2003

Foucault's Political Spirituality

Ladelle McWhorter
University of Richmond, lmcwhort@richmond.edu

Foucault's Political Spirituality

Ladelle McWhorter

Recently, while rereading some material in *The Essential Works of Foucault*, I came upon a passage that pulled me up short and then sent me flying from my English translation to the French original. The passage, from an interview in May, 1978, contains one of Foucault's infamous attempts to sum up his life's work. It starts with the assertion that "since the beginning," Foucault has been asking himself a certain question: "What is history, given that there is continually being produced within it a separation of true and false?"[1] He elaborates, then, expanding that question into four sub-questions: (1) "… in what sense is the production and transformation of the true/false division characteristic and decisive for our historicity?"; (2) "… in what specific ways has this relation operated in Western societies…?"; (3) "… what historical knowledge is possible of a history that itself produces the true/false distinction on which such knowledge depends?"; and (4) "… isn't the most general of political problems the problem of truth?" (QM, 233). The paragraph ends with these extraordinary sentences: "How can one analyze the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false—this is what I would call 'political spirituality'" (QM, 233).

I find this odd phrase "political spirituality"—which Foucault clearly applies to his own work[2]—intriguing and suggestive in a number of ways; to it I will devote the balance of this essay. But it was the phrase "search for a new foundation"—a phrase apparently definitive of Foucault's practice of "political spirituality"—that disturbed me

enough to send me to the French. A search for foundations seemed utterly antithetical to the general movement of Foucault's work. I found it hard to believe he had ever asserted that his own work was a search for a new foundation for anything at all.

As I discovered, the French is fairly opaque. Foucault made the statement more or less off the cuff, and the result is less than perfectly articulate.[3] But I was relieved to note the absence of the French nouns for "search" and "foundation," as well as the verb for "to analyze." A less misleading and more helpful translation might be something like this:

> How to read the relation between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The will to found each of them ["them" being these practices: (1) distinguishing true and false and (2) governing oneself and other] entirely anew, each by the other (to discover an altogether different division [of true and false] by another manner of governing oneself and governing oneself otherwise by taking another division as point of departure), this is "political spirituality" (DC IV, 30, translation mine).

Foucault is not talking about a search for a new foundation but about a transformative activity that creates its own departure points as a means of moving beyond itself. So whatever "political spirituality" is, it is not a search for foundations. To get a sense of what it is, we must read the whole passage in the context of the last several years of Foucault's work, primarily his work in ethics,[4] which is the subject of the rest of this essay.

By 1978, when Foucault made this statement, he had already explicitly reworked the notion of truth. In an interview in 1976, he said, "'Truth' is to be understood as a system

of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it—a 'regime' of truth."[5] Given this understanding of truth, which encompasses the dividing practices separating true from false, its political importance is undeniable, as Foucault had asserted before: "The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but [to] ascertain the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses … but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (T&P, 132-3). What is new in 1978 is the connection Foucault draws between this politics of truth and "spirituality."

Foucault uses this phrase—"spiritualite politique"—at least one other time, the following October in an article on the Iranian Revolution. Here is my translation of the relevant passage: "What meaning, for the men who inhabit it [Iran] to seek at the price even of their life this thing whose very possibility we—we others—have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crises of Christianity: a political spirituality."[6] In this passage, it might seem that "political spirituality" means no more than a politics informed by religious conviction. If so—although given Foucault's use of the word "spirituality" in other contexts, I don't think it is so—Foucault's allegation of forgetfulness would be false—one has only to think of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference or Falwell's Moral Majority to remember that political practice can be intimately connected to religion, and Foucault knew that. But whatever he meant by the phrase in regard to the

Iranian Revolution, it is clear that in this first usage, he meant something other than political action grounded in religious faith.

Our first task is to examine the two "ways," or two types of practice, that Foucault links to form political spirituality. Political spirituality occurs he says, when people willfully—meaning "with alertness to the creative dimensions of their project"—seek a new way to establish a regime of truth and a regime of self-governance, each by and through the other. This project is different from taking a scientific theory or an ethical code already in existence and working out a regime of self-governance. (It is also, therefore, different from basing political action on religious doctrine and so excludes efforts like those of, say, Falwell.) It is also different from generating a new way of discerning truth and falsity based on a life-style already established. Political spirituality puts in question both one's style of existence *and* one's epistemological regime, one's self-discipline *and* one's modes of self-awareness, simultaneously in order to cultivate possibilities in both fields simultaneously.

