanding of Foucault's late trip to Greco-Roman antiquity in light of perhaps two of the most distinctive themes of his entire *oeuvre*: that of an 'ontology of the present' ('The Care of the Present: On Foucault's Ontological Machine' by Gianfranco Ferraro) and the triad truth-power-subject ('Agonistic Truth: The Issue of Power Between the Will to Knowledge and Government by Truth' by Antonio Moretti and 'From Jurisdiction to Vindication: The Late Foucault's Shift to Subjectivity' by Laurence Barry'). The section titled 'Government of Self, Government of Others' moves to discussing the more properly political ramifications of Foucault's final thinking on the notions of power, government and governmentality ('Understanding Power Through Governmentality' by Karim Barakat), especially by bringing it in dialogue with other prominent, contemporary political theorists, such as Hannah Arendt ('On Authority: A Discussion Between Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt' by Edgar Straehle) and Ernesto Laclau ('Neoliberal Subjectivity at the Political Frontier' by Matko Krce-Ivančić). Following the trajectory of Foucault's thought in his lecture courses, the fifth and concluding section of the collection ('Truth-Telling, Truth-Living') deals with the Greek notion of *parrhesia* and the associated one of truthful living, as explored by Foucault in his last lecture course, *The Courage of Truth* (1983-84). In keeping with the general approach of the collection, the contributions of this sections either re-read these notions in perspective of other types of truth-telling unearthed by

¹⁴ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-82*, 189.

Foucault in his earlier studies, such as the ‘confession’ or ‘avowal’ (‘Rethinking Confession’ by Andrea Teti), or evaluate their relevance for understanding and tackling contemporary ethical and political challenges, whether these be constituted by the recent developments of the psychotherapeutic sciences (‘Truth-Telling as Therapeutic Practice: On the Tension Between Psychiatric Subjectivation and Parrhesiastic Self-Cultivation’ by Marta Faustino) or the narratives of trauma survivors (‘Foucault, the Politics of Ourselves, and the Subversive Truth-Telling of Trauma: Survivors as Parrhesiasts’ by Kurt Borg). All in all, Faustino and Ferraro’s attempt with this volume to present Foucault’s last words not as *final* but as irreducibly *other* – words thus capable of penetrating into our present lives and the belief systems that sustain them to radically transform them both – proves a highly felicitous one. This is a welcome and important addition to the existing literature on the last season of Foucault’s thought and a valuable point of reference for anyone interested either in building a coherent understanding of the arch of Foucault’s long and productive intellectual career or in approaching the ethical and political challenges of our present.

References

- Bernauer, James and David Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.
- Defert, Daniel, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, *Michel Foucault, Dits Et Écrits, 1954-1988*, vol. II. Paris: Gallimard, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-82*. New York: Picador, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel, “The Concern for Truth,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interview and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman, 255-271. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jordan, Mark D., “In Search of Foucault's Last Words,” *Boston Review*, 19 January, 2022. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/in-search-of-foucaults-last-words/>.
- Raulff, Ulrich, “An Interview with Giorgio Agamben,” *German Law Journal* 5:5 (2004), 609-614. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2071832200012724>.

Author info

Matteo Johannes Stettler
 mstettler@deakin.edu.au
 Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy
 Department of Philosophy
 Deakin University
 Melbourne, Australia