Michel Foucault: Educational Philosopher?

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Introduction

There are several ways to discuss how the work of Michel Foucault has been used in educational philosophy and theory. The most common way is to retrace references, to recall or reconstruct philosophical debates, and to evaluate his most enduring influence. There is no reason not to take this route and to start with a general overview of how Foucault's work has played, and continues to play a role, in philosophy of education. But there is a good reason to add another layer to such an overview. This additional layer of influence is not about clear-cut references, and is to be located at the level of a philosophical ethos rather than at the level of systems of thought and conceptual apparatuses. This influence is less mediated by debate, argument, and position, than by experience, concern, and style. Adding this layer, arguably, does better justice to how Foucault himself thought about philosophical work. In addition, then, this layer allows us to give Foucault a voice in how to think about philosophy, education, and the relationship between them.

Foucault's Influence

It is not possible to present a complete overview of all educational research inspired by or based upon Foucault. To have an overall sense of the broad influence of his work, a short overview might suffice (see, for example, Simons and Masschelein 2007). Early on, Foucault's genealogies, and related concepts such as normalization and disciplinary power, played a major role in critical histories of education: the

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history of the modern school and classroom, the normalizing role of the teacher, and the power-effects of the educational sciences (e.g., Pongratz 1989; Ball 1990; Hunter 1994; Popkewitz 1998; Depaepe 1998). During the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the influence of Foucault can be situated on a continuum between two poles, ranging from theoretical and conceptual research to analytical and empirical studies in education. This overview is limited to the Anglophone context predominantly, and it is important to consider that this influence was partly shaped by the availability of his works in English.

In philosophy of education, the work of Foucault was introduced to question, for instance, the use and underpinnings of key concepts such as autonomy and liberal education (Marshall 1996). More generally, Foucault has been positioned as a key representative of postmodernism and poststructuralism, and his work has played a major role in debates on epistemological and ethical relativism, and in criticisms of the modern conception of the subject underlying educational theory (e.g., Smeyers 1995; Wain 1996; Blake et al. 1998; Biesta 1998). Foucault has also been mobilized in attempts to revitalize the historical materialistic approach in education studies (Olssen 1999), and became a key source of inspiration for the reformulation of the concept of the self (Marshall 2001). But his influence went far beyond that. He also left a clear mark on methodological reflections in educational research, and in sociology of education and educational policy studies in particular (Ball 1994; Popkewitz and Brennan 1997). Finally, Foucault's later work on 'technologies of the self' and 'truth telling' was introduced into the study of ethics in education and in discussions on the role of critique and truth(−telling) in philosophy of education and educational theory (Peters and Besley 2008).

In the study of concrete educational practices, the influence of a Foucauldian approach has been, and remains, very visible. A substantial number of authors make use of his analytical tools (discourse analysis, for instance) or adopt his genealogical analysis in the field of education (to analyze normalizing mechanisms in educational settings, for example). Foucault's lectures on governmentality during his courses at the *Collège de France* in 1977–1978 and 1978–1979 (Foucault 2004a, b; Burchell et al. 1991) have been particularly influential in this regard. One could rightly refer to studies of governmentality as having become a new subdiscipline within the humanities (Dean 1999). The term discipline, however, may not be fully appropriate, as it might mask the huge diversity within these studies, in terms of both research domain and method (Rose 1999). What they have in common, however, is an interest in forms of governmentality, minimally conceived of as the strategies of governing people and governing ourselves. This work on governmentality has also given a new impetus to critical education policy studies while confronting education reforms in the wake of neoliberal and neoconservative policies (see, for example, the edited collection, Peters et al. 2009). The following examples give an idea of the wide range of themes and topics being covered: governmentality, busnopower, and liberal education (Marshall 1995); classroom management (Tavares 1996); entrepreneurship and education (Peters 2000); teacher reflection and teacher identity (Fendler 2003; Zembylas 2003); mobilization, flexibility, and lifelong learning (Edwards 2002); neoliberalism, globalization, and democracy (Olssen

et al. 2004); Europeanization and new forms of power (Masschelein and Simons 2002; Hodgson 2016); the care of the self and confession in a knowledge economy (Drummond 2003; Fejes and Nicoll 2015); as well as several edited volumes (e.g., Baker and Heyning 2004; Pongratz et al. 2004; Ricken and Rieger-Ladich 2004).

