

Ethics of Genealogy in Michel Foucault's Historical Works through the 1970s-1980s

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Kim, Hera. "Ethics of Genealogy in Michel Foucault's Historical Works through the 1970s-1980s." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 43.4 (2017): 53-67. Although Michel Foucault's works through the 1970s and 1980s have been understood in notions of genealogy and ethics, the works during these decades can be understood together within Foucault's philosophy of history. Even though critics have viewed Foucault's genealogy as a methodological stepping-stone for his next journey on ethics, the ways in which he understands history reveal that his genealogy, ethics, and history are interwoven with one other within a frame of 'self-problematization.' In this paper, I will suggest 'self-problematization' -- which is a mode of being ethical through a perpetual polemic attitude that motivates one to transform continually -- as a conceptual tool to grasp Foucault's philosophy of history. Revisiting Foucault's works through the 1970s and the 1980s and pondering how the earlier inchoate thoughts of history have been developed within the frame of 'self-problematization' in later years, I argue that Foucault's investigation of history through genealogy becomes ethical, as the concepts of both history and genealogy undergo the continual reconfiguration within themselves. (Texas A&M University)

Key Words: Michel Foucault, Ethics, Genealogy, History, Self-problematization

I. Introduction

In a brief introduction to Michel Foucault's writing about history, Jan Goldstein in *Foucault and the Writing of History* states that although Foucault as a philosopher

has been “intensively studied,” “the significance of [his] work of the writing of history . . . has never received extended discussion” (1). Although lack of examination of Foucault’s history is true, two critics’ different interpretations of Foucault’s 1970s-1980s can open up a new insight to contemplate on his philosophy of history: his genealogy in a specific sense; his concept of history in a broader sense.

On one hand, in “Reading *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1” (henceforth *HSI*), Richard A. Lynch views Foucault’s genealogy as “a turning point on Foucault’s thought” before entering into his ethical trajectory of the 1980s (154). According to Lynch, Foucault has investigated the buried history of discourse through genealogy -- “a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or non legitimized knowledges” against the tyrannical knowledge (*Society Must Be Defended* 9) -- during the 1970s while his later works “explore the implications of the freedom . . . [in] a profoundly ‘ethical’ exploration” (161). As Lynch represents, previous critics have viewed the 1970s and the 1980s in separate ways due to the difference in the main discussions. On the other hand, Christopher Falzon in “Making History” interprets that while Foucault focused on genealogy in the 1970s, he shifted his interests from genealogy to “the ‘historical ontology of ourselves and our present’ in the early 1980s” (282). If we compare Lynch’s term for Foucault’s 1980s as ethical period with Falzon’s perspective of the same period as Foucault’s transition to the historical ontology of present, it is possible to raise a question: on what basis we can make a clear distinction between Foucault’s 1970s and 1980s. In other words, whereas Lynch views the 1980s as the ethical journey that is different from previous genealogical period, Falzon understands Foucault’s later period as an extension of genealogy with the developed concept of historical ontology. Such distinctive perspectives of the two critics leads me to ponder what type of an alternative understanding can grasp Foucault’s 1970s and 1980s without a distinction. In order to respond to my reflection, I argue for ethical genealogy as an alternative term for Foucault’s 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on how Foucault’s methodological genealogy

and his concept of history have undergone continuous transformations during the periods, I conclude that Foucault's genealogical history becomes ethical within its frame of 'self-problematization,' a mode of being ethical through a perpetual polemic attitude that motivates a continual transformation.

II. Genealogy, Ethics, and History

In order to approach Foucault's genealogical period in a new angle, I examine how Lynch and Falzon have understood Foucault's genealogy first. Although Lynch has shown an entire re-reading throughout *HSI*, I specifically focus on his depictions of genealogy as "a turning point on Foucault's thought" before his ethical period of the 1980s (154). Defining Foucault's 1970s as "'genealogical' period" and his 1980s as "'ethical' exploration" (154), Lynch states,

Foucault's research in the 1980s is marked by a constellation of themes related to truth and subjectivity . . . [But] [h]is work in the genealogical period of the 1970s emphasized . . . how discourses constitute our identities . . . Foucault's later work will explore the implications of the freedom . . . [in] a profoundly 'ethical' exploration. (161)

