

Wolfgang DETEL, *Foucault and Classical Antiquity*

Power, Ethics, and Knowledge, translated by David Wigg-Wolf,
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Michel Foucault's engagement with classical antiquity in general and ancient philosophy in particular is rich and varied. As well as the well-known second and third volumes of the *Histoire de la sexualité*, especially worthy of note are his 1981-82 Collège de France lecture course published as *L'Herméneutique du sujet* (Paris, 2001) and his 1983 University of California lectures on *parrhesia* published as *Fearless Speech* (New York, 2001). These works have not yet received the critical attention that they deserve. We can welcome the recent collection of essays *Foucault et la philosophie antique* edited by Frédéric Gros and Carlos Lévy (Paris, 2003), but in the English-speaking world in particular there has been little serious discussion of Foucault and ancient philosophy. Part of the reason for this no doubt reflects the structural peculiarities of English-speaking academia; those who have taken Foucault most seriously as a philosopher are often not in departments of philosophy and often do not have the grounding in the history of ancient philosophy that would enable them to do justice to the task. Specialists in ancient philosophy are less likely to be familiar with Foucault's work as a whole, even if they may have encountered his incursions into ancient thought.

So, Wolfgang Detel's *Foucault and Classical Antiquity* – first published in German under the title *Macht, Moral, Wissen: Foucault und die Klassische Antike* (Frankfurt, 1998) – looks at first glance as if it should be a welcome addition to the existing literature. Detel is a respected scholar of ancient philosophy and so should be ideally suited to offer a serious and detailed analysis of Foucault's engagement with classical antiquity.

But any hope that this is what we shall find in this volume is destroyed by the very first sentence of the book, in which Detel makes clear that his principal concern in this volume is not Foucault's engagement with ancient philosophy but rather moral concerns about sexuality as they are expressed by authors of classical antiquity. By 'classical antiquity', Detel means primarily the fourth century B.C., and so the principal authors that he has in view are Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon. Foucault is of interest to Detel here *only* insofar as Foucault has already examined this principal topic of moral concern with sexuality in classical antiquity. Foucault's discussion of that topic is to be found in the second volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité – L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris, 1984) – and so Detel's interest in Foucault is directed towards this text alone. Detel is especially concerned with correcting what he takes to be errors in Foucault's analysis of ancient sexuality, in order to pave the way for his own account of the subject. While Detel's project is a perfectly reasonable one to undertake, it is something of a disappointment for those – tempted perhaps by the title of the volume, *Foucault and Classical Antiquity* – who may have been hoping for a study primarily concerned with Foucault, and in particular with Foucault's engagement with ancient philosophy. Instead what we get is in effect an extended critical book review of *L'usage des plaisirs*, a book now more than twenty years old.

This is not to say that Detel's critical examination of Foucault's work on ancient sexuality is unwelcome or unnecessary. A scholarly and thorough analysis of Foucault's claims on this topic will no doubt be of use to many people concerned with ancient sexuality. The fact that the *Histoire de la sexualité* has exerted such an influence on so many readers makes a properly critical analysis of its claims by an appropriately qualified scholar all the more necessary, and Detel has ably done just this. But it should be stressed that this is a book that has no primary interest in Foucault's engagement with antiquity at all and it is a book more concerned about ancient sexuality than about Foucault.

The task that Detel sets himself is to correct Foucault's analysis of ancient sexuality according to Foucault's own methodological principles. The first chapter offers a thorough analysis of Foucault's account of the relationship between power and knowledge. This is by way of methodological introduction and does not touch on antiquity at all. The four central chapters examine the ancient texts discussed by Foucault in *L'usage des plaisirs*. In Chapter Two Detel argues that Foucault neglects the role of *eudaimonia* in his accounts of ancient sexual desire. In particular Foucault fails to do justice to Aristotelian ethics. In Chapter Three he suggests that Foucault attributes too much *ethical* significance to ancient dietetics. In Chapter Four Detel becomes even more critical, arguing that Foucault makes a number of quite serious misjudgements in his discussions of ancient pederasty and marital relations. Ancient concerns with an adult male's sexual behaviour had less to do with his authority within the context of a political career (as Foucault claims), and more to do with his status as head of the *oikos*, the household or estate. In Chapter Five Detel completes his critical analysis of Foucault by suggesting that Foucault's account of Plato's theory of *eros* is ultimately unsatisfactory.