Foucault's Concern

Few will doubt that Foucault's influence has been and remains massive. But there are some observations to be made when compiling an overview of the remarkable impact of his work. First, the extent to which Foucault is promoted as a master-thinker in the field of educational research correlates with the 'risk' of creating a growing group of followers, if not a school of Foucault scholars. This risk has, arguably, become a reality, for it is striking to note that many usages of Foucault are, in one way or another, about isolating his method, approach, or conceptual apparatus and applying it to practices in the field of education not previously studied. An example of this is the number of studies that makes use of 'disciplinary power' as an analytical concept to reveal mechanisms of power in the most diverse practices. The widespread use of discourse analysis as a method is another example. The assumption is that Foucault's ideas, approaches, or concepts can be disconnected from the, often very specific, genealogical studies from which they emerged, and that they can be used without considering the research attitude, disposition, or ethos (Karskens 1986). This is not about arguing that many studies are mere copies of the original and that very few take our thinking any further. The relevance of these studies is not in question. There is reason to doubt, however, whether it is at the level of applying conceptual and methodological apparatus and tools that the full relevance of Foucault's work is located.

The second observation to be made is that, although Foucault became a key reference figure, this was not without strong criticism (see, for example, Flynn 1994). Historians (of education) often criticized his work for not being the work of a true historian and, for instance, for making a rather selective use of the archives. Philosophers (of education), for their part, formulated doubts about the relevance of a Foucauldian contribution to theoretical debates about, for instance, the human subject, freedom, and power. His work was considered to be too historical or empirically oriented, and too implicit in its philosophical stance to actually contribute to ongoing philosophical conversations. This kind of criticism was often about the difficulty of giving Foucault and his work a proper place. In one way or another, the work of Foucault provoked strong reactions and did not meet the expectations of the established research disciplines. Despite the temptation to blame the disciplinary gatekeepers for having the wrong expectations, it is perhaps more useful to ask what motivated Foucault's work and made him transgress disciplinary boundaries. This again leads to the question of what Foucault's concern actually was. The third observation here offers the beginning of an answer to this question.

Foucault was one of the protagonists in the modernism-postmodernism debate, as it was staged by Habermas, which also had clear echoes in philosophy of education. In his statements on modernity as being an "unfinished project", Habermas (1985) strongly opposed Foucault's ideas about the end of modernism and the death of the subject. He labeled Foucault "crypto-normative" in his ambition to criticize power-knowledge regimes without making explicit the criteria or norms for his critique. For Habermas, such a position not only leads to intellectual relativism but also is politically dangerous. Foucault was categorized as one of the French "young conservatives" who had given up belief in reason and, therefore, the Enlightenment. In his typical style, Foucault questioned this framing of his work in the famous appeal to refuse the "blackmail of the Enlightenment," that "you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism […] or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality" (Foucault 2007: 110). He commented on several occasions on Kant's essay *What Is Enlightenment?*, not to radically question the project of Enlightenment and modernity, but to distinguish between the critical project to install reason as the supreme court of history on the one hand, and modernity as a concern with one's present on the other hand:

> No philosopher can go without examining his own participation in this *us* precisely it is this *us* which is becoming the object of the philosopher's own reflection. All this, philosophy as the problematization of an actuality and the philosopher's questioning of this actuality to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to position himself, may very well characterize philosophy as a discourse of and about modernity. (Foucault 2007: 85)

Foucault's main philosophical concern was the modern act of questioning one's actuality, including our actuality that proclaims reason to be the ultimate guide to emancipation and progress. To get a clearer picture of Foucault's relevance for philosophy of education, it is worth exploring this concern in more detail.[1]

Foucault's Truth

Foucault is exceptionally clear about where to situate his own work:

> It seems to me that the philosophical choice with which we are confronted at present is this: we can opt for a critical philosophy which will present itself as an analytic philosophy of truth in general, or we can opt for a form of critical thought which will be an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the actuality. It is this form of philosophy that, from Hegel to the Frankfurt School, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, has founded the form of reflection within which I have attempted to work. (Foucault 2007: 95)

Instead of being engaged in intellectual work that seeks to discover or establish the grounds, rules, or procedures for knowledge and truth, he is concerned with what counts as truth in our actuality to which he himself belongs, and with finding out what made this count as truth. In later studies, which can to a certain extent also be

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[1] The next sections are partly based on: Simons and Masschelein 2014.

read as an ontology of his own work, Foucault traced back this project of a critical philosophy to Greek and Roman antiquity. In the 1981–1982 courses at the *College de France*, under the title *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Foucault 2001), Foucault studies ancient practices of truth-telling and retraces two traditions in philosophy. The leading questions in this series of courses were: How can people have access to the truth? How can people become truth-tellers? What is the price of having access to the truth? Foucault distinguishes two traditions that each answers this set of questions in its own particular way.

The first tradition, which emerged in Greek antiquity and is dominant today, claims that it is knowledge that offers access to the truth. The point of departure is that in order to have true knowledge, specific (internal and external) conditions related to the act of knowing and the position of the knower have to be taken into account. Aristotle – "the philosopher" – represents for Foucault the incarnation of this tradition (Foucault 2001:18). Probably little clarification is needed to see how this tradition culminated in modern scientific research that relies for the discovery or production of true knowledge on the rigorous use of methods that open up a world of objects to be known and place someone in the position of a disinterested researcher. Philosophical enquiry in this tradition mainly tackles epistemological issues, or aims to answer questions about the foundations or limits of knowledge. Perhaps due to our familiarity with this tradition and its institutionalization in academic and university life, we have lost sight of the fact that it is but one, very particular, way of having access to the truth.

Foucault refers to a less common tradition that claims that access to the truth requires a transformation of the self. This second tradition, which could be called the existential-ethical, spiritual, or ascetic tradition, assumes there is no access to the truth without transforming one's mode of being. Instead of postulating the subject as an underlying, stable entity that functions as the source or foundation of knowledge, this tradition is oriented toward exercises in thought and experience through which a particular relation of the self to the self, others, and the world – as a specifically shaped form of subjectivity – can be questioned, challenged, and shaped. This is linked to the idea that philosophy is, in the first instance, about a way of living and about the aspiration to live a true life. It is not about developing a system of knowledge or a set of rules that exists externally to the philosopher and can be passed to others. Rather, one becomes a 'touchstone' for others in their search for a true life.

In both traditions one has to meet certain conditions and to pay a price for having access to the truth, but the conditions and prices differ: in the first, one must fulfill conditions relating to knowledge; in the second, one undergoes a transformation of the self. On the basis of this distinction, it makes sense, first, to situate Foucault's own intellectual work within the existential-ethical tradition, and second, to acknowledge that the importance of self-transformation in philosophy allows us to think in a very particular way about philosophy of education: it becomes philosophy as education. Here, a possible influence of Foucault can be seen and might be made possible.

Foucault's Philosophy

Foucault states that his studies and books work as experiences, and that in his study-ing and writing he is transforming himself: "What I think is never quite the same […] for me my books are experiences […] And experience is something that one comes out of transformed" (Foucault 2000: 239). The term experience is related to practices of putting oneself and one's thinking to the test: "[…] I am an experi-menter and not a theorist. I call a theorist someone who constructs a general system, either deductive or analytical, and applies it to different fields in a uniform way. That isn't my case. I'm an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before" (Foucault 2000: 240). While the theorist – a figure clearly associated with the first tradition – puts an out-side reality to the test of her theory, thereby immunizing herself, the experimenter always puts her own thinking, and so her very mode of existence, to the test. Notice that experience for Foucault does not refer to what someone has (as in "I have expe-rience of…" or "This experience has enriched me"), but rather to what actually disrupts or destroys the 'I' and 'me': "[…] experience is trying to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable,' to that which can't be lived through. […] experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself. […] This is a project of desubjectiva-tion. […] The idea of a limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself" (Foucault 2000: 241–242).