By relating the genealogical period to the analysis of discourse and by connecting the 1980s to the issues of truth, subjectivity, freedom, and most importantly ethics, Lynch seems to differentiate the 1970s from the 1980s. Contrastingly, although Falzon views Foucault's 1970s as his genealogical period as well, he interprets that Foucault was interested in "the historical ontology of ourselves and our present' in the early 1980s" (282). This is to say, unlike Lynch, Falzon does not seem to make a clear distinction between the 1970s and the 1980s. Rather, he seems to understand the 1980s as Foucault's extended, historical journey with a new nature of ontology

of history. In spite of Lynch's periodization distinguishing the 1970s and the 1980s, Falzon displays a different perspective in which the genealogical period and the ethical period cannot be differentiated from each other.

In order to find an answer to why Falzon approaches to Foucault's history in the way above, I suggest ethics of genealogy as an answer. Through the 1970s and the 1980s, Foucault has employed genealogy as a primary method to investigate discourse, power, and knowledge in the 1970s, and Greek and Greco-Roman ethics in the 1980s. Yet, his concept of history grounded in the genealogical methodology encounters an unexpected moment in which history itself becomes ethical. This could be the reason why Falzon links history to Foucault's journey on ethics.

With regard to the ethics of genealogical history, it is necessary to examine the meaning of Foucault's ethics through the four ethical stages depicted in the first part of *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (henceforth *HS2*). Exploring Greeks' moral code in relation to the issue of "an ethical subject [of] action" (26), Foucault explains four ethical stages of how one comes closer to the telos of ethics; or, the goal of ethics. At first, there is "the *determination of the ethical substance* . . . the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prima material of his moral conduct" (26, emphasis in original). The second stage is "the *mode of subjection* . . . the way in which the individual established his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice" (27, emphasis in original). What comes next is "the forms of *elaboration, of ethical work* that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior" (27, emphasis in original). Lastly, the telos – the goal of the process – of the ethical subject comes as the last of the four stages.

In the examinations of the four stages of how one can “conduct oneself” according to “self-formation as an ‘ethical subject’” (28), Foucault probes into how the moral code and being an ethical subject are connected to each other. If we pay more attention to what is being ethical rather than the moral code, it is possible to capture the nature of the ethical subject in which he continuously “monitor[s], test[s], improv[es], and transform[s] himself” (28). Simultaneously, when we consider the nature of the mode of being ethical as a perpetual, polemic attitude of one, we also might be able to link the attitude of one to ‘self-problematization’ (particularly at the second and the third stages). If we links ‘self-problematization’ to telos, the nature of ‘self-problematization’ becomes more apparent. Although one can attempt to come closer to telos through the process of ‘self-problematization,’ the nature of the goal of ‘self-problematization’ is not something that can be finalized. Consequently, what eventually remains for the conducting self is a continuous self-formation to have “more complete mastery of the self” (28). In this regard, telos, the goal of ethics, can be interpreted as constantly ‘purposeful’ rather than something finalized. Examined in this way, a continual practice of oneself through ‘self-problematization’ in order to approach telos is profound in Foucault’s concept of ethics.

If the ‘self-problematization’ that motivates a continual transformation represents the profound nature of Foucauldian ethics, it is possible to apply the ethical principle to Foucault’s transforming concept of history during the 1970s and the 1980s. Foucault displays his concept of genealogy in *Society Must Be Defended* (henceforth *C-SMD*). In the very first part of the lecture in January 1976, Foucault defines genealogy: “[i]t is a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or non legitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance . . . in the name of a true body of knowledge” (9). As Foucault asserts, genealogy is a “historical

knowledge of struggles” between the buried knowledges and the tyrannical knowledges. If Foucault conceptualizes the methodology of genealogy in *C-SMD*, he briefly yet enigmatically notifies of his motive of writing history in *Discipline and Punish* (Henceforth *DP*). Although Foucault’s descriptions of genealogy and writing history are scattered in different works, I put them together and attempt to link them to the issue of history.

