

ARTICLE

Foucault as Virtue Ethicist

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ABSTRACT: In his last two books and in the essays and interviews associated with them, Foucault develops a new mode of ethical thought he describes as an *aesthetics of existence*. I argue that this new ethics bears a striking resemblance to the virtue ethics that has become prominent in Anglo-American moral philosophy over the past three decades, in its classical sources, in its opposition to rule-based systems and its positive emphasis upon what Foucault called the care for the self. I suggest that seeing Foucault and virtue ethicists as engaged in a convergent project sheds light on a number of obscurities in Foucault's thought, and provides us with a historical narrative in which to situate his claims about the development of Western moral thought.

It is impossible for anyone who attempts to keep abreast of recent developments in both Anglo-American and Continental philosophy not to be struck by a certain convergence between important strands of their ethical thought. On the one hand, we have the later work of Michel Foucault, and his 'return to the Greeks'.¹ On the other, we have a host of philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition, often calling themselves 'virtue ethicists', who have sought in Aristotelianism a new way of conceptualizing the problems of ethics.² As I shall show, the apparent similarities between the two bodies of work is more than a surface appearance, but reflects a real convergence in the thought of the two traditions. The work of each side can thus be read so as to illuminate that of the other.³

¹ The major texts of Foucault's last period are the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), hereafter cited in the text as *UP*; and *The Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley, (London: Penguin Books, 1986).

² On virtue ethics, see the articles collected in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds) *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ I take myself here to be engaged in the project of shedding light on a little appreciated point of convergence between Foucault and an important strand of Anglo-American ethical thought, a convergence that suggests that greater dialogue between the Continental and Analytic traditions, at least on these questions, would prove fruitful. I should not like my argument to be understood to play down the very real differences in the stakes, styles and methods of the two major kinds of Western

Foucault and the Virtues

Virtue ethicists are united by one core thesis: that modern moral theories have placed far too much stress on, variously, rules, duties and consequences, and accordingly have overlooked the true primary locus of ethics: the character of the agent. They argue that the debate that dominated moral philosophy in the analytic tradition for much of the twentieth century, between deontologists and consequentialists, has ended in impasse precisely because both ignore the centrality of character. Moral philosophical debate can no longer afford to ignore a third ethical tradition, that which centres around the virtues.

Virtue ethicists call upon us to cultivate desirable character traits. Rather than seeking rules or principles following which would lead to good consequences or fulfil our duties, we should seek to behave justly, compassionately, charitably – to display the virtues in our actions. The proponents of this view claim for it a number of substantial advantages over its deontological and consequentialist rivals. It is widely held to be truer to the phenomenology of ordinary moral life, in which we are moved by concern for others, not principles, duties or consequences. It avoids the counterintuitive implication, apparently common to its rivals, that we act wrongly in caring more for our intimates than for strangers. It is, supposedly, less bloodless and abstract – an ethics for all of us, not just for philosophers, yet also, it is claimed, the ethics that gives the best account of the actions of moral exemplars down the ages. Socrates and Confucius, Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King each displayed the virtues, rather than guiding their behavior by rules or thoughts of consequences.

Foucault, working in an intellectual environment in which utilitarianism has rarely seemed to be a live option, is not much concerned with opposing it. However, important elements of the project he developed in his last works are strikingly similar to virtue ethical thought. Foucault distinguishes two primary elements of the ethical domain:

in certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behavior [...]

On the other hand, it is easy to conceive of moralities in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self. In this case, the system of codes may be rather rudimentary. Their exact observance may be relatively unimportant, at least compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship which he has with himself (*UP*: 29, 30).

philosophy. On the degree to which Analytic and Continental philosophy differ from each other, and the prospects for reconciliation between them, see my 'Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences', *Metaphilosophy*, April 2003.

