In a new and groundbreaking book titled, interestingly enough, Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge, as if to suggest that we are now moving to another level of interpretation of Foucault’s work, and another version altogether in the assessment of his legacy, 22 years after his untimely death, Eric Paras takes up the following question—which has preoccupied many contemporary readers, sympathizers and critics alike: “How and why does Foucault go from being a philosopher of the disappearance of the subject to one wholly preoccupied with the subject?” (3).

His carefully researched, scrupulously documented, well-written and well-structured text, properly inscribed with the intellectual history of contemporary French philosophy, consists essentially of three main parts—preceded by an introduction into the Archive (1-15), and followed by a conclusion characterizing “Foucault’s pendulum swing” in the course of his career (149-158). Each part deals with various aspects of Foucault’s work around the central notions of Discourse (17-71), Power (73-97), and Subjects (99-148). It also contains abundant notes (159-208) and original translations of new materials heretofore little-known of the broad academic community, as well as a very helpful bibliography of both primary and secondary sources (209-232).

Paras’s central argument is that that many contemporary philosophers have minimized the significance of Foucault’s late recovery of a more robust concept of subjectivity either (1) because they did not have access to his lectures—courses at the College de France from 1978 to 1983 (or recorded tapes thereof) or (2) because, like Luc Ferry and Alain Renault,[1] who had a political agenda and a philosophical ax to grind against Foucault and others leading radical French philosophers of the 60s, they doubted the sincerity of Foucault’s late conversion or transformation, or simply viewed it as somehow too little too late (157). Paras contends subsequently that a new reading and interpretation must be articulated, which takes Foucault’s turn more seriously by looking into the highly insightful and revealing contents of the lectures and courses at the College de France— a point that had been made, by the way, by a number of other scholars—e.g., Arnold Davidson, whose contention in this regard is here recognized as “vindicated” (2).

Paras’ proposed new reading and interpretation of Foucault’s philosophical odyssey and ultimate assessment of his legacy, on such a rich and highly documented basis, makes it a strong contender, one that is not easy to impeach. But whether or not it does become the established and widely agreed upon interpretation, or Foucault 2.0 as Paras puts it, remains to be seen. It will depend obviously on the sincerity of Foucault’s late conversion or transformation, or radical French philosophers of the 60s, they doubted the.

If we leave aside the literary productions of Foucault—in particular, the history of the involvement of the Tel Quel group in the late 50s-early 60s, and focus strictly on the philosophical and historical works of "the early period," then the following well-known published works must unquestionably be included: Madness and Civilization (1961), Birth of the Clinic (1963), The Order of Things (1968), The Archeology of Knowledge (1969), Discipline and Punish (1975), and the History of Sexuality. The Will to Know (1976). However, after what we might consider to be a brief period of transition during the 8-years hiatus (1976-1984) between major publications, Foucault delivered a number of very important lectures-courses, starting in 1978, which are of particular significance for understanding the marked distancing from his earlier interests and "problematics."[2] and taking a proper measure of the shift that his thinking has undergone in "the late period;"[3] at the end of his career—e.g., with regard to his "return to the subject," "the return to morality," his more optimistic ethical-political horizon, and his connection with the legacy of the Enlightenment thinkers. These are: (a) Security, Territory, and Population (1978); (b) The Birth of Bio-Politics (1979); (c) The Government of the Living (1980); (d) Subjectivity and Truth (1981); (e) The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1982), and (f) The Government of the Self and of Others (1983).[4] Several of these lectures have now been...
I agree wholeheartedly with Paras on the two points articulated above, and I believe he performs a valuable service by providing extended discussions of the contents of these lectures [esp., (b)-(c) as well as (d)-(e)] in an effort to reveal the "enormity of the shift" (157) that had taken place in Foucault's thinking. (I also agree that all of these lectures, the one he delivered in 1978 was still framed somehow with the 'problematics' of his genealogical phase, and may therefore be said to correspond to the transition period, when Foucault was arguably still groping for an alternative thrust altogether (92ff)).

However, according to Paras, the result of the still dominant yet deficient interpretation is that Foucault's philosophical career was read like a kind of arrow's flight, with a straight trajectory and an unwavering determination to deconstruct the subject. He refers here for example to Habermas' posthumous analysis (1994) of Foucault's work, whose title presumably implies the metaphor. Nothing could be further from the truth about Foucault's work taken in its totality.