In *DP*, employing genealogy, Foucault investigates the history of modern penal system in order to uncover a difference between previous punishment system and the modern penal system. However, at the end of Ch. 1, Foucault raises an abrupt question which is not directly related to the past and present penal systems: “I [Foucault] would like to write the history of [the] prison . . . Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present” (30-1). Perhaps Foucault might have thought two different levels of history in *DP*. On the one hand, Foucault investigates “the history of [the] prison” (30-1) through genealogy in which we discern the buried system in the past under the tyrannical modern system. In this sense, history is about the past. On the other hand, Foucault’s “writing a history of the past in terms of the present” (31) indicates that his history is not only related to the past, but it is also connected to the present. In this latter sense, through writing history, Foucault seems to aim at integrating the genealogical method of investigating the past into a concept of “writing the history of the present” (31).

In spite of Foucault’s methodology to excavate the buried history of the past along with his motive of “writing the history of the present” (31), Foucault does not seem to fully elaborate on how his genealogical excavation of the history of modern penal system is connected to the writing history of the present. At these stages in

C-SMD and *DP*, Foucault's methodology and his concept of history of the present seem fragmented, and thus, they are less consolidated to each other.

Returning to *HSI*, although we might not be able to easily relate this book to *C-SMD* and *DP* because of the different main issue, it would be a meaningful attempt to contemplate in what senses the three books can be connected to each other in conjunction with the issues of genealogy, history, and their transformations in Foucault's writings during the 1970s-1980s. That is because, *HSI* is Foucault's turning point when and where he has reformulated his ways of thinking and his main interests not from the genealogical history to the ethics such as Lynch's perspective but from the history of methodological genealogy to the ontological history.

In *HSI*, Foucault changes his examination from the penal system to sexuality in the nineteenth century through genealogy. I draw upon some applicable explanations from Mark G. E. Kelly's *Foucault's History of Sexuality*. Volume 1, *The Will to Knowledge*. According to Kelly, Foucault has five main discussions in the book: the critique of "the repressive hypothesis"; "the genealogy of sexuality"; "the reconnection of power"; "the analysis of biopower"; and "the critique of sex" (3). In this regard, *HSI* seems about the complexity of the multiplying power mechanism which is investigated by Foucault's genealogy of the sexuality. In other words, the book is about an analysis of the power mechanism within the system. Yet, at the end of the book, Foucault evinces a different direction: "[a] process of struggle . . . against the system" (145). This sudden breakaway continues in the following pages:

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim . . . to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack

against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (157)

Even though the “rallying point” in the passage above seems to mean fighting against power imposed on sexuality at first glimpse, Kelly offers more detailed interpretations of what “rallying point” could mean. Drawing upon the original French words, “*point d’appui*,” Kelly translates “rallying point” into the “point of support”: “a place that one can go to if needed in order to carry on thereafter, with the subsequent operation, not the rallying, being the main thing” (117, emphasis in original). On one hand, Foucault probes into what has been buried under discourse, power, knowledge, and unitary history of sexuality, in which ones seems completely confined in the dense web of power mechanism. On the other hand, Foucault gives a puzzling conclusion that seems to lead to a different direction. Providing another context of bodies/pleasures, Kelly articulates that Foucault in his interview in 1978 claims pleasure is an empty concept that can have new meanings within it (119). Based on this context, it is possible for us to conjecture that Foucault attempts to discover a certain realm that has not yet been affected by the dominant disciplinary power. The “rallying point” would not be a certain site for fighting against power mechanism of sex-desire. Rather, the “rallying point” could mean a new, conceptual space for bodies/pleasures. Synthesizing these concepts of “rallying point” and bodies/pleasures together, Foucault at the end of *HSI* shows an attempt to discover another local realm in which power discourse is not dominant, and thus bodies/pleasures can realize their potentials.

Perhaps due to Foucault’s main analysis of the multiplying power mechanism, it might not be able to say that the paragraphs above can be the primary issue in *HSI*. Nevertheless, the digression that Foucault evinces at the end of the book might hint at Foucault’s own transformative moment while writing *HSI*.