Thus, while virtue ethicists typically oppose their thought to both consequentialism and deontology, Foucault sees his project as being to correct the over-emphasis in moral thought upon codification. Against this tendency, he reasserts the importance of the relation of the self to itself in ethics. He would have us return to the practice of the Greeks, for whom

in order to behave properly, in order to practice freedom, it was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one's self [...] and to improve oneself.⁴

Though all moralities contain both codes and relations to self, the two are mutually exclusive in the sense that an increase in one automatically causes a decrease in the other. Thus, Foucault tells us, that where the codes are numerous and detailed, 'practices of the self [...] almost fade away'.⁵ But finding an adequate place for liberty in ethics requires that the practices of the self remain vital. An over-emphasis on codification decreases the margin of liberty, just as over-codification in politics 'sterilizes both intellectual life and political debate'.⁶

We have seen that virtue ethicists, unlike Foucault, are concerned with the rejection of consequentialism, as well as codification. But their favored replacement as the locus of ethical thought is the same as Foucault's, the character of the agent. For John McDowell, for example, the question 'How should one live?' is 'necessarily approached *via* the notion of the virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out'.⁷ Moreover, the virtue ethicists, though not concerned exclusively with opposing codification, nevertheless give its rejection special emphasis. For them, as much as for Foucault, the new emphasis on character is the concomitant of increased suspicion with regard to the place of rules in ethics.⁸ For McDowell, the belief that such codes play the major role in ethics is simply a particular form of a more general prejudice: that 'acting in the light

⁴ Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of Care of the Self as Practice of Freedom', J.D. Gauthier (trans), in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 5. . Hereafter cited in the text as ECS.

⁵ Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', A. Sheridan (trans), in Lawrence Kritzman (ed), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 260.

⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Pour en finir avec les mensonges', in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (June 21-7, 1985), p. 61. My translation.

⁷ John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason' in Crisp and Slote, p. 141.

⁸ Indeed, it has been argued that one of the primary appeals of virtue ethics is that 'it promises a nonskeptical response to the failure of codification'. (Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character' in Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty *Identity, Character and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 454).

of a specific conception of rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle' (148). When we cease to be blinded by this prejudice, it will be apparent that

If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong (148).

Like the later Foucault, virtue ethicists seek to replace what they see as a misplaced stress on codes with an ethics centred around the self. Moreover, they find this ethics of the self in the same source: the ethical thought of the ancients.

To be sure, the ancient sources drawn upon by virtue ethicists in the Anglo-American tradition, on the one hand, and Foucault, on the other, are somewhat different. Most virtue ethicists draw mainly from Aristotle, in particular the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whereas Foucault is more concerned with later, Hellenistic and Roman, developments of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.⁹ However, this difference should not be over-emphasized. From the point of view of the mainstream of modern ethical thought, with its emphasis upon codification, the differences between these schools are relatively insignificant. They represent differing views on the best way to elaborate an ethics based upon the relationship of the self to itself, on an internecine debate between proponents of a radical alternative to mainstream philosophical thought. Moreover, the differences between Aristotelian and later approaches to ethics are somewhat softened in the respective developments of the two traditions by contemporary thinkers. On the one hand, Anglo-American thinkers are by no means ignorant of later developments in ancient ethical thought.¹⁰ For his part, Foucault abandons key elements of Hellenistic ethics in his reinterpretation of it, especially their claim, *contra* Aristotle, that living the good life depends only on the resource of the self, rather than also requiring a conducive social, political and economic environment.¹¹ For all their differences, Foucault and Anglo-American virtue ethicists can therefore be seen as engaging in convergent enterprises: a mobilization of ancient, character-based, ethics against modern, codification-based, thought. Moreover, perhaps as much due to their

⁹ I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to think about this difference in the sources of each.

¹⁰ For influential work in the Anglo-American tradition which emphasizes later Ancient thought, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹¹ I argue for this in interpretation of the later Foucault in my *Being Up-To-Fate: Foucault, Sartre and Postmodernity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

differences as their striking similarities, these are mutually illuminating enterprises.