According to Paras, the swing of a pendulum might instead be a more accurate depiction. His alternative metaphor serves his purpose in characterizing Foucault's entire corpus as consisting ultimately of three phases, starting from (1) a position in which he somehow still admitted the possibility of individual experience and subjectivity, then moving on to (2) a period in-between, during which he articulated the 20th century's most devastating critique of the (free) subject, and finally (3) returning or swinging back (25 years later) to a position that "looked not a little like his starting point" in that he now acknowledged "the existence of a pre-discursive subject, enraptured by literature, politically unaffiliated, and pledged to a kind of experience that pushed the limits of the known" (Paras, 2006: 157-8; italics added).

Paras assumes here, quite rightly I think, that period (2) covers all of Foucault's well-known archeological and genealogical studies --without however claiming, as other authors have (e.g., Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983), Beatrice Han (2000)), that there is a strong and substantial (methodological and theoretical) discontinuity or rupture between these two phases of his inquiries into regimes of discourse/knowledge and power/knowledge (10-11).

With regards to period (1) above, however, Paras writes: "Arguably, it was his awareness that certain kinds of subjects had been suppressed merely because of the label one had affixed to them --"mad," "demented," "enraged"--that motivated him to write in the first place" (158). But it is questionable. I believe, whether Foucault's psychological motivation to write (which may be privately true) could constitute an adequate basis for interpreting the philosophical position he sought to defend in his early works --even if at times his own language bewitched him and betrayed his real intentions and purposes.

Finally, with regards to period (3), Paras claims that Foucault seems to have altogether abandoned his previous methods and adopted instead "a text-driven hermeneutical method." This is, I believe, a serious point of contention, about which, I will suggest later on, we could have some reasonable disagreement. He also states, in a somewhat melodramatic way, that "in a voice that by the end trembled from pain and debility, Foucault "liquidated" his critique of the subject. He goes on to add in the final lines of his book: "For, the notion of the end of subjectivity had offered a kind of cold clarity, as well as an immensely thoughtful provoking lens through which to view the world. But ultimately, only the notion of strong subjectivity proved warm enough to accommodate an overwhelming passion for life and an inextinguishable belief in the primacy of human liberty" (158).

Paras' discussion seems to imply somehow that there is a straightforward or simplistic recovery of the liberal humanist subject in Foucault's later work. But I don't think this is the case. Foucault was far too paranoid-critical (having gone through the most radical archeological and genealogical deconstructions) to merely to return to notions of subjectivity, experience, agency, autonomy, and critical reflection, as if they could be recovered un-touched and un-informed by his earlier devastating critiques and analyses. Under a certain construal of the principle of charity (Davidson), consistency with what may be reasonably deemed the most likely, general and over-arching thrust of a philosopher's work is bound to constitute a substantial advantage in interpretation. But the interpretation that Paras offers is ultimately problematic, I believe, because, like so many other reconstructive proposals, it arguably fails to strike a proper and judicious balance between 'abstraction' and 'idealization' in that, paradoxically enough, his reconstructed intellectual history of Foucault's journey both 'leaves out too much' and 'adds too much.'

This is precisely the point where I part company with Paras for, I don't think that Foucault had simply returned to the exact same course that he previously held the position that Paras attributes to him. Paras' periodization of Foucault's career depends on such a claim (and this is in my view a serious point of contention), according to which Foucault's first major works contemnanced a notion of "lived experience" and therefore, of "pre-discursive subjectivity." But, if his early work contained "traces" attesting to a still lingering concern with "lived experience," that he was not able to dispense with completely, or that he was using, if I may say so, under erasure, it is doubtful that Foucault thereby meant to uphold a notion of "pre-discursive subjectivity" -- let alone rehabilitate it as is as in his later works --25 years later.

Besides, as I suggested earlier, if Foucault's philosophical odyssey is any indication of his philosophical temperament, it is hard to think that he would simply recover and re-validate a position that he held at the beginning of his career. Metaphor for metaphor, a more appropriate and judicious one, I believe, would be that of a flexible spiral, whose end-points don't necessarily touch each other, or coincide, and cannot therefore be said to be indistinguishable, and whereby any return to a previous point must be viewed as going back to a slightly different point. But, as I suggested earlier, this "swing of the pendulum" may be viewed as bending at times in one direction or another in order to rectify occasional rhetorical excesses and theoretical tactical exaggerations. (Naturally, the objections and counter-claims made above require more substantial arguments and defense than I can give here. Nevertheless, they are worth entertaining as just that --possible objections and counter-claims).

