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## Foucault, Levinas and the Ethical Embodied Subject

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## Summary of the Dissertation

Lok Wing –Kai, Peter

This dissertation attempts to interrogate whether the postmodern anti-essentialist approach to the body can truly recognize the ethical value of the body. For the postmodernists, the value of the human body has long been repressed by Cartesian rationalism and dualism that privileges the mind over the body. Dualism is a form of reductionism that reduces either the mind to the body or the body to the mind. It not only fails to recognize an interaction between mind and body, but also privileges one side at the expense of the other. For instance, rationalism is a dualist reductionism since it always explains the body and matter in terms of mind or reason. Thus, dualism not only refers to a split or separation between mind and body, but also refers to a reductive relation between mind and body.

Furthermore, the postmodernists argue that the essentialist and dualist understanding of the body is a form of manipulation that reduces the body to a manipulated object. Inspired by a social constructivist approach to the body, the postmodernists argue that the body does not have any pre-given or transcendent essence; rather the body is simply a socially and culturally constructed product. Many influential contemporary feminists or queer theorists, such as Monique Wittig, Judith Butler or Elizabeth Grosz, have adopted such a social constructivist approach to “deconstruct” various kinds of essentialist understandings of the body. They stress that giving the gendered body an “essence” or “ontological nature” is to impose power towards those who have an alternative bodily and sexual identity distinct from the dominant sexual culture.

For the postmodern constructivists, any ontological understandings of body, which give the body a pre-given nature, are unethical because they mask the fact that the body is simply a socially constructed body and negate the singularity of body. Thus, the aim of body politics, for some postmodernists such as Butler, is to “deconstruct” different ontological understandings of the body, then “reconstruct” the alternative symbolic style for the body. The body is simply a style and sign, not a being: the body has no ontological status. Simply, the social constructivists’ political strategy is an aesthetic subversion of repressive gender culture through symbolically styling one’s body.

But this dissertation will question that is stylization of one’s bodily identity an unconditional act? In fact, one’s subversive bodily identity is not necessarily ethical

that might generate violent act towards the other. Thus we should think of how stylization of one's bodily identity can yield a subversive, responsible and ethical bodily act. But most social constructivists fail to take into account an ethics of bodily subversion.

Furthermore, some social constructivists simply regard stylization of body as a construction of the cultural meaning of the body: the body is reduced to cultural sign. While I agree that changing the symbolic dimension of one's body can subvert some repressive cultural boundaries, I do not agree that only a transformation of the cultural meaning of the body can subvert repressive boundaries. Rather I believe that the body per se, which includes one's bodily gesture, suffering face and bodily sensation, can also yield a subversive or even ethical meaning.

Of course, not all social constructivists ignore the subversive element of one's bodily sensation. In fact, some social constructivists do treat the bodily pleasure as a "force" or "strategy" to subvert the social norms so as to achieve one's autonomy. While I agree that some social constructivists do recognize the subversive meaning of the pleasure, they do not pay enough attention to the ethical meaning of pain and suffering, which can cultivate a sense of responsibility for the subject.

This dissertation will pose a challenge to the social constructivists that if "liberation of pleasure" is the telos of body politics, this might cultivate a pleasure-driven egoist subject who is indifferent to the suffering of others. Moreover, this dissertation will further question: how the social constructivists can ensure that their pleasure-seeking subjects can take care of the other? Is bodily transformation an unconditional transformation? Can stylization of the body be ethical? In addition to pleasure, can other bodily sensations become a subversive and ethical force to subvert repressive boundaries?

Thus, in response to the social constructivists' problems, this dissertation will focus on Foucault and Levinas' notion of an ethical embodied subject. In fact, Foucault's theory of body deeply inspires contemporary body politics. Foucault inspires the social constructivists' claim that one's body is socially constructed by culture, and stylization of self is the only way to achieve a freedom of life. However, stylization of the body, for Foucault, is not an unconditional act, as the social constructivists believe; rather it aims at cultivating a unique and autonomous ethical subject that not only takes care of oneself but also takes care of the other. Of course, as this dissertation will show that Foucault's approach to the embodied subject, which

merely treats the subject as a “pleasure-driven subject,” cannot limit one’s egoism in one’s bodily stylization.

Thus, in response to the second problem, this dissertation will argue that Levinas’ ethical embodied subject can provide a solution to Foucault’s problem. For Levinas, the subject cannot become an ethical subject without an irresistible intervention by the other because only the other can limit one’s egoist mentality. Furthermore, Levinas argues that it is the sense of suffering, not the sense of pleasure, that makes one ethical: one’s sense of responsibility towards the other can only be aroused through one’s empathetic bodily relationship with another fragile body. Thus, this dissertation will argue that Levinas’ ethical embodied subject can transform Foucault and social constructivists’ subject into a mourning subject, a truly ethical subject.