It is apparent that their strikingly similar diagnoses of the malaise of modern ethics, and of the means by which it will be cured, commit both to a historical thesis. If modern ethics has gone wrong by over-emphasizing the role of rules, and the solution is to be found in classical thought, then the history which led from late Antiquity to modernity must be a history of the fading away of practices of the self, and their replacement by codes. In fact, both sides do indeed tell such a historical story. For Foucault, for example,

[The] elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art was at the centre [...] of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity, whereas in Christianity [...] morality took on increasingly the form of a code of rules.¹²

Foucault appears to suggest that the transition from an ethics centred on practices of the self to a more strictly codified morality was the reverse side of a transformation in the primary target of ethics. Whereas classical ethics had as its primary target the concern for self, later morality emphasized 'the care one must show others' (ECS: 5). As a result, the care of the self was 'denounced as being a kind of self-love, a kind of egoism' (4). Rather than caring for herself, the Christian was exhorted to *sacrifice* herself for others (5).

The virtue ethicist tells a similar story about the transition from an ethics of virtue to a more codified morality. In her seminal 'Modern Moral Philosophy', for example, Elizabeth Anscombe tells how we arrived at the strange sense we give to the word 'ought' and to the concepts of moral duty and moral obligation. We feel them to have some kind of absolute force; they 'imply some absolute verdict'.¹³ The most obvious model here is the Kantian categorical imperative, which is supposedly binding upon all rational agents regardless of their wants, desires or social status, but the same kind of force has widely been taken to be definitive of moral judgments. However, such an absolutely binding force was absent from the judgments of Classical ethics. How, then, it did come about that our terms for moral obligation acquired this strange sense?

The answer, Anscombe tells us, is historical: 'between Aristotle and us came Christianity, with its *law* conception of ethics' (30). Christianity held that moral obligations were laid down by the word of God, fixed forever in His commandments. Moral duties were thus strictly codified. As a result of the long domination of Christianity over our thought, 'the concepts of being bound, permitted, or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought' (30).

¹² Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence' Alan Sheridan (trans), in Kritzman, p. 49.

¹³ G.E.M. Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in Crisp and Slote, p. 30. Hereafter cited in the text as MMP.

Thus Anscombe's diagnosis of the crisis in modern moral thought: The language in which we think our morality has its source in a conception of ethics as divine law. Hence, the absolutely binding force which, we feel, somehow attaches to moral judgments. At the same time, however, we live in a profoundly post-theistic world. We still have the terms that stem from this conception, they still retain their essentially theistic connotations, but we no longer believe in the cosmology that once imbued them with significance. As a result, our moral terms no longer have any 'reasonable sense' (33). They are anachronisms, simply survivals from a past way of thought.

What are we to do, faced with this situation? Give up on our peculiar moral terms, Anscombe counsels:

the concepts of obligation and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say —and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of 'ought', ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conceptions of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it (MMP: 26).

These ethical terms are, literally, nonsensical without the framework which once made them meaningful. And, in any case, we know we can do ethics without them. We have the example of Aristotle, who did not even possess a term for 'illicit' (31)—that is, contrary to the (moral) law. Thus, Anscombe counsels us to reject deontological and consequentialist ethics, in favor of a thought which concentrates instead on the character of the agent—a virtue ethics. Such an ethics would no longer judge acts as contrary to or in conformity with the law, but would instead assess them as exhibiting, or failing to exhibit, some particular virtue: 'It would be a great improvement if, instead of "morally wrong", one always named a genus such as "untruthful", "unchaste", "unjust"' (MMP: 34).

If I am right, Anscombe's narrative, and her proposed solution, can illuminate Foucault's last works. Her thesis provides a powerful justification for Foucault's search for an aesthetics of existence. Foucault, too, recognizes that codified ethics is in decline:

The idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.¹⁴

But Foucault does not provide us with an explanation for this decline (or even a clear definition of what this decline consists in).¹⁵ Anscombe's narrative, with

¹⁴ 'An Aesthetics of Existence', p. 49.

¹⁵ As an anonymous referee pointed out to me, Foucault does provide hints that suggest that he, like Anscombe, sees the decline in religious belief—the so-called Death of God

its parallel account of the replacement of ancient conceptions of *ethos* by the codified morality of Christianity, and its similar call for a new emphasis on the agent, rather than the rules, is, at very least, fully compatible with Foucault's later work. We can therefore look to it to provide us with the missing piece of the puzzle: the explanation for the decline of codified morality. As we have seen, Anscombe provides that explanation via a further historical thesis, to do with the decline in belief, which leaves the laws without the context that made them both meaningful and motivating.

