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2011

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citation for published version (APA)

Lok Wing-Kai, P. (2011). *Foucault, Levinas and the Ethical Embodied Subject*.

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Chapter Five. Conclusion: Searching for an Ethical Ground for Body Politics;

Foucault and Levinas' Inspiration

This thesis has argued that Foucault and Levinas view the subject as an ethical embodied subject in which the body is a necessary condition for being ethical. Either training one's body (Foucault) or sensing the other's bodily suffering (Levinas) makes possible an ethical subject who can take responsibility for the other. And ethics, for them, is no longer a disembodied law or rule that simply concerns the conformity of the subject to the social norm; rather it is an embodied ethics that primarily concerns a compassionate and sensual relationship between subject and other. Unless we recognize the importance of the body or bodily sensation, we can never release the ethical potentiality of the body or bodily sensation.

Furthermore, we have seen the main differences between Foucault and Levinas to be as follows. Whereas Foucault believes that "care of the self" (treating oneself properly/righteously) must lead to "care of the other" (treating the other properly/righteously), Levinas believes that "care of the other" is the only way to make the subject ethical and righteous. Foucault's subject is an aesthetic subject who views taking care of one's bodily life and stylization of self as the important practice of being ethical; Levinas' subject is a religious subject who views sacrificing one's own bodily life

for the other as the only way of being ethical. That is to say, Foucault's ethical subject is a self-driven ethical subject, whereas Levinas' subject is an other-driven ethical subject.

Foucault and Levinas view the notion of the other differently. For Foucault, the other has a symmetrical relationship with the subject, whereas for Levinas, the other is a transcendent other who has an asymmetrical relationship with the subject. Their different interpretations of the status of the other lead to different approaches to ethics and ethical subjectivity. In addition, while Foucault and Levinas agree that one's bodily sensation can subvert various kinds of social or psychological boundaries, they privilege different modes of sensation. For Foucault, bodily pleasure can serve to transgress social boundaries; whereas Levinas affirms bodily pain and suffering that can subvert the subject's egoist mentality.

Finally, while Foucault and Levinas affirm the constructive and linguistic nature of the body, their approaches to the body do not simply reduce the body to "text" that negates the natural power of the body or reduce the subject to a passive culturally constructed subject. Instead, Levinas shows us how the body per se can yield a subversive and ethical meaning, and Foucault shows us how the subject can become an active ethical subject through speaking truthfully to the authority.

As was mentioned in chapter one, this study of Foucault and Levinas' ethical

embodied subject aims to see how their comprehensive notions of embodiment can respond to some ethical problems in contemporary body politics. In the following, I shall show how Foucault and Levinas' ethics of body can inspire and modify contemporary body politics so as to offer us a more solid ethical ground on which to fight against various kinds of bodily repression.

As chapter one shows, most social constructivists believe that subverting all social laws in an endless bodily mutation, subversion or deconstruction is the only way to defend one's bodily freedom. They adopt a subversive aesthetic strategy to subvert all dominant understandings of gender and bodily identities. As Shapiro rightly says, the driving force of body politics, a politics of the life world, "is an *aesthetic* one. The goal is not a moral vision of the right social order but that of the endless quest for *creative destruction and construction*—to disrupt and transgress the given forms of our identity.... Freedom is the continuing act of subverting this reified world. Not surprisingly, sexual 'normalization' is the central target for this life politics."¹ Thus, most social constructivists treasure an alternative bodily identity that can challenge the supposed naturalness of heterosexuality and actualize the uniqueness of the embodied subject.

However, the social constructionists' body theories do not explicitly address the

¹ Svi Shapiro, "Introduction: The Life-World, Body Movements and New Forms of Emancipatory Politics," p. 10.

following question: Why must such a stylish identity be “better,” “ethical” or “less repressive” than the less-stylish one? Is subversion good enough for us to construct a “less-repressive” identity? We need to ask: Is bodily transformation an unconditional transformation? Does stylization of the body have ethics? Can stylization of body fully actualize the meaning of the body? Can the natural body per se generate a subversive meaning or power? How can the subversive subject become a responsible and ethical subject? In this final chapter, I shall show how both Foucault and Levinas’ approach to the ethical embodied subject can help to answer the above questions.