Foucault is talking about very specific things; for instance, our common under-standing of madness in terms of normality and abnormality, and our tendency to problematize sexuality in moral terms. He does not place himself outside this com-mon understanding and the familiar practices in order to judge those who are part of it. His point of departure is exactly those understandings and practices from which he himself cannot escape, that make his own thinking possible, and that are actually part of his subjectivity. What is at stake is "to construct myself and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it trans-formed," and this means, he goes on, "that at the end of the book we would establish new relationships with the subject at issue; the I who wrote the book and those who have read it would have a different relationship with madness, with its contempo-rary status, and its history in the modern world" (Foucault 2000: 244). Being an experimenter and not a theorist, Foucault regards his books as books of experience and not as truth books or books of demonstration. Truth books aim to pass true knowledge to the readers by way of demonstration. They are focused on argumenta-tion and proof, and they address readers as an audience that has to be convinced. In describing experience books, however, Foucault makes the following remark: "I don't accept the word 'teaching' […], my books don't exactly have that value [method, demonstration, lessons]. They are more like invitations or public gestures" (Foucault 2000: 245). In view of this invitation and gesture, readers are not put in a position of ignorance, but rather they are invited to 'share' an experience. Foucault

sees his books working at the existential-ethical level, then, and not at the level of knowledge. This short depiction of Foucault's understanding of his own work brings several important aspects to the foreground.

First, what guides Foucault's work is a concern for the present. The aim is not to reveal the truth about what is going on and to demonstrate what is right or wrong, but instead to question the truths we live by and take for granted today. Foucault described this concern for the present as an (historical, critical) "ontology of the present" or an "ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 2007: 95 and 113). This kind of ontology starts from the things that *we* take for granted (or regard today as fundamental or ontological), and asks how *we* came to see these things as fundamental; which *we*, or which subject, came to see these things (e.g., the prison, the hospital, sexuality) as evident or essential. The present, however, is not merely what we see in front of us, nor is it what shows itself when looking through temporal or historical lenses. Rather, Foucault's present presents itself when we are attentive to or "present in the present" (Foucault 2007, p.86). It appears in a kind of "sagittal relationship", and this requires an effort. The present refers to that what is 'actual' or 'actualized' today, to things that matter. The notion of curiosity captures very well this attitude of care toward the present (Rajchman 1991: 141). Curiosity, as Foucault explains, is not to be situated at the level of knowledge and the ongoing assimilation of what we ought to know:

> To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes 'concern'; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential (Foucault 1997: 325).

The term curiosity, then, relates to care. Care is derived from the Latin word *cura* that provides the root of 'curiosity' and the French *curiosité* (Foucault 1980: 108). An attitude of care encompasses a concentrated, accentuated gaze on what is happening today, what is happening to us in the world, and a willingness to become a stranger in the familiar present; that is, to regard who we are and what we do, and what we regard as our foundations, as no longer self-evident. As such, curiosity combines both distance from and vigilance or attention toward oneself in the present (Gros 2001: 512).

Second, critique for Foucault is first of all an attitude (and even 'akin to virtue'). More specifically, it is a task one takes up (Foucault 2007: 43; Butler 2004; Masschelein 2004). The critical task, according to Foucault, "requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty" (Foucault 2007: 119). Driven by a curiosity for the present, critical philosophy embodies "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault 2007: 118). Intricately related to the ideas of experience and desubjectivation introduced earlier, the critical attitude at stake combines a limit-attitude and an experimental attitude. These attitudes are different from what motivates a foundational critique that judges

the legitimacy of current practices and understandings based on given principles (limiting attitude) or that unmasks particular strategies and tactics by recalling what is given in original experiences (experiential attitude). The limit-attitude is about the act of becoming sensitive to what presents itself as a necessity nowadays in order to explore a possible transgression of its limits. Critical work, then, refers to the work that is done at the limits of ourselves and our present: "[…] It will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think […] it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault 2007: 114). But this limit-attitude should be combined with an experimental attitude, or an attitude that seeks to transform or modify one's mode of being and how one lives the present. It involves an experimental work of the self on the self, and "this work done at the limits of ourselves must […] put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take" (Foucault 2007: 114). This explains why Foucault refers to the critical ontology of the present as a kind of essay. An essay – as the French word *essayer* or 'to try' indicates – is a careful attempt to modify our mode of being in the present. It is a "transforming test of oneself in the play of truth," or an "*askesis*, an exercise of the self, in thought" (Foucault 1984: 15). For Foucault, what is at stake is the challenge to take care of the self and the world. It is not at all a withdrawal from the world, but rather is an attempt to "live the present otherwise" (Foucault 1979: 790).