The Primacy of the Self

If I am right thus far, it may be that virtue ethics can help shed light on some other puzzling aspects of Foucault's work. In particular, perhaps it can shed light on the place he gave to the notion of the care of the self, and the reasons he may have had for thinking that such care is an indispensable part of ethics. The Greeks, Foucault tells us, assumed that "the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relation to others and for others" (ECS: 7). This seems very strange to us. Surely ethics has as its subject matter, its very substance, the relation the self has to others, not to the self? How ought we to understand the claim that, in ethics, the self and not the other is primary?

It is easy to misunderstand Foucault's claims here. We might think, first, that he is claiming that while ethics is necessarily concerned primarily with the care for the other, this care is best secured by way of a detour through the self. If this were the case, then the relation to the other would remain primary, and the emphasis on the self would be relegated to a mere means. But Foucault explicitly denies that the relation to the other is primary in *any* sense: "One must not have the care for others precede the care for self. The care for self takes moral precedence in the measure that the relation to self takes ontological precedence" (ECS: 7). We cannot, therefore, interpret away Foucault's emphasis on the primacy of the care for the self in ethics. He does not mean it metaphorically, or strategically; he means, quite literally, that in ethics the relation to self is primary.

Second, we might interpret Foucault as denying the importance of ethics. Perhaps he is giving Anscombe's narrative a Nietzschean twist: with the death of God and the subsequent undermining of the concept of ethical obligation, we should simply give up on the project of morality. We—we strong ones—should shake off its shackles, and realize our full potential, taking care of ourselves. But this interpretation, too, is in conflict with

—as central to the decline in codified morality. However, Foucault provides no more than hints; perhaps he intended to develop an account in later volumes of the *History of Sexuality*.

Foucault's explicit pronouncements. The care for the self does not *exclude* caring for others, but is its condition:

Care for self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others [...] *Ethos* implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in interindividual relationships which are proper (ECS: 7).

How are these seemingly contradictory statements to be harmonized? How can the care for self be— ontologically and ethically—primary, yet still serve as the ground of an ethics which is nevertheless concerned for others? Once again, I think the solution is to be found in virtue ethics.

What is the foundation of ethics, according to the virtue theorists? To what can we refer, when we need to decide which character traits are virtues, which vices? What, in the absence of divine law, can play this role? Many (though by no means all) virtue theorists are Wittgensteinian on this question: what underlies our ethics, and rescues our lists of virtues and vices from individual caprice, is our shared forms of life. More specifically, as part of our socialization into a particular form of life, certain kinds of character are held up to us as exemplary. Through explicit teaching, through the narratives we are told, and through the practices of praising and blaming, we are led to adopt a certain character, one which will incorporate as many as possible of the traits our culture considers to be virtues. In this training, what we do is often more important than what we say—if our parents and teachers tell us that meekness is a virtue, for example, but neither practice it themselves, nor praise it in others, it is likely to be their example, and not their pronouncements, which take hold.

It is this conception of the kinds of character worth cultivating which guide us when we act. We can, as John McDowell points out, depict moral deliberation in the form of an Aristotelian practical syllogism, in which the role of major premise is played by 'the virtuous person's conception of the sort of life a human being should lead'.¹⁶ It is not, therefore, the dictates of reason, or the intuition of a transcendent realm of timeless moral facts, or the word of God that justifies our morality; it is our inculcated interest in being a certain kind of person. As Sabina Lovibond puts it:

moral categories [...] can be seen as registering distinctions which are of *unconditional* practical interest to us in virtue of our concern to live a life deserving of praise and not of contempt. Nothing, short of indifference to that aim, can make moral considerations irrelevant; and we naturally think of them, further, as overriding other kinds of considerations, since there seems

¹⁶ McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', p. 156

to be some incoherence involved in setting aside the constraints imposed on one's conduct by the design one seeks to impress upon one's whole life.¹⁷