The philosophical odyssey and career of Foucault has confused and confounded sympathizers and critics alike. This is no doubt due at least in part to the sheer creativity that he was able to display in a relatively short life, exploring different kinds of questions and directions, adopting different methodologies and terminologies, changing focus and emphasis at different times. In part, it was also due to his philosophical temperament, which made him relish the pleasure
to surprise his readers by going places where we did not expect to find him.[7] He furthermore affirmed his "intellectual homelessness" or "nomadism" by emphatically stating his right to change his mind as he progressed in his investigations, and showed a boundless propensity and capacity to reinterpret his past efforts and achievements in light of his current concerns and projects, and what's even more confusing, in the conceptual and theoretical terminology and language pertaining to the latter.

Nevertheless, scholars have for the most part pretty much understood the fundamental challenge that Foucault's early works had posed to the hegemony of 'man,' the sovereignty and autonomy of the 'subject.'[8] But it has been more difficult to understand the second part of his career that followed thereafter, from 1976 to 1984, the year of his untimely death. This is due in part to the fact Foucault had not published any major works until 1984 -- when the long-waited volumes II and III of the History of Sexuality (respectively sub-titled The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self) finally came out, and in another part, to the fact that up until recently most scholars did not have access to his lectures-courses at the College de France, particularly from 1979 until about 1983. This was however a period during which Foucault abandoned the so-called "structuralist program" that he later claimed never to have adopted, but only extended in to an area in which it had theretofore never been applied. [Typical Foucauldian move, some might argue, on a note of skepticism]. This was also the period during which, to the dismay of many, showed a renewed and strong interest in "the speaking, acting and creating subject" as well as in a self-defining, self-creating, self-constituting rather than merely defined, determined, constructed and constituted subjectivity, and many other notions that he had previously worked hard to undermine, or rather, to 'problematize,' such as experience, freedom, individualism, and even human rights. (101-148)

In my view, a close scrutiny of Foucault's later period does indeed reveal a dramatic turn or shift from his earlier more constructivist and deterministic view of the efficacy of disciplinary and normalizing forces. This shift leads to an increased concern with resistance to paranoid totalizing systems and pervasive power-dispositifs, and an exploration of the possibilities for ethic-political action, but I would be prepared to argue at greater length that the latter remain somehow limited and circumscribed --informed as they are and will remain by Foucault's earlier archeological and genealogical works. His late works see human beings less as merely "constructed subjects," objects of discipline and control, and more as beings with some capacity for effective and reflective action, self-discipline, self-control and limited critical agency (Veyne, 1992: 340-345).

Again, in contrast to Paras, I don't believe that we can view Foucault's later work as having completely "liquidated" or "repudiated" his early work, or, as having gone beyond power and knowledge. In this sense, one could not compare Foucault's trajectory to that of Wittgenstein, for example, as he moved from the Tractatus to the Philosophical Investigations. While some of the excesses and extremist positions of the early work may have been later tempered and rectified somewhat so as to clear out the theoretical and conceptual space for a different set of questions and inquiries, and for a possible and reflective ethical-political action, it is arguably not the case, as Paras contends (12, 138ff), that Foucault has completely abandoned and rejected his archeological and genealogical method in favor a new text-driven hermeneutical method. As Foucault has shown repeatedly, his approach is not that of a methodological chauvinist. If he has in later lectures, for example, made a focused use of the latter method (which he has also used occasionally in previous works), this could not and should not be taken to indicate that he now favors this method over any other he had used before. If when all is said and done, Foucault's entire work is viewed, as he recommends in his own words, merely as "tool box," then one could easily imagine that it will contain different, diverse and heteroclitic methods and methodologies suitable for different tasks and purposes, which have been part of his political arsenal.

In closing, we can therefore observe both continuities and discontinuities between Foucault's earlier investigations of regimes of discourse/knowledge/truth and power/knowledge, and his later focus on (critical) subjects, subjectification and ethics. His later discussions point unquestionably to the possibility of a political ethics that is not identical with, but may be compared to an ethics of self-discipline. Local ethical action may not proceed as far as Foucault would want in dismantling the humanist subject, but by challenging rather than embracing the oppressive systems of the time, neither denying their responsibility nor exaggerating their effectiveness. It is, I believe, in this context (pace Paras (14) that we must understand his statement --which seems to play a central role in Paras' over-archingly argument in defense of his interpretation: "Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem." What we can do is to 'problematize,' and we must do so differently from the vantage-point of different subject-positions. Neutrality is not possible.

