Michel Foucault

Born in Poitiers, France, in 1926, Michel Foucault considered himself an "archaeologist" whose task it was to uncover the latent structures of knowledge and power that are responsible for various cultural formations in recent Western history. Such historical studies are comparible to tracing the blood lineage of a person back for centuries into the ever complicated and increasingly tangled roots of a genealogical tree - not for the sake of unveiling some single, original ancestors but to show that any individual existence or cultural phenemonon stems from hundreds of often unrelated and iften widely divergent personal histories.

After earning an agrégation in 1951, Foucault worked in a psychiatric hospital for three years. While teaching at the University of Upsala in Sweden, Foucault wrote *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961). This was the first of his trenchant revisionist historiographies. In 1970, Foucault was elected to the prestigious post of chair of "History of Systems of Thought" at the College de France. During the 1970s and 1980s his international reputation grew as he lectured all over the world. He died in 1984.

Foucault exposes the fact that all disciplines--be they be scientific, legal, political, or social--operate through a network of self-legitimizing power and knowledge. He further maintains that power/knowledge functions in a way that makes its version of truth obvious to its participants. He critiques the project of the modern human sciences by showing that their claims to objectivity are impossible in a domain in which truth itself is always a discursive construct.

Foucault attempted to show that the basic ideas which people normally take to be permanent truths about human nature and society change in the course of history. Foucault's theories challenged the ideas and influence of philosopher Karl Marx as well as Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. His theories challenged people's assumptions about prisons, the police, insurance, care of the mentally ill, gay rights, and welfare, he forced people to think about this social issues and hopefully challenge the complacency of the day.

Foucault's thought explored the shifting patterns of power within a society and the ways in which power relates to the self. He investigated the changing rules governing the kind of claims that could be taken seriously as true or false at different times in history. He also studied how everyday practices enabled people to define their identities and systematize knowledge; events may be

understood as being produced by nature, by human effort, or by God. Foucault argued that each way of understanding things had its advantages and its dangers.

Foucault was a postructuralist. A Postructrualist (1) does not believe in absolutes, (2) does not believe in truth, (3) sees history as a series of human observations, and (4) does not establish absolute goals.

Foucault's primary influences came from philosophers Frederick Nietzsche who argued that human behavior is motivated by a will to power and that traditional values had lost their power over society, and Martin Heidegger criticized what he called "our current technological understanding of being.

Any given historical period shares unconscious formations that define the right way to reason for the truth. His critique extends to conceptions of normative sexuality and behavior, showing how heterosexual gendering is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Foucault's major works include The Order of Things (1966), The History of Sexuality (1976-84), and Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975).

Foucault's thinking developed through three stages. First, in Madness and Civilization (1960), he traced how, in the Western world, madness—which was once thought to be divinely inspired—came to be thought of as mental illness. In this book he attempted to expose the creative force of madness that Western societies have traditionally repressed. In his second stage he produced The Order of Things (1966), one of his most important works.

Foucault's last period was inaugurated by the publication of Discipline and Punish in 1975. It ostensibly questions whether imprisonment is a more humane punishment than torture, but it is more generally concerned with the way society orders individuals by training their bodies; for example, basic training may discipline and prepare a person to be a soldier.

Foucault's last three books—History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction (1976), The Use of Pleasure (1984), and The Care of the Self (1984)—are parts of an unfinished history of sexuality.(Duncan note: He died that year) In these books, Foucault follows the stages by which people in Western societies have come to understand themselves as sexual beings, and relates the sexual self-concept to the moral and ethical life of the individual.

In all the books of his last period Foucault seeks to show that Western society has developed a new kind of power he calls bio-power—that is, a new system of control that traditional concepts of authority are unable to understand and criticize. Rather than being repressive, this new power enhances life. Foucault encourages people to resist the welfare state by developing individual ethics in which one turns one's life into something that others can respect and admire.

Largely taken from: http://www.connect.net/ron/foucault.html

and: http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/critical/foucault.htm

and Solomon, RC & Sherman, D. **Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy**, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2003

Questions on Foucault

1. What did Michel Foucault consider himself?

2. Explain in your own words with an example, what the phrase 'structures of knowledge and power' means. You will probably need to read through the article first to be able to explan it. You should have at least three structures.

3. If Foucault identifies structures, why is he called a post-structuralist? What is a post-structuralist?

4. Did Foucault think any system of thought was better than any other system of thought? Explain.

5. In Foucault's late stage he explores what he calls bio-power.Try to use your own words to briefly explain it. Give an example from your own life of someone who you feel exemplifies this ethical idea.