The term *governmentality* designates a technological domain formed by the overlap of two regions of concern—with the self and with others. It has to do with methods and techniques used to cultivate the self in the process of becoming a good manager of others. Thus it always has both an ethical and a political dimension. Governmentality is the work of creating or maintaining oneself in a set of skills and style of existence, an *ethos*, that enables one to affect others' actions, that enables one to exercise power in certain ways.[7] Furthermore, *governmentality*, this ethico-political domain or field of relations, lies between what Foucault calls "strategic relations" and "states of domination."

> [W]e must distinguish between power relations understood as strategic games between liberties—in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct to be controlled or try to control the conduct of the others—and the states of domination that people ordinarily call "power." And between the two, between games of power and states of domination, you have technologies of government—understood, of course, in a very broad sense that includes not only the way institutions are governed but also the way one governs one's wife and children [for example].[8]

At one level is the interplay of individuals seeking to influence their immediate situation—the give and take among colleagues on a committee, e.g., or the wrangling between dealer and customer over the price of a car. Outcomes may be predictable in such encounters, but they do vary. In the moment it is not clear which party will prevail. Such struggles are commonplace, the stuff of everyday existence. At the other extreme lies the almost total predictability granted by a situation so rigidified that there is hardly any loose interplay of forces at all. When the guards come for the condemned prisoner, he will go with them and the execution will occur; there is nothing he else can do. But such domination is rare; most situations include some range of possibility. Between the loose and unpredictable interplay and the lack of interplay and its virtual determinism, there is a level of power relation that Foucault calls "general strategy" or "regime." It is here that established technologies of power exist, institutions, methods, and instruments that individuals can draw upon or be drawn into. These technologies come into being as the contingent mutual reinforcing of repeated patterns of interplay at a less determined

level. At this more organized and thus somewhat more determined level we might speak of "the institutionalization" of action as a means for controlling behavior. Such strategies include pedagogical theories and techniques, military disciplines, surveillance and other methods of data-gathering, ascetic regimes, etc. These strategies, while available for individual use, are not under the individual's control. (In fact to a great extent individuals are their products.) Government is not something one person inflicts upon another. The use of any disciplinary strategy to manipulate someone's behavioral options or control their development requires the user to develop herself in certain ways as well; the user must discipline herself to the technology just as surely as she disciplines the other by its means. Thus, being a parent requires not only shaping one's child's environment and imposing discipline; it also requires working on oneself, cultivating patience or certain skills, perhaps, or suppressing one's sympathy and desire to make the child happy. No child believes a parent who claims that a spanking hurts him more than it hurts the child, but there is truth in the claim; whatever disciplinary method parents use, they have to discipline themselves to it to follow it consistently and completely. Such is the case with any disciplinary technology applied extensively within any set of human relationships.

In sum, governmentality is the point of intersection between two areas of concern: (1) "technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination" and (2) "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[9] Whenever we strive to develop skills or attitudes in ourselves in order to

manage, educate, or otherwise influence other people's behavior, we are working within the realm of governmentality.

Foucault's genealogical writings, which can be read as cultural critique, are both the products and the instruments of his own governmental practices. They are both political in nature—attempting to influence the conduct of their readers—and ethical in nature—attempting to transform the self, their author. This latter point is one Foucault made often—e.g, in a 1978 interview with *Il Contributo*: "What I think is never quite the same, because for me my books are experiences, in a sense, that I would like to be as full as possible. An experience is something that one comes out of transformed."[10] The former, while less often noted, is also one Foucault expressly avows. Responding to questions about why he wrote *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault said,

> [I]t's true that certain people, such as those who work in the institutional
>
> setting of the prison … are not likely to find advice or instructions in my
>
> books that tell them "what is to be done." But my project is precisely to
>
> bring it about that they "no longer know what to do," so that the acts,
>
> gestures, discourses that up until then had seemed to go without saying
>
> become problematic, difficult, dangerous. This effect is intentional (QM,
>
> 235).