At first glance, Foucault’s anti-essentialist approach to the body shares with social constructivists the motif that the body is the “cultural constructed body,” without any pre-given essence and nature. His stylization of self also shares with most social constructivists the argument that only if we can actualize the aesthetic and stylish value of body can we achieve a freedom of life that does not conform to a universal dominant rule or norm. For Foucault and the social constructivists, one can achieve one’s stylish bodily identity only if one transgresses or subverts one’s bodily boundary. Both the social constructivists and Foucault view the conversion or transformation of the body as the starting point for achieving a unique and stylish form of life. To a certain extent, both treasure an aesthetic value of the body and view bodily subversion as an aesthetic

subversion. If Foucault's approach is the same as the social constructivists' approach, then how can Foucault's notion of ethical embodied subject improve on the latter?

Where Foucault differs from most of the social constructivists is that Foucault can further show a stylish embodied subject to be not simply a "stylish subject" but an "ethical stylish subject." First, for Foucault, while stylization of the self needs to transgress or subvert repressive boundaries so as to make possible a subject of liberty, this does not mean that he identifies stylization of body as simply a symbolic or aesthetic subversion of the dominant culture. Instead, stylization of the body, for Foucault, aims at cultivating a unique and free ethical subject who not only takes care of oneself but also takes care of the other. A stylish subject does not simply have a peculiar "bodily figure" or "bodily identity." Rather it is about a cultivation of the ethical quality of one's life. For instance, Foucault views a subject who can speak truthfully as a stylish subject, not because he or she has a peculiar bodily identity, but because he or she has a virtue of *parrhēsia*. Thus, stylization of self is not a celebration of an aesthetic style that our consumer culture promotes; rather it is about an ethical formation of one's subjectivity.

Of course, Foucault also criticizes the manipulative nature of language as social constructivists do. But he does not treat all languages as manipulative language. Rather, he treasures an embodied language that can cultivate one's ethical embodied identity and

affirms an ethics of speech (*parrhēsia*) that can cultivate a virtue of speaking freely and honestly. Unlike the social constructivists who view the language in a negative way, Foucault views the language in a comprehensive way.

Second, while Foucault affirms the transgressive power of the body, he does not view stylization of self as an unconditional self-transformation. Transgression, for Foucault, is not simply violation; rather it is a movement between limit and transgression. Transgression is an art for him because the subject needs to learn how to balance or manage properly this movement. Inspired by ancient Greek spirituality, Foucault is aware of the importance of use of pleasure in one's ethical formation in that one's proper use of pleasure can lead to a righteous act towards the other, and one's excessive use of the pleasure can generate violence towards the other. Since he fully recognizes the ethical and unethical natures of bodily pleasure, he highlights the importance of technique of the self through which one learns to regulate one's desire and power modestly. In other words, stylization of self, for Foucault, is not an unconditional subversive act but a conditional ethical act: he rejects any violent repression of others generated from one's stylization of self. Therefore, Foucault's ethical understanding of stylization of self can offer the social constructivists an ethical perspective to reexamine their praxis of bodily subversion.

Of course, as was mentioned before, the problem for Foucault is his celebration of a

self-sufficient ethical formation in that one can become ethical in oneself without this necessarily demanding the intervention of the other. Foucault is very confident of one's potential to be ethical. He believes that the ethical subject has an "in-born ethical urge" or "conscience" so that one can overcome one's egoism through care of self. While Foucault optimistically believes that care of self can lead to care of the other, he cannot warrant that such a self-sufficient ethical formation will not generate violent acts towards the other. Levinas, who treats the irresistible intervention of the other as an essential way to limit one's egoism, can modify Foucault's optimistic approach to stylization of self. In fact, this modification is also valid for social constructivists because they are not aware of one's egoist tendency, which could generate a violent act towards the others, in one's bodily subversion. Thus, Levinas, who affirms the priority of the other as a way to limit one's freedom, can restrict the egoist tendency of the social constructivists' bodily transformation.²

