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REVIEW

Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007). ISBN: 9780810122833.

At the heart of Edward F. McGushin's book is his original reconstruction of a Foucauldian history of philosophy. Relying to a significant extent on Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France* (most of which were either unpublished or not translated at the time he was writing), McGushin's history makes good use of Foucault's blend of philosophical reading techniques, derived from both ancient and modern practices. What holds together the diversity of Foucault's readings, which span a period of four decades, is McGushin's re-reading of Foucault's earlier archaeological and genealogical writings on modern forms of power/knowledge through the lens of his later work on subjectivity, the ethical care of the self and aesthetics of existence.[1] The result is a compelling Foucauldian genealogy of philosophy presented as a history of our present. It begins where Foucault ended, in the ancient world, and concludes with Descartes and Kant, two figures of great significance both in Foucault's earliest works and in lectures he gave in the last few years of his life. Along the way, McGushin's genealogy serves two closely related purposes, one explicit and the other more implicit. First, it allows him to illustrate how Foucault eventually came to recognize his own life's work as comprising a critical and self-transformative *askesis* that constituted a distinctly philosophical life. In this regard McGushin succeeds in bringing to life Foucault's claim in the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* that he had made use of experimental forms of writing in order to think differently and thereby *become* different, an exercise that constituted for him the "living substance" of philosophy:

[1] While this is an original aspect of McGushin's reading, there is some precedence for doing so in Foucault's own later assessments of his earlier work. For example, in a 1983 discussion with Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow Foucault suggested that all three axes, knowledge, power, and ethics, could be found, "albeit in a somewhat confused fashion," in *Madness and Civilization*, which was originally published as *Histoire de la Folie* in 1961. See Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 237.

> The 'essay'—which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication—is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e., an 'ascesis', *askesis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.[2]

To those who might be tempted to find here a thinly veiled attempt at appropriating Foucault to the philosophical fold against all competing disciplinary claims, it should be pointed out that McGushin is certainly aware of Foucault's longstanding ambivalence toward philosophy. Of course, as Foucault well knew, we generally do *not* "assume that philosophy is . . . an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought," nor do we tend to read the history of philosophy from the perspective of such a framework. But, as McGushin emphasizes, Foucault identified the eclipse of the ancient imperative to "take care of oneself" in favor of the imperative to "know oneself" as an extremely significant event in the history of thought.[3] It is here that I find what I take to be the second and more implicit purpose of McGushin's genealogy. By tracing the history and consequences of this event, he raises anew Foucault's question, "Who are we in our actuality today?" At stake is nothing less than the ways we think, write, act, and speak when we engage in contemporary philosophical practices, especially those of us who have been trained to work within the disciplinary confines of professional academic philosophy. Rather than making a proprietary claim on behalf of the discipline of philosophy, McGushin is raising the critical questions "What is philosophy?" and "Who is a philosopher?" in a most powerful way. Joining together the two purposes of McGushin's genealogy is Foucault's examination of the practice of *parrhesia* or ethical truth telling. Using diverse examples from the ancient world and extending them in provocative ways into the modern, Foucault offered a general description of *parrhesia* as a philosophical form of etho-political resistance to the dangers of self-neglect that emerge as the result of taking for granted the established relations between power, subjectivity and truth.

In the first four chapters of the book, which comprise the first of its two parts, "Philosophy As Care of the Self," McGushin traces Foucault's interpretation of the history of the concern with the self and *parrhesia* in the ancient world. Beginning with the work of Euripides, Foucault identified *parrhesia* as a political right and duty of aristocratic Athenians to speak one's mind. However, as Athens became more and more democratic, a certain anxiety developed around the practice of *parrhesia* and the problem of Athenian governance. In his reading of Plato, Foucault highlighted

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2 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), 9.

3 McGushin, 31.

Socrates' concern with the susceptibility of his fellow Athenians to flattery and rhetoric. Socrates identified this vulnerability as a form of self-neglect insofar as they failed to take care of themselves by being concerned with the truth. In this context *parrhesia* appears as a political problem of truth that is also ethical insofar as it involves a concern with both self-governance, that is, the work one must perform upon oneself in order to not succumb to ignorance, as well as the governance of others. McGushin notes that this convergence of truth, ethics, and politics was important for Foucault in thinking about our present because he found in it "a way of isolating the dynamic interplay between relations of power, discursive or epistemic forms, and practices of ethical subjectivization."[4] In the ancient texts interpreted by Foucault he revealed examples of philosophy as a way of life consisting of spiritual exercises focused, not primarily on the acquisition of objective knowledge, as orthodox interpretations have insisted, but on practices of self-transformation aimed at truthful living. In his readings of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy he discovered a rich diversity of practices of care of the self that led to a wide range of forms of subjectivity with various relations to different forms of truth. Of particular significance is Foucault's interest in the Cynics, not only because their practices constituted an especially radical form of resistance to orthodoxy, but also because their particular exercises of self-care were eventually appropriated and redefined by early Christian forms of asceticism. It was these practices that later led to ethical self-renunciation and the forms of pastoral power that Foucault had already begun to describe in his earlier work. As a result of these historical transformations philosophy became divorced from spiritual practices and made to become a purely theoretical activity. Here we find an example that illustrates the crucial genealogical point that no set of practices, discourses, or forms of subjectivity can be accepted as definitively true, universal, or final. They all arise as specific forms of resistance to specific historic problems. However, to the extent that they succeed, there is always the danger that they will solidify into a new form of orthodoxy.