Foucault's Education

In his later work, Foucault recalls a tradition of philosophy that is primarily concerned with self-transformation, care, and exercise. It is remarkable how he tries to articulate his own philosophical ethos in a similar way. He does not argue that the other tradition – an analytic philosophy of truth – is wrong or mistaken. His concern is not to convince. At most, Foucault argues there is a possible danger in this tradition; it often leads to the installation of tribunals by self-proclaimed judges of truth, progress, reason, etc. who put humanity to the test. Philosophy, for Foucault, starts with the courage of putting oneself to the test, that is, with a deep concern with the present to which one belongs. Herein lies the unique contribution that Foucault makes to philosophy of education, one that is easily overlooked if we remain at the level of concepts, theories, epistemological positions, and methodologies. One could argue that a Foucauldian-inspired philosophy of education can be identified by the priority it gives to the concern or curiosity for education. Education is not approached as a field of application for ideas or concept developed elsewhere; it is not something to pass judgment on. Philosophy of education along Foucauldian lines expresses a relation of care and concern, not primarily a relation of knowledge

and judgment. This concern is not only about unmasking what is self-evident in, or taken as fundamental to, education by others, but also what we in our contemporary reality – to which the philosopher himself belongs – take for granted as the onto-logical 'make-up' of education. But there is more to a Foucauldian-inspired philosophy of education than this.

Foucault frequently writes about processes of self-transformation and (de)subjectivation, but he mainly uses an ethical, and partly political, vocabulary. This is remarkable because, traditionally, these or similar processes are described in educational or pedagogical terms. To the extent that philosophy is an act of self-transformation in thought, one could easily consider this to be an educational process and even argue that philosophy is a particular mode of (self-)education: philosophy as education (Simons and Masschelein 2014). Foucault probably has good reason to draw on ethical and political vocabularies to frame these processes of change. Ethics and politics, in one way or another, approach the issue of change with a particular aim or goal in mind that gives the change processes their orientation and urgency: "you *must* change your life" or "we *have to* change our lives" (see also Sloterdijk 2014). But ethical and political devices such as these assume, and for that reason also forget, that what comes first is the ability to change one's life: "I *can* change my life." This assumption is exactly what in (classic) philosophy of education is called the basic assumption or belief of education: human beings can be educated, that is, human beings are born without essence or destiny and thus are able to 'give shape' their own essence or destiny (clearly expressed in the German idea of *Bildung*, and perhaps foremost in the term *Bildsamkeit*; Peukert 1992).

Foucault's studies always seem to circulate around this educational point without really being attentive to it. Or, in other words: while radically questioning essences, Foucault's critical ontologies of the present seem to bring the reader to the point where it becomes possible to think again about 'giving shape' to one's life. Experience books make it possible to relate in a different way to madness, to sexuality, to punishment, etc., and they create a space where the question about living the present otherwise starts to make sense again (Masschelein and Simons 2013). There is, without doubt, a strong tendency to give an urgency and direction to *how* to live the present otherwise by projecting a compelling ethical or political horizon. But this often seeks to mobilize or even tame education – and its potential for change – in the name of particular ethical or political projects. Instead of looking at education as the carefully designed place and time in which the coming generation can 'give shape' to itself, these projects use the transformational force unleashed through education to shape the coming generation into its own image. Foucault himself was, of course, always reluctant to articulate or defend such clear-cut ethical or political projects. And he was criticized for that. His criticism without giving an alternative led Habermas to call him crypto-normative. But what if Foucault's work were approached as being crypto-educational? It could be an interesting exercise of thought in philosophy of education.

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