With respect to the meaning of the body, Levinas' saying can further inspire the social constructivists. For the social constructivists, there is no pre-cultural body: every dimension of the body, including the biological dimension of body, is culturally

² Perhaps one could question whether the social constructivists would accept Levinas' approach to the subject, since his approach, which limits the freedom of the subject, is contrary to the liberation agenda of contemporary body politics. But Butler's recent affirmation of the importance of Levinas' ethics of the other in one's ethical formation shows that Levinas' ethics can be compatible with the social constructivists' liberation agenda. See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

constructed. Thus, social constructivists' subversive strategy is to generate a peculiar but subversive cultural meaning of the body, one which challenges the dominant meaning of the body. For instance, Butler celebrates "drag" because it violates our traditional understanding of male/female. That is to say, the body, for social constructivists, is a cultural text or cultural sign; stylization of body is an encoding and decoding signifying process that yields one's subversive meaning.

But I do not think that the social constructivists' meaning of body, which simply treats the body as "text," can fully "liberate" the true meaning of the body or affirm the value of the body.³ As David McNally argues, the postmodern constructivists' approach to body finally destroys the body:

"After all, talk of the body is everywhere in postmodernist discourse. We have desiring bodies, performative bodies, cyborg bodies. Yet, there is something curiously attenuated

³ One of the accurate critiques of the social constructivists' approach to body and gender is from the feminist Toril Moi's critique of Butler's radical anti-essentialism. For Moi, Butler's anti-essentialist approach, which denies the concrete, material, living and dying body, finally destroys all meaning of the body: "When Butler conceives of gender as a category that does not include the body, however, she loses touch with Beauvoir's category of 'lived experience.' As a result, she is left with only one way of conceptualizing the body, namely as sex...In Butler's picture of sex and gender, sex becomes the inaccessible ground of gender, gender becomes completely disembodied, and the body itself is divorced from all meaning." Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 74. While Moi believes that the body has its cultural and social dimensions, she does not think that the social constructivists should ignore the biological and physical dimensions of the body because of the fear of the biological determinism. Moi argues that, unless we accept the biological and physical dimensions of the body, we never realize how the biological factor is misused or abused in our gender formation.

about the postmodern body. It has been de-materialized, relieved of matter, biology, the stuff of organs, blood, nerves, and sinews... Sensible needs--for food, love, sex, and shelter--are not countenanced in this discursive space. The postmodern body is thus constituted by a radical disavowal of corporeal substance... Liberated from biology, anatomy, physiology, social class, gender, and ethno-racial identity, the postmodern body is free to invent itself. A plaything of the imagination, it can assume any shape and size, any age or location, any identity its creator chooses; it is as one feminist critic puts it, 'no body at all.'⁴

In addition to negating the multidimensionality of the body or the substance of the body, the social constructivists fail to liberate and identify a subversive but ethical bodily power, which rests on the natural body per se. In Levinas' ethics of the body, the natural body per se has an ethical meaning when one exposes one's life towards the other, or vice versa.

Such a bodily exposure, which includes one's fragile face, physical pain, bodily suffering or lack, does not need the aid of the external linguistic system to signify. Rather, the sensual body or bodily exposure can generate an ethical meaning.⁵ That is to say, one's

⁴ David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 2.

⁵ Alphonso Lingis has an excellent phenomenological description on how one's bodily emotion can communicate one's interior life. See Alphonso Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 67-9.

tear and fear make us transparent to one another. For Levinas, such a bodily exposure, an overwhelming “sensational attack,” can express the other’s fragility and suffering. It is a subversive force that not only subverts the subject’s egoism but also transgresses all repressive boundaries. But it is also an “ethical command” that commands the subject to leave his or her “comfort zone” and give his or her life for the other’s suffering. Thus Levinas’ natural bodily meaning is more radical than the social constructivists’ textual bodily meaning because the former can show us the true subversive force of the body: it not only subverts all conceptual boundaries, but also makes the subject ethical.