Foucault wanted his work to have material, political effects. Thus it is fair to say that Foucault's philosophical practice was political.

It is also fair to say that his practice was spiritual, if we allow his rather tentative definition of "spirituality" in an interview from 1984: "By spirituality I mean … the subject's attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject

must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being" (ECSPF, 294). *Askesis* is always spiritual, then, for it is always work of the subject engaged in self-transformation. It is also "the living substance of philosophy," "an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought."[11]

Thus a case can be made that all of Foucault's philosophical work is what he calls "political spirituality"—political in that it is an exercise in governmentality, spiritual in that it is an exercise in self-transformation. However, I want to push this issue of the meaning of "political spirituality" further. I believe that Foucault meant something more specific by "political spirituality" than simply philosophical work that aims at social and self-transformation; moreover, I contend that Foucault's writings are not exhausted by their governmental or their self-transformative functions, are not simply artifacts of self-overcoming and political practice.

Knowledge is for cutting,[12] Foucault said; the place where Foucault's genealogically generated knowledge cuts into selves to incite overcoming is precisely at the point where true is divided from false. Foucault's genealogical works operate at the site where our regimes of truth are grounded, the site of the knowing subject and its epistemic, as well as its ethical, judgment. Thus we must look at Foucault's genealogical critique, his "political spirituality," not merely as a political practice and/or a practice of caring for the self. In Foucault's work, practices of governmentality are bound up with critique of ways of dividing true and false, which is why he goes on to say, "My general theme isn't society but the discourse of true and false, by which I mean the correlative formation of domains and objects and of the verifiable, falsifiable discourses that bear on them; and it's not just their formation that interests me, but the effects in the real to which they are linked."[13]

Governmentality entails power/knowledge. One cannot deliberately influence others and transform oneself in the absence of knowledge—knowledge of self, of others, of management techniques or ascetic regimes, of the political situation, etc. But what if one takes truth, regimes of truth, to be the most general political problem in the world today, as Foucault insists that he does? What if one undertakes to influence and transform society and self at the site of the very knowledge that enables such practices? How does one go about influencing, affecting, and transforming *that*?

It is appropriate to pull up short at the articulation of this question. There are two obvious problems with such a project. First is that in undertaking it one would be making an intellectual effort to place transform the very basis of intellection. And second is that one would be aiming to effect a transformation that is not in the service of any known value or ideal. Given these problems, it is hard to know how to proceed. But of course that is the point—knowing how to proceed means, precisely, *not* placing in question usual modes of dividing true from false. These problems are not evidence that Foucault's project is self-contradictory; it is not. They are merely evidence that his project entails enormous difficulties, and, if successful will have unforeseeable and likely quite radical epistemological and ethical results.

So although we may not have much idea where we are going, it is not impossible to proceed. Two questions confront us: (1) What ways can we discover or invent to conduct ourselves and influence the actions of others that would help us discover or invent new ways of dividing true and false? And (2) what ways of dividing true and false can we discover or invent that will help us find new ways of conducting ourselves and influencing others? To take up these two questions simultaneously—bodily, in practice,

and not just speculatively, in thought, fully mindful of how difficult such an act will be—is to engage in the endeavor, the *ethos*, that Foucault calls "political spirituality." This is what Foucault did in his own writing, but it is not something his writing can do for us; "political spirituality" is a practice that each must engage in for him or herself.

Philosophers usually hesitate to characterize our work as "spiritual." No doubt many of us would hesitate to describe Foucault's work as such. Indeed, Foucault's is a strange "spirituality," one without finality, a heaven or an immortal soul. His is a strange politics too, one with nothing absolute to be won or secured. But that, I conclude, is what Foucault's political spirituality is: A set of practices undertaken to loosen the power of regimes of truth that tell us who we are and to critique those regimes as knowledge-practices—i.e., as practices establishing divisions between true and false—and thus to loosen the power of the identities that have been imposed on us, that *are* us.

Why call it spirituality then; what is spirituality, historically in our culture, but cultivation of the soul? But is that not what Foucault does? Does he not begin with that pre-eminent among inventions of this carceral society, the modern soul? Is not *Discipline and Punish* a genealogy of us? That soul—Foucault's and mine, the souls that have evolved in the recent history of the West—is cultivated, turned and moved and fertilized and possibly sown with seeds of something quite different from itself in Foucault's genealogical practices. However, strange it might seem at first hearing, it does make genealogical sense to call these practices "spiritual."