Thus, Foucault's work moves from an earlier vision of structured discourses and regimes of discipline and power that precludes autonomy, choice and even change to a vision of a self-disciplined subject with some limited yet more effective socio-political agency and resistance. Although Foucault ascribes to agents in his later work an ability to distance themselves critically from their historical present, such a limited critical agency does not derive from a return to a humanist, or even purely human, individual subject. Others late postmodern philosophers, such as Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, were probably committed to recuperating the traditional autonomous liberal individual subject. But Foucault, arguably interested in the opposite of such a return, should be read instead as investigating the process of subjectification (in its double, equivocal or ambiguous, meaning) as both possible subject-formations and subject-positions, and trying to propose ways in which people can participate to some extent in re-creating themselves as locally situated ethical and political agents --who are perhaps better apprehended as already situated in a post-humanist and post-postmodern era (see Chokr, 2006).

References


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[1] They represent only two of the most vocal and eloquent critics of the radical French philosophers of the 60s, including Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lacan, etc. They deliberately set out to recover and rehabilitate a number of concepts and solutions such as history, the subject, rights, and man himself that had seemed inevitably lost at the end of the 60s. In their highly polemical and controversial book, French Philosophy in the Sixties: An Essay an Anti-Humanism (1985/1990), they take aim at the radical anti-humanist critiques of these various authors in an effort to show why their respective views are either untenable or inconsistent and contradictory, and therefore not worth taking seriously—despite the obvious tentative by some of the targets here in question to qualify and substantiate their newly evolving positions in defense of some 'recovered' or 'qualified' notion of subject and subjectivity.

[2] This term along with that of 'problematisation' become part of Foucault's terminological, conceptual and epistemological tools in the later part of his career, as he now seeks to characterize his inquiries as concerned with what these terms designate—i.e., the manner or modality in terms of which an object of thought is apprehended as a problem, and in terms of which "a problem" is formulated, what makes such a formulation in terms of "problems" (with alternative possible solutions) meaningful, what assumptions are made, what constraints are set in place by the manner in which a problem or a "problematique" is articulated? One might say more generally speaking that Foucault is now interested in formulating different ways of setting up the problem differently and in different ways, if only to show that a number of consequences flow there from. See one his last interviews with Paul Rabinow, titled "Poemics, Politics, and Problemizatzions." (1989, 1994, 2003).

[3] It has been a common practice among scholars to distinguish between the early and late works of Foucault, and debate the question of continuity and discontinuity that may or may not exist in his entire corpus, as well as the significance, if any, that may (or not) be attributed to the various shifts, turns, or mere changes in emphasis and focus in his work—particularly with reference to the return of subject and morality (Chokr, 2004).

[4] Though the titles of Foucault’s lectures are often deliberately misleading (an indication perhaps of his playfulness and sly sense of humor) and misnomers for the actual specific contents that he ends up covering, they are nevertheless a good indication that something is afoot in his thinking—i.e., that a shift is visibly taking place.


[7] His statements in the introduction to the Archeology of Knowledge are quite telling in this regard, as well as about his distinctive sense of humor. Here is what he writes in response to the questions of an imaginary interviewer: "Aren’t you sure of what you’re saying? Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you? ... and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you are speaking? Are you going to declare yet again that you have never been what you have been reproached with being? Are you already preparing the way out that will enable you in your next book to spring up somewhere else and declare as you are now doing: no, no, I am not there where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, looking on and laughing at you? In response, Foucault says: "What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I could venture, in which I could move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. Leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write" (1969: 28; 1972: 17; Italics added). Despite Foucault’s affirmation of his right to constantly re-invent himself, to change his mind, and dart off in unpredictable directions, we are also right to seek to “pin him down," and hold him to some minimal rules of consistency. Foucault himself has certainly not made this task easy as his intellectual modus operandi was quintessentially Nietzschean. He was fiercely anti-systematic as a philosopher, who viewed consistency as “the hologobin of small minds,” and restrictive of
his freedom of thought. See his take on both notions of "freedom" and "thought" later on in the text.

[8] It should be perhaps noted, in passing, that some authors object to leaving out the literary works (such as Raymond Roussel for example) for, they claim, these productions already contain precursor signs and motifs of what Foucault will end up developing in his more philosophical-historical writings. Others authors (e.g., Paras 2006) believe that the so-called early phase of Foucault's career must in fact be divided into two moments --from, say 1961 to 1965, and from 1966 to 1976: in the first moment, they claim, Foucault still countenanced a notion of "lived experience" (of the mad or the patient, for example) and had not yet completely done away with all terms redolent of individual subjectivity and agency, as he would do in the second moment—from 1966 to 1976. In this regard, I would merely point out that while this periodization may well be helpful in some sense, and supported by textual evidence and even corroborated by future research and scholarship, I doubt however that one may impute such a view (as the one implied here) to Foucault other than as a 'residual' influence from the predominant schools of philosophy and literary dispositions of the time to which he had been subjected in his formative years.