We might think that this vision of morality is frightening, in as much as it seems to make adherence to its strictures optional, the contingent outcome of a practice of teaching or, merely, as Philippa Foot puts it, 'a system of hypothetical imperatives'.¹⁸ Indeed, this vision of ethics makes its force contingent upon our having been brought up in a certain way. Objectivity becomes merely a matter of adopting the correct—that is to say, socially endorsed—standpoint. But, as Lovibond argues, that just is what objectivity *means*, not merely in ethics, but *everywhere*. To judge objectively means to judge from a standpoint which approximates that of the ideal observer, and we adopt this particular standpoint

not because *experience has shown* that the particular standpoint is the one which offers the best view of reality; rather, it is because reality is *defined* as that which one apprehends when one looks at the world from the standpoint in question (59).

On this account, ethics is no less objective than is perception: both get their significance from our shared forms of life.

Our forms of life, specifically our practices of praising and blaming, lead us to internalize certain character traits as exemplary. Thus, virtue ethics claims that moral judgments owe their force ultimately to the assessments we make, that certain actions, omissions and dispositions express certain traits of character, traits that are virtuous or vicious. It is this fact that accounts for the primacy of the interest one ought to take in the shape of one's life. Our concern to live a certain kind of life, a concern which, given that we are fundamentally social beings, we cannot *not* have, provides the ground for our morality. Ethics, defined as the relation of the self to itself, precedes morality, understood as the relation to the other.

Reading Foucault through the lens of virtue ethics, it becomes apparent that he understood this primacy in the same manner. It is the primacy of character that explains the simultaneous moral and ontological precedence of the relation to the self over the relation to the other. Though we are concerned, in moral philosophy, largely with how we should treat each other, this concern has as its precondition the relation we have to ourselves. At the same time, however, we ought not to repeat the error made by Christianity, of confusing this relation to the self with an egoism, onto which a concern for

¹⁷ Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 52.

¹⁸ Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', in Michael Smith (ed) *Meta-Ethics* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995).

others may, or may not, be grafted. The care for the self is *simultaneously* a caring for others, for there is an intimate relation between the achievement of the desired relation to the self and other-directed actions. We do not possess the virtues of courage, or kindness, for example, unless we are disposed to act courageously or kindly in appropriate circumstances. Moreover, the surest way to cultivate these virtues is by acting appropriately: virtues involve a kind of knowledge, and this knowledge is acquired only through practice. As Lovibond argues, moral concepts can only be acquired, and refined, by way of participation in appropriate practices:

The use of moral concepts by individual speakers (as they progressively acquire competence in that area of language) is grounded in an increasingly diversified capacity for participation in social practices, i.e. practices mediated by language or other symbolic systems (32-3).

Thus the concern for the self does not stand opposed to a concern for others, but is its essential condition. Only through an appropriate concern for myself do I become an ethical subject. Indeed, and in stark contrast to the selflessness of the Christian tradition, Foucault holds that the abuse of power over others is not the result of an excess of concern with the self. It stems, precisely, from its lack:

the risk of dominating others and exercising over them a tyrannical power only comes from the fact that one did not care for one's self and that one has become a slave to his desires (ECS: 8).

The primacy of the relationship to the self in ethics is neither the regrettable outcome of the egoism of human psychology, nor the expression of a fundamental amorality. Rather, it provides the grounds for concern for others. Without the relation to self, we would not be concerned about others at all. We would not, in fact, be concerned about anything.

The Continuity of Foucault's Concerns

It seems, therefore, that Anglo-American virtue ethicists are engaged in an enterprise that runs parallel to, and can illuminate, Foucault's later recovery of practices of the self. However, there is one obvious objection to my claim that Foucault can profitably be read as a virtue ethicist. Someone might argue as follows: Foucault cannot have been engaged in the project of elaborating a virtue ethics, because such an ethics runs counter to the deepest currents in his thought, from first to last. A virtue ethics is concerned with the interiority of the subject, with what she is, rather than with what she does; virtue

