

DANGEROUS POSSIBILITIES FOR DIFFERENTLY-SITUATED PEOPLE IN FOUCAULT'S ETHICS ¹

Maureen Ford

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

For almost a decade, a small card has been posted above my desk. It bears a quotation from Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, that has seemed familiar and puzzling to me. It reads: "What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself; but to forget oneself it is first necessary to be assured that now and in the future one has found oneself."² I was reminded of de Beauvoir's words as I read Frank Pignatelli's discussion of the possibilities for ethico-political action as informed by the works of Michel Foucault. In each of these two projects resides a struggle to recognize and, simultaneously, to let go of, at least some of the ways in which we identify ourselves or are identified in our worlds as moral subjects. Following Foucault's lead, Pignatelli argues that we put ourselves in a position to "think ourselves differently" when we become aware of the historical contingency and specificity of the dominant systems of thought and practice. My commentary this morning is marked by enthusiasm for the conclusion Pignatelli has drawn, namely, that Foucauldian analysis creates space in which people can reconceive and reconstitute the moral contexts within which we participate. I focus on the connections Pignatelli has made among the 'care of the self', governmentality, and bio-power, and provide two examples of 'normalization' that exemplify, I think, the 'current danger' to which he and Foucault refer. I then close my comments by raising a question about what it might mean to *choose* to "refuse what we are."

Prior to reading Pignatelli's paper, my familiarity with Foucault's works was restricted to his accounts of disciplinary power, particularly as found in the essays collected in the *Power/knowledge* anthology, "The Discourse on Language," and Vol 1. of *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault's analysis of 'discursive' power has been particularly helpful to me in my work as a feminist theorist. For example, in one area of concern, I have attempted to recognize and understand the contradictions inherent in the feminist epistemological strategy of 'privileging' the experiences of 'women as women'. Power, says Foucault, is a phenomenon that we are always practicing. It is a phenomenon that we simultaneously undergo and exercise.³ Such an analysis of power allows us to illuminate the ways in which a practice of investing "women's experiences as women" with epistemic authority empowers some groups of women at the same time as it marginalizes other groups of women (for example, women whose experiences are common with some men, or whose experiences are not shared by all women).⁴

Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge has also influenced my examinations of structural determinants of knowledge such as race and gender. The urgency with which I feel a need to make my own work self-reflexive, that is, to ask questions about the political processes implicit in my own investigations, is owed at least in part to my regard for the ways Foucault has illuminated the political dimensions of discourse.

Seen from such a background, the connections Pignatelli makes among 'care of the self', 'governmentality' (that is, the extension/reduction of 'care of the self' to 'care of the population'), and 'bio-power' (the construction of subjectivities in accordance with norms of deviance embedded in discursive language and practice), seem well-considered. I am particularly appreciative of the care

taken to point out that it is the “*self-evidence* of how we understand our well-being” that Pignatelli wishes to question.

Examples of the kinds of normalization that Foucault and Pignatelli talk about are not hard to find in contemporary life at least in Canada and the United States. I will list just two. First the confluence of ‘governmentality’ and normative scientific discourse was a daily public event during the Gulf War as each representative of the international media and of the nation states involved, touted their analysis of the war, complete with ‘expert analysts’, technical jargon that obliterated concrete references to deaths and injuries, and endless explanations of the strategic and, hence, moral justification for each attack. Second, the “set of complex, often subtle relationships framed by ethical, political, and scientific considerations” that Pignatelli sees as emerging out of the “art of government as population” is familiar to many feminist analysts. Lorraine Code, for example, discusses such relationships in her analysis of the “double standard” in credibility afforded to the testimony of doctors (ie., based on their expertise) and nurses (ie. based on their practical experience) at the Grange Inquiry into infant deaths at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children.⁵ In each of these examples I have little difficulty in agreeing with the assertion made by Pignatelli and Foucault that the development of a “hyper- and pessimistic activism” is a key avenue of moral agency.