Of course, it is not fair to say that all social constructivists completely ignore the natural meaning of the body. In fact, some social constructivists do recognize the power of the physical body. More specifically, some of them recognize that one’s bodily pleasure is a powerful force that can subvert all repressive boundaries. In particular, inspired by Foucault’s understanding of the subversive nature of pleasure, most social constructivists view bodily pleasure as an important “subversive force” to subvert all repressive social norms. For Foucault, pleasure is a “force” to resist sexual normalization and to create a new possibility of life. As McWhorter rightly says: “Pleasure figures prominently, then, in Foucault’s understanding of power as normalization, but it also figures prominently in his excursions into discourses and practices having to do with

shaping an ethos, with leading a good or beautiful life. Pleasure, on Foucault's view, is not just a state of the body or mind that occurs following some particular accomplishment or stimulus. Pleasure is not just an outcome. Pleasure, like power, is creative."⁶ Similarly, Butler believes that one's playful drag identity can generate a pleasure that subverts all repressive social norms,⁷ and Linda Singer suggests that empowering one's capacity to recreate one's sexual pleasure is an effective way to resist and undermine the debilitating effects of the hegemonic forms of dominance.⁸

As was mentioned before, Foucault does not affirm the subversive or creative nature of the pleasure unconditionally; rather he views the use of pleasure from an ethical perspective. Foucault not only recognizes the subversive nature of the pleasure, but also recognizes the ethical nature of the pleasure. Unfortunately, most social constructivists fail to recognize Foucault's ethical interpretation of the use of pleasure. Thus, while some

⁶ Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*, p. 177.

⁷ Admittedly, in recent years Judith Butler has been more concerned with the ethical ground of body politics and the ethical dimension of one's sensation. This marks an ethical turn in her thought. In *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler starts to explore the meaning of a livable life, especially the relation between normative violence and livability. In *Precarious Life*, a book written after September 11, 2001 ("9/11"), Butler further takes into account the meaning of grief and mourning so as to explore how one senses the other's suffering in inter-corporeal relationships. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004). But Moya Lloyd argues that the idea of an ethically inflected politics is still a largely embryonic one in Butler's work and, as such, it is difficult to assess its impact: "What it is possible to say, however, is that Butler's ethical 'turn', if this is indeed what it is, raises a number of questions that have not yet been answered in full: whether the idea of an ethical impulse, as Butler deploys it, is like her account of the desire for existence, pre-discursive or not; whether there has been a shift from criticizing political ontologies to positing an ontology, an ontology of bodily vulnerability..." See Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 155.

⁸ Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 82.

social constructivists can recognize the creative or subversive power of one's natural pleasure, they fail to recognize the ethical and unethical consequence of the use of pleasure that Foucault emphasizes.

Yet, as this thesis shows, Foucault's regulative strategy of dealing with the excess use of pleasure (care of self) cannot overcome one's egoism, since it fails to leave "room" for the intervention of the other that can motivate the subject to take responsibility for the other. Since care of the other, for Foucault, does not demand the subject to risk his or her life for the other, Foucault's subject, who cannot mourn and weep, never acts ethically and emphatically towards the other. Thus, while Foucault shows us a way of overcoming one's egoism through regulating one's pleasure, this does not warrant that such a pleasure-driven subject can become a truly responsible agent, who can fight against social injustice and take care of those who suffer.

Therefore, while some social constructivists, inspired by Foucault, can affirm the subversive or creative power of one's natural body, this does not mean that they can truly recognize the comprehensive meaning of the natural body, especially its ethical meaning. First, most social constructivists cannot do justice to Foucault's body theory: they only recognize its affirmation of the subversive nature of the pleasure, but fail to appreciate its ethical diagnosis of the use of pleasure. Second, even though some social constructivists

can recognize the ethical diagnosis of the use of pleasure from Foucault's ethics, they still cannot obtain a "right strategy" to overcome one's egoism from Foucault's failing regulative strategy.