The volume concludes with a sixth and final chapter that is about neither Foucault nor ancient sexuality. Instead it is a discussion of the relationship between the concepts of biological sex and social gender, primarily directed against what Detel calls 'post-modern feminism'. Detel's concern is with those authors who deny the validity of a distinction between the biological sexes and focus exclusively on socially constructed gender. His principal target is Judith Butler. As someone concerned with analysing ancient conceptions of gender, Detel's concern is that if the notion of biological sex is dropped altogether then there will be no foundation from which it will be possible to examine socially constructed conceptions of gender from historical periods other than our own. Thus, again, the discussion is shaped by Detel's own research project on ancient sexuality rather than an attempt to understand his stated subject, Michel Foucault. This discussion of post-modern feminism is justified, however, by drawing attention to the fact that some of these authors have indeed been influenced by Foucault's work. But it should be noted that here at least Detel does acknowledge that Foucault does not go down this post-modern route himself.

This final critical chapter on post-modern feminism gives the sense that Detel's real concern here and in the volume as a whole is to tackle what he takes to be the weakness inherent in post-modernism. His interest in 'correcting' Foucault's account of ancient sexuality appears to stem from the thought that

Foucault's own work stands as an important inspiration behind both post-modern feminism and post-modernism in general. Indeed, in the introduction, Foucault is implicitly characterized as a representative of post-modern thought. Detel writes (p. 5): « I would like to see the comments presented here as an example of a rational approach to post-modern thought, that takes its intuitions seriously, but without renouncing exact explication and critical examination » The two unstated assumptions here are that (1) Foucault's work (presumably including *L'usage des plaisirs*) forms an example of post-modern thought, and (2) post-modern thought is in some sense non-rational or irrational and so generally tends to renounce « exact explication and critical examination ».

It is not clear precisely what Detel means by 'post-modern' here. We are offered no definition in an otherwise very detailed and precise study. The nearest we get is in n. 102 on p. 202 : « 'Post-modern' thought is frequently committed to the 'deconstruction of metaphysics' – although without explaining what exactly is understood as the 'metaphysics' of classical authors. » Detel's own discussion of the 'post-modern' suffers from precisely the same weakness. I suspect that he is referring to a certain type of academic work mainly produced in the English-speaking world – sometimes openly accepting the label 'post-modern', sometimes labelled as such by its detractors – that Detel finds deficient on both intellectual and scholarly grounds. I have no desire to defend such work here. But I would want to question Detel's implicit presentation of Foucault as an example of such work. Foucault may well have made some contentious scholarly claims in his work on ancient sexuality. His work may have also influenced some of the post-modern feminists whose work Detel finds questionable. But it is quite a leap from these two claims to the more serious criticism – if only implicit – that Foucault's work as a whole does not embody a rational approach or employ exact explication. While Detel is quite right to draw our attention to what he takes to be some scholarly weaknesses in *L'usage des plaisirs*, these wider implicit assumptions about Foucault's work are wholly unjustified. At the very least they are not openly argued for.

In sum, this volume will be of use to those who are interested in ancient conceptions of sexuality and to those who want to gather opinions about the standard of Foucault's own classical scholarship. But, despite the title, this is not a wider survey of Foucault's engagement with either classical antiquity or ancient philosophy. Much of the material that is presented here might have been more appropriate as a series of tangents in a volume explicitly dealing with ancient sexuality.

John SELLARS