Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual
Translated by Michael Bess

Bess: You were saying a moment ago that you are a moralist. . . .

Foucault: In a sense, I am a moralist, insofar as I believe that one of the tasks, one of the meanings of human existence — the source of human freedom — is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile. No aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us.

We have to rise up against all forms of power — but not just power in the narrow sense of the word, referring to the power of a government or of one social group over another: these are only a few particular instances of power.

Power is anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good.

Bess: But we nonetheless need to pin things down, even if in a provisional way.

Foucault: Certainly, certainly. This doesn't mean that one must live in an indefinite discontinuity. But what I mean is that one must consider all the points of fixity, of immobilisation, as elements in a tactics, in a strategy — as part of an effort to bring things back into their original mobility, their openness to change.

I was telling you earlier about the three elements in my morals. They are (1) the refusal to accept as self-evident the things that are proposed to us; (2) the need to analyse and to know, since we can accomplish nothing without reflection and understanding — thus, the principle of curiosity; and (3) the principle of innovation: to seek out in our reflection those things that have never been thought or imagined. Thus: refusal, curiosity, innovation.

Bess: It seems to me that the modern philosophical concept of the subject entails all three of these principles. That is to say, the difference between the subject and the object is precisely that the subject is capable of refusal, of bringing innovation. So is your work an attack on the tendency to freeze this notion of the subject?

Foucault: What I was explaining was the field of values within which I situate my work. You asked me before if I was not a nihilist who rejected morality. I say: No! And you were asking me also, in effect, "Why do you do the work that you do?"

Here are the values that I propose. I think that the modern theory of the subject, the modern philosophy of the subject, might well be able to accord the subject a capacity for innovation, etc., but that, in actuality, modern philosophy only does so on a theoretical level. In reality, it is not capable of translating into practice this different value which I am trying to elaborate in my own work.

Bess: Can power be something open and fluid, or is it intrinsically repressive?

Foucault: Power should not be understood as an oppressive system bearing down on individuals from above, smiting them with prohibitions of this or that. Power is a set of relations. What does it mean to exercise power? It does not mean picking up this tape recorder and throwing it on the ground. I have the capacity to do so — materially, physically, sportively. But I would not be exercising power if I did that. However, if I take this tape recorder and throw it on the ground in order to make you mad, or so that you can't repeat what I've said, or to put pressure on you so that you'll behave in such and such a way, or to intimidate you — well, what I've done, by shaping your behaviour through certain means, *that* is power.

Which is to say that power is a relation between two persons, a relation that is not on the same order as communication (even if you are forced to serve as my instrument of communication). It's not the same thing as telling you "The weather's nice," or "I was born on such and such a date."

Good. I exercise power over you: I influence your behaviour, or I try to do so. And I try to guide your behaviour, to lead your behaviour. The simplest means of doing this, obviously, is to take you by the hand and force you to go here or there. That's the limit case, the zero-degree of power. And it's actually in that moment that power ceases to be power and becomes mere physical force. On the other hand, if I use my age, my social position, the knowledge I may have about this or that, to make you behave in some particular way — that is to say, I'm not forcing you at all and I'm leaving you completely free — that's when I begin to

exercise power. It's clear that power should not be defined as a constraining act of violence that represses individuals, forcing them to do something or preventing them from doing some other thing. But it takes place when there is a relation between two free subjects, and this relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon.

Therefore, power is not always repressive. It can take a certain number of forms. And it is possible to have relations of power that are open.

Bess: Equal relations?

Foucault: Never equal, because the relation of power is an inequality. But you can have reversible systems of power. Here, take for instance what happens in an erotic relationship — I'm not even speaking of a love relationship, simply an erotic relationship. Now you know perfectly well that it's a game of power, and physical strength is not necessarily the most important element in it. You both have a certain way of acting on each other's behaviour, shaping and determining that behaviour. One of the two can use this situation in a certain way, and then bring about the exact inverse *vis-à-vis* the other. Well, you have there a purely local form of reversible power.

Relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression. But what happens is that, in society, in most societies, organisations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of asymmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally, etc. And this totally freezes the situation. That's what one calls power in the strict sense of the term: it's a specific type of power relation that has been institutionalised, frozen, immobilised, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others.

Bess: But are both sides in the relation victims of it?

Foucault: Oh not at all! It would be pushing it a bit too far to say that those who exercise power are victims. In a sense, it's true that they can get caught in the trap, within their own exercise of power — but they're not as much the victims as the others. Try for yourself. . . .you'll see. [laughs]

Bess: So are you aligned with the position of the Marxists?

Foucault: I don't know. You see, I'm not sure I know what Marxism really is — and I don't think it exists, as something abstract. The bad luck or the good luck of Marx is that his doctrine has regularly been adopted by political organisations, and it is after all the only theory whose existence has always been bound up with socio-political organisations that were extraordinarily strong, extraordinarily volatile — even to the point of becoming an apparatus of state.

So, when you mention Marxism, I ask you which one you mean — the one that is taught in the German Democratic Republic (Marxism-Leninism); the vague, disheveled, and bastard concepts used by someone like Georges Marchais; or the body of doctrine which serves as a point of reference for certain English historians? In other words, I don't know what Marxism is. I try to struggle with the objects of my own analysis, and when it so happens that I use a concept that is also used by Marx, or by Marxists — a useful concept, a passable concept — well, that's all the same to me. I've always refused to consider an alleged conformity or non-conformity with Marxism as a deciding factor for accepting or repudiating what I say. I couldn't care less. [...]

Bess: Do you have any ideas about a system of power, for ordering this mass of human beings on the planet — a system of governance that would not become a repressive form of power?

Foucault: A program of power can take three forms. On the one hand: how to exercise power as effectively as possible (in essence, how to reinforce it)? Or, on the other hand, the inverse position: how to overturn power, what points to attack so as to undermine a given crystallisation of power? And finally, the middle position: How to go about limiting the relations of power as embodied and developed in a particular society?

Well, the first position doesn't interest me: making a program of power so as to exercise it all the more. The second position is interesting, but it strikes me that it should be considered essentially with an eye to its concrete objectives, the struggles one wishes to undertake. And that implies precisely that one should not make of it an *a priori* theory.

As for the middle positions — Which are the acceptable conditions of power? — I say that these acceptable conditions for the exercise of power cannot be defined *a priori*. They are never anything but the result of relations of force within a given society. In such a situation, it happens that a certain disequilibrium in the relations of power is in effect tolerated by its victims, those who are in the more unfavourable position for a period of time. This is by no means to say that such a situation is acceptable. They become aware of it right away, and so — after a few days, years, centuries — people always end up resisting, and that old

compromise no longer works. That's all. But you can't provide a definitive formula for the optimal exercise of power.

Bess: You mean that something freezes or congeals in the relations between people, and this becomes, after a certain time, intolerable?

Foucault: Yes, although it sometimes happens right away. The relations of power. as they exist in a given society, are never anything but the crystallisation of a relation of force. And there is no reason why these crystallisations of relations of force should be formulated as an ideal theory for relations of power.

God knows I'm not a structuralist or a linguist or any of that, but you see, it's a bit as if a grammarian wanted to say, "Well, here is how the language should be spoken, here is how English or French should be spoken." But no! One can describe how a language is spoken at a given moment, one can say what is comprehensible and what is unacceptable, incomprehensible. And that's all one can say. But this doesn't imply, on the other hand, that this kind of work on language will not allow for innovations.

Bess: It's a position that refuses to speak in positive terms, except for the present moment.

Foucault: Starting from the moment when one conceives of power as an ensemble of relations of force, there cannot be any programmatic definition of an optimum state of forces — unless of course one takes sides, saying "I want the white, Aryan, pure race to take power and to exercise it," or else, "I want the proletariat to exercise power and I want it to do so in a total fashion." At that moment, yes, it's been given: a program for the construction of power.

Bess: Is it intrinsic to the existence of human beings that their organisation will result in a repressive form of power?