By contrast, and with the aid of phenomenology, Levinas shows us how concrete bodily suffering can generate a subversive but ethical meaning. According to Levinas, only sensing the other's suffering can trigger one's responsibility towards the other. In contrast, pleasure-seeking only cultivates a self-centered subject. Thus, if we fail to give priority to the experience of suffering, we can never cultivate a truly critical and responsible subject. If we cannot feel pain and suffering through our body, we cannot even communicate with other people the dreadful nature of violence. Sensing the other's suffering is a condition for us to be aware of the violent nature of social injustice. For instance, most of us still have a strong impression towards a picture taken in the Vietnam War, in which a naked young Vietnamese girl cried and ran with a burnt body. This picture is powerful because we all "know" how pain feels and how "bad" it is when our body is burnt.

For Levinas, ethical life is not driven by reasoning or deliberation, but by the voice of the suffering other that urges the subject to participate in the long revolution against social injustice. Unless we are exposed to the suffering of the other with our fragile

bodies, we will never want to take a risk-taking journey to stand by those who suffer. In other words, one's sense of responsibility towards the other can only be aroused and maintained through one's empathetic bodily relationship with the other's suffering body. And one's pleasure-seeking egoist mentality can only be "shaken" by one's bodily exposure towards the other's pain. Thus, the exposure of the subject's fragile body towards the other turns Levinas' subject into a mourning subject, not a pleasure-seeking subject.

Thus, social constructivists and Foucault, who simply treasure the mode of pleasure, not the mode of suffering, might fail to cultivate a responsible subject who takes the other's suffering seriously.⁹ Their subversive subject easily becomes an egoist subject because such a pleasure-driven subject need not give up his or her physical body for the other. In particular, some social constructivists treat the body as a "political medium" that subverts the repressive social norms, rather than an "ethical medium" that relates the subject to the other's fragile and suffering body. Unlike Levinas, Foucault and the social constructivists ignore the mode of suffering or pain and consequently fail to recognize and liberate the ethical potentiality of the body.

⁹ Of course, Butler is an exception. In recent writings she agrees that a mourning and vulnerable subject, who can sense the suffering of the other, is important for contemporary politics: "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself." See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 30.

Of course, I do not deny the importance of pleasure, especially its creative, subversive and life-flourishing nature, in one's bodily life. And I endorse Ricoeur's criticism that Levinas' ethical subject, who is driven by the debt of other, can easily become a self-hating, not self-respecting subject. Yet if contemporary body politics is solely led by a pleasure-driven subject who cannot mourn for the other's suffering, this might turn body politics into a pleasure-fulfilling egoist politics, not a politics of solidarity that fights against today's societal destruction of human bodies. Moreover, I also believe that body politics is not only a politics of subversion that subverts the repressive social norms, but also a politics of compassion that can challenge our indifference towards those who suffer. Introducing Levinas' notion of an empathetic subject into contemporary body politics is not to deny the value of pleasure, but to retrieve the significance of suffering neglected by most social constructivists today. Levinas' ethical embodied subject offers us a more comprehensive way to re-examine the praxis of contemporary body and sexual politics.

In sum, while this chapter shows that both Foucault and Levinas can modify the social constructivists' problematic approach to the body, 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.

This does not mean that Foucault makes no contribution for contemporary body politics. His genealogical critique of various kinds of the bodily repression can supplement Levinas' phenomenological approach, which lacks a concrete historical analysis of the formation of the body. Moreover, Foucault, as an anti-essentialist and constructivist, does not give up thinking through the ethical condition of being ethical after the critique of modernity and rationalism. In particular, he shows us the value of the care of self in one's ethical life. We can connect this with Levinas' care of other in offering us a comprehensive understanding of one's ethical formation after a postmodern critique of Cartesian dualism.