Appreciative as I am, then, of most of Pignatelli’s study of Foucault’s work on ethics, I am surprised to feel uncomfortable with the discussion of “Educational Considerations: Practising Freedom,” which closes his paper. Upon reflection I discover that, seen in the light of this concluding section, Pignatelli’s earlier references to ‘choice’ also meet with my resistance. Here I am referring to his mention of Foucault’s search for “an ethic of freedom around ‘choosing forms of possible experience’” and his assertion that, following Foucault, one “has more opportunities to practice freedom, to exercise one’s inventiveness, to assert possibilities and, therefore, to change oneself.” My wariness, once aroused, does not allow me to read without uneasiness, Pignatelli’s assertion that “a vibrant civic culture is predicated upon the ability and willingness of its members to speak with courage, conviction and understanding about things held in common.” It is not that I think it is inappropriate to suggest that educators resist the tendency to present knowledge conventions as self-evident. It is, rather, that I wonder if there is another ‘danger’ to be reckoned with in the practice of conveying meanings of ethical concepts such as “freedom” and “choice”. In order to get at this worry, I want to introduce a question to today’s investigation of Foucault’s ethico-political project. I want to ask if Foucault or Pignatelli have provided an analysis of “the current danger” which takes into account the ways people who are differently situated within given social locations are differently affected by the dynamics of knowledge/power. In other words, do they provide a way of discovering, or noticing, the different skills, tasks, and barriers to be overcome that will constitute the process of questioning “who might we become” and “how might we resist the knowledge/power/government nexus from our positions in the social order?”

This question originates in a worry...admittedly a worry that might reflect the ways I ‘receive’ or ‘read’ certain terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ as opposed to the ways Pignatelli speaks them... nonetheless, my worry is that in speaking of freedom “as a practised *attitude*” and as “a *refusal* to identify...with fabricated subject categories” Pignatelli may over-generalize the cognitive elements of moral agency to the detriment of other crucial elements. For example, in the section of his paper dealing with ‘bio-power,’ he presents a claim made by Sheldon Wolin in which a connection is drawn between government policies which pay attention to the poor and the depoliticization of the poor and other marginalized groups of people. What worries Wolin the most, Pignatelli tells us is what Wolin refers to “as a 1088 of the self, or the absence of the ability and will to imagine things differently and work collectively toward changing intolerable conditions.”

I do not want to suggest that the concern Wolin and Pignatelli express here for the internalized effects of marginalization upon people who are poor or otherwise disenfranchised is misplaced, yet I think that it is at least misleading to explicate the depoliticization of marginalized peoples solely in terms of internalized oppression. What is missed by such a narrow focus, if indeed that is the focus

Pignatelli is suggesting, are the many concrete effects of bio-power that serve to separate people from the means to express and enact their political and moral agency. If, for instance, a welfare recipient, perhaps a single unemployed mother, commits herself to working a number of hours a week with an anti-poverty activist group she risks having her payments cut off by a case-worker who might interpret such work as an indication of her unwillingness to pursue so-called 'gainful' employment. Lesbian mothers who are active in gay and lesbian rights advocacy are in a similar position when they lose custody of their children, not on the grounds that they are unfit parents, but on the grounds that the children's living in such an environment of civil unrest would contravene the "best interest of the child" mandate according to which the courts are to award custody. I think that if we are to take Foucault's question seriously and ask, "What is the current danger?" we must be prepared to discover that there are different answers available to differently situated people. I worry that if it is acceptable to frame the answers to this question in abstract and generalized terms rather than in historically specific terms that recognize the ways that actions of some subjects are more circumscribed by the effects of bio-power than are the actions of other subjects, then our discourse risks contributing to the very technical normalization of ethical agency we are trying to call into question.

As a feminist educator committed to the development of educational practices that construct non-dominating forms of knowledge, I believe we must not be content with developing the cognitive elements of freedom; moral ends such as "the will and the ability to imagine things differently" do not exhaust the possibilities for moral agency that can be dealt with inside schools. I believe that resisting the normalization practices of governments, regulative bodies, schools, judicial systems, etc., can involve educators in activities as wide-ranging as civil disobedience to cooperative child-care. At this point, I do not see that such commitments are implicit in the ethicopolitical projects outlined by Foucault and Pignatelli and I can't decide whether that means that we, three, choose to identify different problems as "the current danger" or that we have different analyses of what constitutes ethico-political freedom. I leave my commentary with this question left open.

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² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (New York: First Vintage Books, 1974).

³ Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

⁴ The problem of exclusion within feminist theory caused by arguments which depend upon 'privileging' women's experiences 'as women' is discussed in depth by Elizabeth Spelman in her book, *Inessential Women: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

⁵ See, Lorraine Code, "Credibility: A Double Standard," in *What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 222-64.