The second part of the book, "Care of the Self and *Parrhesia* in the Age of Reason," is a rereading of Foucault's earlier work on modern thought in light of his later work. Specifically, McGushin examines the modern forms of power/knowledge elaborated by Foucault in his works from the 1960's and 1970's in terms of the problematic of care of the self and ethical truth telling. Although it is arguable that Kant remains the most important modern philosopher throughout the entirety of Foucault's career (at least as important as Nietzsche and Heidegger), it is Descartes who stands as a pivotal central figure here. His most famous work consisted of a series of meditations that made use of self-transformative exercises that resulted in the production of an entirely new form of subjectivity positioned in a new

[4] Ibid., 14.

relationship to truth. In this regard Foucault interprets Descartes as the creator of a modern form of philosophical *askesis* and *parrhesia* developed in order to resist the pastoral forms of power/knowledge that dominated the Renaissance era. Here again, however, we find an example of a philosophical care of the self that successfully emerged as a specific form of resistance to a prevailing apparatus of truth and subjectivity only to be rigidified into a new form of orthodoxy. As we saw in the case of the Christian appropriation of Hellenistic practices, once philosophical *askeses* are abstracted from their original historical context of problematization and resistance, they lose their "truth effects" as *parrhesia*. The emergence of this "Cartesian moment," as Foucault described it, ultimately proved to be perfectly congruent with disciplinary power and biopolitics, particularly as they took hold through the development of the human sciences. McGushin is right to suggest that it may be because we continue today to live under the shadow of this "Cartesian moment," particularly in terms of our philosophical understanding of subjectivity and truth, that we tend to have a blind spot in regard to the initial spiritual aspect of Descartes' work.

Through his reading of Foucault's repeated encounters with Kant, McGushin suggests that Kant's critical philosophy failed to recognize its own complicity with disciplinary power, at least in part because of his ahistorical approach to questions of knowledge and subjectivity. Kant was unaware of the philosophical practice of care of the self that had been abandoned by Descartes only to be picked up by the new pastoral forms of biopolitical governance. Even in his article "What Is Enlightenment?" in which he focused on the importance of maturity, autonomy, and the courage to know, Kant insisted on a private obligation to obey governmental power even while encouraging free engagement in public critique. Nietzsche, of course, is the modern figure who allowed Foucault to extend his critical project beyond Kant's limitations by way of his recognition that subjectivity and truth are historical formations inextricably interwoven with the contingencies of power.

It was at this point of convergence between his earlier archaeological and genealogical work and his later work on the ancient care of the self that Foucault was able to propose the possibility for a modern form of *parrhesia* that would constitute a re-spiritualization of philosophy practiced as a way of life. The *parrhesiastic* role of philosophy proposed by Foucault is comprised of two moments. Its first task is to produce truth in the form of a critical diagnosis of who we are in our present actuality. The key element here is the use of what McGushin calls a "genealogical circle." It begins by using a contemporary apparatus of power, knowledge, and subjectivity as a lens for examining historical texts. The goal of such an interpretation is not to produce a history of ideas and practices, but to problematize the apparatus as a historically contingent formation. By problematizing what is presently taken for granted as given or natural, this critical form of *parrhesia* reveals the manner in which we engage in self-neglect. In

modernity this neglect manifests itself in the extent to which we allow ourselves to be taken care of by disciplinary or biopolitical forms of power and discourse. To the extent that these modern forms of power, knowledge, and subjectivity present us with the task of discovering or liberating our true or authentic selves, the second task of *parrhesiastic* philosophy is to offer us the possibility of a flight from the self by way of truths that are etho-poetic. Philosophical discourses and ways of living constitute a work of freedom that can produce truths experienced through their transformative effects on life. These effects register as new ways of thinking, speaking, and acting in the world. However, as Foucault often pointed out, the work of freedom is something that can never be completed because, as McGushin puts it, there is "no natural form of human life; the most natural thing about us is that the problem of being human always requires new responses and new forms of life."[5] In this way, McGushin's depiction of Foucault's journey to the philosophical life is also a call and invitation for those of us willing to hear it and respond.

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5 McGushin, 287-88.