Some historians criticize that Foucault's way of investigation and his works in the genealogical periods bring about not only a selective history but also a historical truth. Ann Curthoys's and John Docker's *Is History Fiction?* is an example of previous historians' criticisms of Foucault. In the introduction, Curthoys and Docker show their aim to attempt to define history and summarize previous historians' approaches to history. For them, there are two different approaches to history: the history in "literary form"; and the history constituted by "the desire for historical truth" (2). Curthoys and Docker define the former history as "the magic of narrative," and they place Foucault in the category of the former history. According to them, Foucault employs a rhetorical strategy in his works during the 1970s in order to make his own histories. Curthoys and Docker argue that Foucault's rhetorical use of 'therefore' in his analysis change a part of history into "the ruling discourse of 'the West'"; for example, how Catholic pastoral confession has become the inclusive sexual discourse in the West. Therefore, according to Curthoys and Docker, Foucault's analyses of local histories produce a master-narrative due to his rhetorical strategy.

Yet, Curthoys's and Docker's approaches to Foucault's history disregard the nature of Foucault's exploration, 'self-problematization' that accompanies the continuous transformations. Curthoys and Docker do not seem to meditate on Foucault's different stages. Rather, they make the categories of the types of history and examine Foucault according to their categories. However, is it possible to categorize Foucault's thinking and analysis? Although Foucault's genealogical approach to history might bring about a certain narrative that aims to challenge the dominant narrative of history, constructing a narrative is not Foucault's purpose. Rather, Foucault's narrative constructed by his genealogical investigation has its own fragmented moment, as the sudden digression at the end of *HSI* shows. Furthermore,

the fragmented moments in Foucault's narrative lead to another direction as well as another transformation. Each of Foucault's works undergoes a transformation. Consequently, even though Foucault's exploration of the history seems to result in a certain narrative, his analysis that brings about the fragmented moments cannot make up a certain meta-narrative. Thus, Curthoys's and Docker's categorical approach to Foucault dismisses the nature of Foucault's way of thinking, 'self-problematization.' Considering the characteristics of 'self-problematization' in Foucault's thinking and the definition of ethics that consists of 'self-problematization,' Foucault's puzzling conclusion in *HSI* indicates rich significations. At the puzzling conclusion that seems a digression from the main discussion, Foucault might have encountered the unexpected moment resulted from his own transforming thoughts. This unexpected moment can be a foundation such as “*point d'appui*,” -- “a place that one can go to . . . in order to carry on thereafter, with the subsequent operation” (Kelly 117) -- for his further works.

Returning to my own attempt to connect *C-SMD*, *DP*, and *HSI* to each other, I argue that Foucault defines his genealogical approach in *C-SMD*, and that he applies the methodology to *DP*. Yet, *DP* has more than genealogy's methodological use, as Foucault informs of his motive of writing history of the present. In this sense, *DP* could be an embryonic stage of Foucault's further thought of history of the present. In *HSI*, then, Foucault has encountered another moment in which he situates himself within 'self-problematization.' At this moment, the methodological genealogy undergoes a transformation. As genealogy is related to the notion of history in a significant way, history undergoes transformation as well. From this transforming moment, genealogy indicates not only history as the past but also history as a critical perspective of present. History undergoes 'self-problematization.' Finally, Foucault himself has undergone his own transformation in *HSI*. Therefore, it is a

better understanding that Foucault's genealogical period itself has become ethical through the process of 'self-problematization' rather than understanding Foucault's 1970s-1980s as genealogical or as ethical in a separate way.

After eight years, in *HS2*, Foucault has shown another transforming thought; history not only about the past but also about the present. Unlike his direct probe into the main point in *HS1*, Foucault in *HS2* provides an introduction in which readers can grasp his mature conceptualization of history. In the introduction, Foucault offers a type of ontology to his genealogical history by drawing upon an idea of "philosophical activity" (9). Foucault raises a question: "what is philosophy today – philosophical activity, I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself?" (8-9). Foucault provides further descriptions of an ontological concept of philosophy.

