

Truth and Eros

Foucault, Lacan and the question of ethics.

John Rajchman



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Foucault, Lacan, and The Question of Ethics

JOHN RAJCHMAN

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*For Joel Fineman
In Memory and Friendship*

Contents

Introduction

1

Part 1: Lacan

29

Part 2: Foucault

87

The Question of Ethics

143

Notes

149

Index

155

Introduction

One of the great questions of ancient philosophy was: What is the eros of thinking? What is the eros of the peculiar sort of truth of which philosophy is the pursuit? What is the passion that drives one to philosophize, and that philosophizing requires of one? How does it come upon one, and when, and with what effects on oneself and one's relation with others? Doing philosophy was then thought to be a way of life, a whole game of mastery, rivalry and freedom in knowing, that had to defend itself against false pretenders. In these ancient agonistic "games of language," philosophers were to be *philoï*, friends; but friends of what and in what sense?

One cannot say that these are questions that play a very prominent role in contemporary English-speaking ethical philosophy. In our great debates over what is good for us and what is right for us to do, we have rather lost the sense in which to do philosophy *is* to entertain such passionate or erotic relations with ourselves and with others. And yet, we are today perhaps confronted with just this question: What can the passion of philosophy and of philosophical friendship still be in our civilization where scientific reason refuses all moral cosmology, and where socio-psychological expertise tries to replace all "charismatic" wisdom?

It is in order to rediscover such questions that I have turned to the work of two recent French thinkers, a psychoanalyst and a historian, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. For I shall try to show that each of them in different ways tried to raise again the ancient question of truth and eros; each of them in different ways re-eroticized the activity of philosophical or critical thought for our times. Together, they thus helped to create an intellectual climate that was to capture the imagination of a generation, and with which we are perhaps not yet done. One aim of this book is to try to get at the *ethos* of this new passion for philosophy or critical thought, which has incited in some fears of a corrosive nihilism and a cynical inactivity.

In particular, I will argue that by degrees, the question of truth and eros involved these two thinkers in a long and involuted reflection on ethics; and that, conversely, if the question of ethics in their work is of a peculiar or unfamiliar sort, it is because of the ways it is inseparable from the ancient question of the passion of thought. By way of introduction I start with the problem of the difficulty of their *styles* of thought or philosophy.

Lacan and Foucault were formed by the different “generations” of the twenty-odd years that separate them. They held different and often opposing views. It is not sure whether they were friends or foes, for they wrote little about one another. And yet at the outset, we may observe that their attempts to rethink eros, and to re-eroticize thought, were ones fraught with great difficulty; and that this difficulty was at the heart of their efforts to invent new styles of thought.

What is a philosophical difficulty, the sort of difficulty that provokes one to philosophy and that philosophy is designed to treat? And why, in the case of these two thinkers, does this sort of difficulty become more insistent or tangible the more closely one approaches the question of ethics in their work? Or, put the other way around, why is the style of each, as a style of ethical thought, such a difficult one? Neither figure was an author of what might be thought to be the traditional ethical forms. They did not write novels, deliver sermons or pronounce prophecies. They did not write Confessions or Meditations or Manifestoes; they left no ethical “treatise” and proposed no “groundwork” for the metaphysics of moral codes. Why is it that the discussion of ethics is rather scattered throughout their work, and linked to many other preoccupations?

As is the case for all great philosophy, the works of Lacan and Foucault were difficult ones, conceptually, rhetorically and thematically. And yet their difficulties were of a rather more peculiar and specific sort. The difficulty of Lacan’s work at least was in part by design. He prided himself on having written what others must initially find unreadable. In 1957 he declared: “I like to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult”;¹ and many who thus found their way in never came out. He wanted to jolt or surprise with the words he used, and could be quite blunt. At the same time he cultivated a singular style he himself called “Gongoristic”