Foucault: Oh yes. Of course. As soon as there are people who find themselves in a position (within the system of power relations) where they can act upon other people, and determine the life, the behaviour, of other people — well, the life of those other people will not be very free. As a result, depending on the threshold of tolerance, depending on a whole lot of variables, the situation will be more or less accepted, but it will never be totally accepted. There will always be those who rebel, who resist.

Bess: Let me give a different example. If a child wanted to scribble on the walls of a house, would it be repressive to prevent him or her from doing so? At what point does one say, "That's enough!"?

Foucault: [...] If I accepted the picture of power that is frequently adopted — namely, that it's something horrible and repressive for the individual — it's clear that preventing a child from scribbling on the walls would be an unbearable tyranny. But that's not it: I say that power is a relation. A relation in which one guides the behaviour of others. And there's no reason why this manner of guiding the behaviour of others should not ultimately have results which are positive, valuable, interesting, and so on. If I had a kid, I assure you he would not write on the walls — or if he did, it would be against my will. The very idea!

Bess: It's problematic. . .something one has to question continually.

Foucault: Yes, yes! That's exactly it! An exercise of power should never be something self-evident. It's not because you're a father that you have the right to slap your child. Often even by not punishing him, that too is a certain way of shaping his behaviour. This is a domain of very complex relations, which demand infinite reflection. When one thinks of the care with which semiotic systems have been analysed in our society, so as to uncover their signifying value [*valeur signifiante*], there has been a relative neglect of the systems for exercising power. Not enough attention has been given to that complex ensemble of connections.

Bess: Your position continually escapes theorisation. It's something that has to be remade again and again.

Foucault: It's a theoretical practice, if you will. It's not a theory, but rather a way of theorising practice. [. ..] Sometimes, because my position has not been made clear enough, people think I'm a sort of radical anarchist who has an absolute hatred of power. No! What I am trying to do is to approach this extremely important and tangled phenomenon in our society, the exercise of power, with the most reflective, and I would say prudent attitude. Prudent in my analysis, in the moral and theoretical postulates I use: I try to figure out what's at stake. But to question the relations of power in the most scrupulous and attentive manner possible, looking into all the domains of its exercise, that's not the same thing as constructing a mythology of power as the beast of the apocalypse.

Bess: Are there positive themes in your concept of what is good? In practice, what are the moral elements on which you base your actions toward others?

Foucault: I've already told you: refusal, curiosity, innovation.

Bess: But aren't these all rather negative in content?

Foucault: The only ethics you can have, with regard to the exercise of power, is the freedom of others. I don't tell people, "Make love in this way, have children, go to work."

Bess: I have to admit, I find myself a bit lost, without points of orientation, in your world — because there's too much openness.

Foucault: Listen, listen. . . How difficult it is! I'm not a prophet; I'm not an organiser; I don't want to tell people what they should do. I'm not going to tell them, "This is good for you, this is bad for you!"

I try to analyse a real situation in its various complexities, with the goal of allowing refusal, and curiosity, and innovation.

Bess: And as regards your own personal life, that's something different. . .

Foucault: But that's nobody's business!

I think that at the heart of all this, there's a misunderstanding about the function of philosophy, of the intellectual, of knowledge in general: and that is, that it's up to them to tell us what is good.

Well, no! No, no, no! That's not their role. They already have far too much of a tendency to play that role, as it is. For two thousand years they've been telling us what is good, with the catastrophic consequences that this has implied.

There's a terrible game here, a game which conceals a trap, in which the intellectuals tend to say what is good, and people ask nothing better than to be told what is good — and it would be better if they started yelling, "How bad it is!

Good, well, let's change the game. Let's say that the intellectuals will no longer have the role of saying what is good. Then it will be up to people themselves, basing their judgment on the various analyses of reality that are offered to them, to work or to behave spontaneously, so that they can define for themselves what is good for them.

What is good, is something that comes through innovation. The good does not exist, like that, in an atemporal sky, with people who would be like the Astrologers of the Good, whose job is to determine what is the favourable nature of the stars. The good is defined by us, it is practiced, it is invented. And this is a collective work.

Is it clearer, now?