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, . . . , an 'ascesis,' *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought. (9, emphasis in original)

In the passage above, Foucault draws upon the concept of Greek's exercise of oneself, and applies it to another concept of philosophy in order to create a conceptual domain in which philosophy can be a critical mirror of itself. At the same time, along with the concept of philosophy -- "an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought" (9) -- that he invents, Foucault moves to another discussion of history: "The studies that follow, like the others I have done previously, are studies of 'history' by reason of the domain they deal with and the references they appeal to; but they are not the work of a 'historian'" (9). So history that Foucault undertakes in *HS2* is not a "pragmatics" of previous conventional historians, but it

is “a philosophical exercise” (9). This is to say, although Foucault has employed the genealogical history as a methodology, the genealogical history is equipped with the ontology ever since he has fleshed out the history with the concept of philosophical exercise. From that point, the genealogical history is not just a methodology to support Foucault’s main discussion, but it becomes the ontological methodology which needs an ethical practice such as “‘asceticism’” (9). In terms of Foucault’s understanding of history and philosophy, Goldstein in her introduction provides useful quotes. According to Goldstein,

[For Foucault] It seems that ‘historians’ and ‘philosophers’ could come together around this notion [of the relations between power and knowledge] and its possible application. The result would not, however, be an ‘interdisciplinary encounter’ but rather a common labor of people seeking to ‘de-discipline’ themselves. (qtd. *Foucault and the Writing of History* 3)

Foucault’s understanding of a relation between “historians” and “philosophers” shows that he does not care about a certain disciplined categorization between the two. Rather, for Foucault, a fundamental difference between “historians” and “philosophers” depends on a way of how to think of discourse, knowledge, and power within the framework of ‘self-problematization.’ For Foucault, such ‘self-problematization’ has two different uses. At first, it is linked to a practice of “‘arts of existence’”: “[the] intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being [within] certain stylistic criteria” (10-1). In addition to this meaning of one’s mode of being, Foucault subsequently links the notion to a goal, “a history of truth”: ‘self-problematization’ therefore becomes “a matter of analyzing . . . through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the bases of which these problematizations are formed” (11,

emphasis in original). If the former is connected to one's specific self-stylization through 'self-problematization' like Greeks and Greco-Roman culture, the latter is linked to a mode of thinking in which the notions of 'self-problematization' are essential to come closer to the goal of the history of truth. Put briefly, Foucault examines ethics of Greek through the mode 'self-problematization.' Then, he integrates this mode into his new concept of history, which has not been shown in his previous works. In comparison with Foucault's previous fragmented, inchoate thoughts of history, he reveals a mature, formulated concept of history in *HS2*.

III. Conclusion

Foucault explains that he has received an idea from the term, "problematization" -- which originally comes from Greek and Greco-Roman culture that "human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" -- as methodology for his projects of archaeology and of genealogy in *HS2*. Doing so, Foucault has "gained a better perspective on the way [he] worked," and has redirected the goal of the project to "a history of truth" through the process of "problematization" (11). While *HS2* has shown Foucault's more developed, consolidated reflection on his historical project, the earlier works than *HS2*, which I examined in this essay, suggest his changing moments in thinking of history through genealogy.

Foucault's genealogy clearly has been employed as the methodology for his historical project of sexuality. While Foucault has been realizing the truth of history as "a matter of analyzing" within the concept of "problematization," however, genealogy as the conceptual embodiment of Foucauldian history undergoes its own

"problematization" process as well (11). Foucault's genealogy has been the methodology, and he investigated history through genealogy. Yet, Foucault's genealogical investigation of history has undergone transformations through the 1970-1980s, as he later imbues both genealogy and history with ontology so that they can be ethical subjects. From this perspective, I argue for the alternative term, ethics of genealogical history in order to comprehend both the methodological function of Foucault's genealogy and the ontological nature of the genealogical history based on its continual transformation under the frame of 'self-problematization.' As Foucault did, Foucault's genealogical history through the 1970-1980s has been transforming within its own process of 'self-problematization.' Through the perspectives above, I conclude that, as Foucault struggles to re-think, re-configure, and re-formulate his thoughts of history and genealogy, readers, too, have to continuously re-formulate their meditations and understandings of Foucault's history in an ethical way.

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