

## REVIEW

**Johanna Oksala 2005.** *Foucault on Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Given the ways in which the work of Michel Foucault has been appropriated by the social sciences and humanities, it is easy to neglect his philosophical acumen and the extent to which his critical positioning within a history of philosophical discourse shaped his investigations. Johanna Oksala's *Foucault on Freedom* should go a long way toward curing that forgetfulness. Treating Foucault's critiques and re-inflexions of phenomenological philosophy, and his approaches to the body/subject, and ethics, Oksala's inquiry into Foucault as philosopher is meticulous and profound. And, in addition to being a well-crafted work of explication, her book makes some original critical contributions to feminist theory in a Foucault-inspired section on "female freedom."

Yet, while there are many useful insights on Foucault's positions in the philosophical trajectory running from Immanuel Kant through phenomenological philosophy, Oksala's *Foucault on Freedom* contains a jarring disjuncture. The book is *about* Foucault - locating his positions well within standard philosophical discourse - but its style is very unFoucauldian. While it is intensely focused on *what* Foucault wrote, it hardly addresses *how* he wrote. Phrases such as "Foucault's method of studying the historical a priori" imply that Foucault as a

writer is more or less cancelled out. But, as many have shown, much of what Foucault has contributed to a critical perspective on modern life is articulated through irony and with a variety of other tropes that render the common sense of many knowledge disciplines bizarre. It is hard to read Foucault without laughing, and nothing in *Foucault on Freedom* captures the basis of that laughter.

Foucault's "method," which is deployed in rhetorical figures as much as it is in traditional argumentation, cannot be well captured in standard philosophical discourse. Thus to speak in such abstractions as "Foucault's explicit critique of phenomenology" is to flatten his concise yet original way of doing critique (which, as he noted, means to cut). When, for example, Foucault wants to fault a phenomenological approach to the value of statements (in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), he says something to the effect that to gauge the value of statement is not to look for a secret content. Moreover, on more than one occasion, he remarked that the secret is that there is no secret. With his various plays on the trope of secrecy, Foucault implied that a hermeneutics of suspicion, which is constitutive of phenomenological interpretation, fails to capture the relationship of discourse to aspects of power and authority. Effectively, with frequent reference to philosophy's preoccupation with secrecy, Foucault makes evident the extent to which much of philosophical discourse is depoliticizing. Ironically, by focusing on what is secret, it gives power a place to hide.

Nevertheless, Oksala's approach to Foucault's philosophy is consistently insightful and comprehensive. Importantly, if one heeds the argumentative dimensions of her text, one finds effective demonstrations - against other interpretations - of the extent to which Foucault's commitment to a version of freedom is continually present from the early to the late Foucault. Finally, and significantly, Oksala is right on the mark in her closing discussion, where she identifies Foucault's continual affirmation of the role of contingency. Because of this insight, which shapes much of the book's discussion, *Foucault on Freedom* is a valuable guide to the philosophical Foucault.