Of course, this does not mean that Foucault’s ethical embodied makes no contribution to the making of an ethical embodied subject after the critique of Cartesian dualism. Thus, this dissertation will compare the strength and weakness of Foucault and Levinas’ ethical embodied subjectivity to see how they can complement each other so that a more comprehensive notion of ethical embodied subject is formulated.

In this dissertation, I shall discuss the later Foucault’s writings *History of Sexuality II* and *Hermeneutics of the Subject* and the later Levinas’ writing *Otherwise than Being*, which have given us a constructive and in-depth approach to the ethical embodied subject. In chapter one, I shall outline the theoretical and ethical problems of contemporary postmodern constructivists’ approach to the body. Then I shall show the relevance of Foucault and Levinas’ notion of the ethical embodied subject with respect to the contemporary philosophical and cultural discussions on body and ethics. In particular, I shall argue why is Foucault and Levinas’ notion of ethical embodied subject more relevant than Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Taylor’s notion of embodied subject in response to the ethical problems of contemporary body politics.

In chapter two, I shall outline the late Foucault’s notion of ethical embodied subject. Although Foucault is commonly regarded as an anti-moral social constructivist, this chapter will argue that inspired by a flexible form of ancient Greek embodied ethics, the later Foucault fully affirms one’s ethical formation through stylizing one’s bodily life that can make one take care of the other through taking caring of oneself. In addition, while Foucault is commonly regarded as a genealogist

who views all discourses of truth as a repressive discourse, this chapter will argue that the later Foucault fully affirms an embodied truth that stems from the ancient Greek embodied philosophy. In other words, Foucault does not reject all discourses of morality and truth; rather what he rejects is a form of morality and truth that negates the body. Finally, this chapter will argue that Foucault does not treat stylization of self as simply a symbolic subversion. Rather, he believes that one's bodily stylization not only transgresses some repressive boundaries but also forms an ethical embodied life that respects the self and the other's life.

In chapter three, I will explore Levinas' notion of ethical embodied subject. This chapter will argue that while Levinas criticizes rationalism and essentialism, his anti-essentialism and anti-rationalism do not eliminate an ethical ground for defending the dignity of human beings. Levinas reconstructs a new ethical embodied subject for whom sensation, not consciousness, is a primordial way to connect with the other. Since the ethical embodied subject can directly sense the suffering of the other, this can enable the subject to build up an ethical relationship with the other.

However, the subject, for Levinas, is not ethical in itself. The subject can become ethical only through the intervention of the other. It is not the subject's will that motivates the subject to take any ethical actions towards the other; rather it is the infinite other that motivates the subject to take an ethical action. Thus, Levinas argues that ethics is also about an intersubjective embodied relationship where the subject and other's bodies are unconditionally exposed for each other. And it is this risky exposure of bodily life that makes possible an ethical embodied subject and diverts the subject from a self-centered life to an other-centered life. Thus, for Levinas, the other, the physical body and bodily sensation are the essential conditions for building up a truly ethical subjectivity.

In chapter four, I shall make a comparison of Foucault and Levinas' ethical embodied subject. This chapter will argue that although Foucault and Levinas have different directions and understandings of being ethical, both of them assert the importance of the body as the essential condition to rebuild an ethical subjectivity after the critique of rationalism; both of them rediscover the ethical potentiality of the body, which they think is repressed by Western rationalism; and both of them agree that ethics is about a fundamental relationship between the subject and the other. I shall argue that their notion of ethical embodied subject can show us the ethical value of the body after modernity.

Of course, Foucault and Levinas understand one's ethical formation in different ways. For Foucault, ethical subjectivity can be attained without the intervention of the other, whereas for Levinas, the intervention of the other is the necessary condition in terms of making an ethical subjectivity. Furthermore, while Foucault asserts the importance of managing one's excessive desire and pleasure in one's ethical formation, Levinas emphasizes the importance of the subversive nature of one's pain and suffering in one's formation. Finally, while Foucault views the ethical language as an "ethical vehicle" of virtuous cultivation; Levinas regards the ethical language as an "ethical urge" of the other. At the end of this chapter, I shall show how Foucault and Levinas' ethical embodied subject can complement for each other so as to show us a comprehensive notion of the ethical embodied subject.

In chapter five, the conclusion, while this dissertation shows that both Foucault and Levinas' ethical embodied subject can modify some of the social constructivists' problematic approach to the body and body politics, I argue that it is Levinas' ethics of the body, not Foucault's ethics of body, that can offer contemporary body politics a more solid ethical ground, especially for an ethical formation of the subversive subject. In particular, this chapter will show the importance of the Levinasian approach to the bodily pain and suffering in terms of one's ethical formation.