theorists emphasize 'Being over Doing, the Inner over the Outer'.¹⁹ But Foucault always rejected such an emphasis, and devoted much of his work to demonstrating its pernicious consequences. *Discipline and Punish*, for example, is largely concerned with an analysis of the 'colonization' of the judicial system by an essentializing psychology, which would attempt to fix our identities.²⁰ *The History of Sexuality* is concerned with the same process of essentialization, this time through the mechanism of a supposedly natural sexuality.²¹ It is implausible that Foucault would have gone back on this life-long commitment. Moreover, this was a commitment that Foucault himself reaffirmed in discussion of his last works, stating that 'a moral experience essentially centered on the subject no longer seems satisfactory to me today'.²² Whatever Foucault may have been doing in these last works, our imagined objector concludes, it cannot have been elaborating a virtue ethics.

This objection is not without some force. It is indeed true that many virtue ethicists speak of the virtues as capacities that allow us to realize our distinctively human natures, and that such talk about human nature was—rightly—anathema to Foucault. It is his continuing rejection of such a nature that Foucault expresses in his rejection of the subject. But I do not believe that this objection establishes that Foucault was not engaged in the project of elaborating a virtue ethics. What Foucault's work demonstrates is that such an ethics can proceed without a notion of the subject, if by 'subject' we understand a being whose essence is fixed in advance. It is here that Foucault's talk about self-stylization, about the aesthetics of existence, comes into its own. Cultivating the virtues is not a process of uncovering a pre-existing nature, it is a matter of creating oneself in a certain way. The virtuous self is not something to be discovered, or a potentiality implicit in all human beings that ought to be realized; it is created, in much the same way as we might create a sculpture or a painting.

Foucault's virtue ethics thus focuses, not on the subject, but on the character of the individual. While a subject is something given in advance, character is the set of dispositions and motivations to act into which we are acculturated and which we may then choose to cultivate or reject. According to this picture, if the self has depths, it is only because it has created them. Here too, though, Foucault is not a lone voice, but working in an area that has also been cultivated by at least some virtue ethicists. Basing virtues, not on nature but upon acquired dispositions is the direction in which the more

¹⁹ Robert B. Loudon 'On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics', in Crisp and Slote, p. 213

²⁰ '[B]ehind the pretext of explaining an action, are ways of defining an individual'. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 18.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

²² Foucault, 'The Return of Morality', in Kritzman, p. 253.

Wittgensteinian of these theorists have also looked. Foucault's work thus participates in the development of that current of virtue ethics which Gary Watson calls '*tradition-based theory*'.²³ On such a theory, 'the concept of tradition somehow does the work that the concept of human nature does in the Aristotelian view'.²⁴ Foucault's careful demonstrations of the pernicious uses to which concepts of a human essence have been put do not disqualify him from being considered as a virtue ethicist. But they do give us powerful reasons to prefer some versions of virtue ethics over others.

Foucault's last works thus show us how we might continue to do ethics after we have followed him in rejecting a substantive conception of the subject. It stands as an example to other virtue theorists, just as his earlier work stands as a warning to them against acceptance of the notion of human nature. Perhaps it also stands as another kind of warning as well. If I am right, if Foucault's last work can indeed usefully be read as participating in the project of elaborating a new virtue ethics for late modernity, then this work could undoubtedly have been rescued from a number of obscurities and hesitations had Foucault engaged with the parallel projects of the Anglo-American virtue ethicists. At the same time, those virtue ethicists who seek to elaborate a tradition-based theory, and reject the notion of human nature, would find in Foucault both a powerful justification for their position and an example as to how they might proceed. Perhaps, then, the fact that we can now see what value each could have been to the other should stand as a warning to those of us in both philosophical traditions, that in ignoring the work of the other we risk inhibiting the development of our own.²⁵

²³ I have defended the view that the aesthetics of existence should be understood as a self-stylization on the basis of traditions in my *Being Up-To-Date*. For Foucault, 'the practices of self' are 'not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group' (ECS: 11).

²⁴ Watson, p. 468, n. 24. On this view, Watson adds, human nature merely 'places boundary conditions on culture, but by itself yields no definite content for the moral life [...] Human nature must be made determinate by socialization'.

²⁵ I would like to thank two anonymous referees for *Foucault Studies* for a number of helpful comments on this article.