

‘A Critical Examination of Michel Foucault’s Concept of Moral Self-Constitution in Dialogue with Charles Taylor’

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Abstract

French philosopher Michel Foucault takes a very specific *aesthetic* interpretation in his proposal for the constitution of the moral self in his late work on ethics, work that is located in the ancient world of Greece and Rome. The thesis writer examines the contours of that approach, and brings it to the level of a critical reflection with the aid of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and three theologians. Foucault’s construction of the moral self is rooted in autonomous *aesthetic-freedom*, which calls into question norms, rules or codes, and especially prohibitions, focusing on a positive elaboration of the self. It marshals certain *technologies of self* for self-creation to produce a certain beautiful style of self or an *aesthetics of existence*. The analysis focuses on the triangular relationship between power relations, truth games and subjectivity. It is a bold and imaginative proposal for ethics in late modernity.

Taylor responds to this approach with an appreciation of its creativity, but he begins to question why Foucault takes the extreme view of avoiding *the good* in his ethics of self. Furthermore, he brings a critique to Foucault’s view of freedom as an *ontology*. On Taylor’s view, Foucault’s self and his doctrine of *aesthetic-freedom* lack a relationship with the good; this makes the self vulnerable to amorality and nihilism. Foucault lacks the element of critique in his practices of the self. Taylor also notes that the heavy emphasis on aesthetics as an interpretative grid on the self has the potential to lead to narcissism and even violence, or to loss of the self, and loss of relationship with the Other. The key issue that he raises for Foucault’s view of freedom is its lack of *situatedness*, the lack of definition of the context and the content of freedom. Taylor offers a moral horizon of the good as an alternative with its own limitations.

The three-way dialogue is picked up late in the thesis by three trinitarian theologians, Long, Schwöbel and McFadyen, responding to Foucault, and yet their contribution is mediated through Taylor’s critical dialogue and follows his suggestion of the merits of a *transcendent turn* towards Judeo-Christian *agape* love. In its own way, it adds to the contextualization of the self and definition of freedom; it also offers a response to the crisis of affirmation that emerges in the Foucault-Taylor dialogue. This view articulates a constitution of the moral self from within a paradigm of trinitarian *goodness-freedom*, which suggests a trajectory of a *communion of love* where the self discerns the possibility of complementary relationships.

The three paradigms explored in the thesis involve firstly an analysis of the character of the *Post-Romantic turn* in Foucault’s self, secondly a critical engagement with Taylor’s idea of the moral horizon, and finally into creative dialogue with the plausibility structure of *trinitarian goodness-freedom*. The thesis writer concludes with three propositions for a *redeemed freedom* (a contrast to Foucault’s autonomous freedom) which revisits the interpretation of the moral self from within a horizon of fecund and significant relationships to the good, the neighbour and trinitarian divine goodness.