One final observation: Most of us have a hard time seeing Foucault's work as spiritual because it seems so divorced from things usually associated with spirituality—belief in absolutes, normative ideals. For a very long time, moreover, critique has been conducted

solely in the service of justice or good in combat against injustice or evil. Foucault's genealogical critique, which I have argued is the both the product and the instrument of his political spirituality, departs from that norm of service. Because what is in question in his work are the very ways in which we judge—the ways we divide true from false, good from bad, right from wrong, sane from insane, healthy from sick, and so on—the work itself cannot be founded upon a firm and lasting judgment about what is just or ideal. If it is founded in any sense at all, it is founded upon itself, in reciprocal re-founding movements that occur as the work progresses, in the body of the critique. What possibilities are there for new regimes of truth, he asks. As one makes discoveries or invents, one will find new ways of governing oneself and others. What possibilities are there for self-governance? As one finds new techniques of self-transformation and the new capacities these create, new possibilities for regimes of truth may surface. Founding, un-founding, re-founding, creating—such is the nature of Foucault's political spirituality, wherein practice—bodily experience, discovery, and invention—is elevated above belief and telic ideal. Practice is movement, change; there is no *telos*. In this sense Foucault's work necessarily exceeds the ethical, even though I have no doubt that his practice, demanding as it was, constituted for him and could constitute for us an *ethos*, a style of life. Like Kierkegaard's religious faith, Foucault's spirituality constitutes a violation of the ethical just as it effects a violation of identity. But a case can be made, and I hope I have gone some way toward making one, that this practice is rightly termed *spiritual* nonetheless.

I close with a quotation from Foucault that I find very significant in relation to these issues: "Can it be said that the subject is the only possible form of existence? Can't there

be experiences in the course of which the subject is no longer posited, in its constitutive relations, as what makes it identical with itself? Might there not be experiences in which the subject might be able to dissociate from itself, sever the relation with itself, lose its identity? Isn't that the essence of Nietzsche's experience of eternal recurrence?"[14] Isn't this the essential movement of spirituality, Foucault-style?

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *The Essential Works of Foucault, III*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 233.

[2] Here, at least. I can only find two instances in which Foucault uses this phrase. The other, which I will discuss below, occurs later in the same year, 1978, and clearly does not refer to his own work.

[3] The passage goes like this: "La volonte de fonder entierement a neuf l'une et l'autre, l'une par l'autre (decouvrir un tout autre partage par une autre maniere de se gouverner, et se gouverner tout autrement a partir d'un autre partage), c'est cela la "spiritualite politique.'" This passage can be found in *Dits et ecrit,VII, 1980-1988,* ed. Daniel Defert and Francois Ewald (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994), 30.

[4] My interpretation is very different from that of Jeremy Carrette, who has written extensively on the subject. Carrette sees Foucault's "political spirituality" as a critique of religious utterances, particularly in his work on confession and governmentality. I see the issue in much broader terms, not linked in any essential way with critique of Christianity at all. But for Carrette's view, see his *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), especially p. 43 and pp.136-41.

[5] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *EW, Vol. 3,* 132. Hereafter this work will be cited as T&P.

[6] Michel Foucault, "A quoi revent les Iraniens?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 747, 16-22 (October, 1978): 49; reprinted in *Dits et ecrit, III, 1976-1979,* ed. Daniel Defert and Francois Ewald (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994), 694. The French reads as follows: "Quel sens, pour les hommes qui l'habitent, a rechercher au prix meme de leur vie cette chose dont nous avons, nous autres, oublie la possibilite depuis la Renaissance et les grandes crises du christianisme: une *spiritualite politique.*"

[7] An example can be found in Foucault's discussion of Greek *ethoi* of self-mastery in *The Use of Pleasure*.

[8] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. I,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 299. Hereafter this will be cited as ECSPF.

[9] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

[10] Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," reprinted in EW3, 239.

[11] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 9.

[12] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154. The exact quotation is: "This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting."

[13] Foucault, QM, 237.

[14] Foucault, "Interview," 248.