

## Book review

### **On The Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980**

Michel Foucault (edited by Michel Sennant; translated by Graham Burchell)

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This review covers a recent volume of the series of lectures Michael Foucault gave at the Collège de France between 1970 and 1984. This volume is based on the course of the academic session 1979-1980, titled *On The Government of the Living*, and offers an enlightening and stimulating direction to the history of “regimes of truth”. I believe that this theoretical framing has a lot to offer to social and environmental accounting researchers in providing a powerful lens for the analysis and investigation of contemporary accounting and accountability practices.

The course of lectures started from the analyses carried out in previous lecture series (Foucault, 2007, 2008) and concerning the notion of government understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing people’s conduct (2014, p. 24). While initially aimed at extending this examination by focusing on the different ways in which the biological problematic of government (the conduct of the life of men and women as populations, the species-body) is reflected in politics, “*On the Government of the Living*” delivers something quite different. This series of 12 lectures studies the government of people by the truth.

The general structure of the course comprises two main parts. The first part - lectures 1 to 4 - discusses the relationships between subjectivity and truth. This part picks out a historical figure to critically analyse how specific knowledge is linked to an “alethurgy”, a word that Foucault coins to designate the manifestation of truth. The second part - lectures 5 to 12 - is where Foucault’s theoretical approach unfolds. New theoretical constructs such as “truth act” and “regime of truth” are introduced to observe and analyse a specific form of society (the early Western Christianity) by the alethurgies that characterise it. As a result, it proposes a genealogical analysis of the connections that link government and manifestation of truth.

The 12 lectures of the volume include a combination of several analytically separable yet related elements of investigation of how a series of practices, linked to a certain regime of truth, inscribe in reality something that does not

exist in itself (i.e. madness, economy or sustainability) to submit it to the division between true and false. This coupling of alethurgic practices and regimes of truth is understood as a form of power that has the purpose of being exercised universally insofar as people have to gain access to the truth to earn their deliverance - the emancipatory effect of being rescued or set free. As such, the series of lectures propose the investigation of the alethurgy as proof of that access and thus as a form of governing of people. The following text summarizes the main analytics of truth outlined in each lecture.

The course of lectures begins by outlining the relation between governing power and truth. Foucault maintains that while one could not govern without knowledge (i.e. knowledge of what to govern, of those one governs, and of the means of governance) governing is not just a question of administration. It is argued that the “problem of conduct” (Foucault, 2007) cannot be reduced to a utilitarian problem of know-how but should comprise a manifestation of truth in which conduct is ultimately funded. While the “art of government” (Foucault, 2007) is accompanied by a wide range of practices, what is involved in these practices is something that is declared or established as true. As a result, Foucault suggests that the study of the conduct of men and women cannot be decoupled from the study of how truth manifests itself.

The term that Foucault coins to designate this manifestation of truth correlative to the exercise of power is “alethurgy”. Alethurgy is therefore defined as “the set of possible verbal and non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten” (2014, p. 7) and there is no exercise of power without something like an alethurgy.

Having established what an alethurgy is, Foucault adopts this construct as a theoretical lens to frame and discuss a precise case of the relationship between the exercise of governing power and manifestation of truth: the story of *Oedipus the King*. Foucault proposes an alethurgic re-read of the story that unveils the dynamics of the manifestation of truth in the form of tragedy. Tragedy makes truth visible and audible “through the myths and heroes, through the actors and their masks” (2014, p. 23). A series of sites where truth is manifested (the theatre, the seat of an oracle or the tribunal) are identified, and the organization of the alethurgies analysed. One of the main points that are made here is the distinction between the general and technical sense of the alethurgy: *Oedipus the King* is an alethurgy in itself because it is a way of revealing the truth; at the same time, the tragedy reveals how the truth came to light, its internal organization and mechanisms.

To illustrate, Foucault describes the dynamic tension between “reversal” and “recognition”: within the story of Oedipus what initially was unknown become known (recognition) thanks to the path and the work of the truth that originate an internal movement by which the fate of the characters is reversed. The mechanics of recognition within this alethurgy, therefore, possess both a subjective and technical dimension of enquiry. On the one hand, there is the reflexive cycle that moves the subject who seeks to know the truth who discovers to be the object of the alethurgy. On the other hand, there are the practices by which recognition is achieved.

Another central theme of this lecture series is represented by the investigation of the forms of alethurgy that revolve around the first person, the “I”, the “myself”, in the rites and procedures of veridiction. The central problem is how and for what reasons truth-telling becomes an alethurgy to the extent that the person who speak can say: *I hold the truth because I saw it, and because I saw it I say it*. To give focus to the discussion, Foucault examines the process of “discovery” - the transformative act by which someone who does not know becomes someone who knows - as specific alethurgic ritual. The story of *Oedipus the King* exemplifies, once again, the investigation of how the transformation takes place: Oedipus can become someone who knows through an act of “searching” that leads him to marks, signs, clues, and markers, that he finds on the way and that enable him to infer the truth. In this context, Foucault sheds light and analyses two major forms of alethurgy present in the story: the religious and the judicial. Accordingly forms of extraction of truth, ways of combining seeing and saying and the time dimension are proposed and explored as analytics of truth.

This theoretical view, therefore, allows the reader to understand the alethurgy of discovery as an act of government. Oedipus himself comes to be the operator of this alethurgy when his power is questioned and the discovery of the truth is the way of steering a course to maintain it. “The art of discovery is then the art of the rudder” (2014. p. 59).

Another important theme to investigate the alethurgy at the level of the subject regards how the government of people, alethurgy and subjectivity are linked in our society. To do so, Foucault emphasises three themes: (1) relationship between alethurgy and exercise of power; (2) importance for this exercise of power of a truth that manifest itself in the form of subjectivity; (3) effect of this alethurgy on the deliverance of people. Subjectivity is regarded as key link between power and alethurgy, and designates the insertion of the subject as such in the procedures of manifestation of truth. To understand this role Foucault advances the constructs of “act of truth”.

An act of truth is the part that falls to a subject in the procedures of alethurgy. Foucault defines this part as that of comprising three different roles of the subject in the procedures of manifestation of truth: operator, spectator or object. The first role portrays the subject as ritually performing a number of acts that reveal the truth (i.e. minister of a certain expertise like priests, doctors, judges, teachers or accountants). The second way of accomplishing truth is when the subject is inserted in the alethurgy as a witness or spectator (i.e. someone who saw, heard, or remembered because s/he was there). The third form of revealing truth is also known as reflexive truth act where the subject is at the same time operator and spectator of truth thus becoming the object of truth?. It is the confession, when the truth discovered through the alethurgy concerns oneself (i.e. this is what I am, what I did). All three roles, according to Foucault, are elements of a more complex notion that of “regimes of truth” that will be defined and explored considerably in the second part of the course of lectures, from the fifth lecture onwards.

The second part of the lectures proposes a genealogical analysis of the connections that link power and alethurgy and critically analyses the government of people in our society. The central construct of this lecture is that of “regimes of truth”. Foucault defines a regime of truth as “that which constrains individuals to a certain number of truth acts [...], that which defines, determines the form of these acts and establishes their condition of effectuation and specific effects” (2014, p. 93). In other words, Foucault conceptualises regimes of truth as the set of processes and institutions by which individuals are obliged to make defined acts of truth. Political, penal and professional domains can, therefore, be identified (and analysed) as regimes of truth. In a similar vein, science can also be conceptualised as a set of systems of truth that submit to the same regime.

As a result, the problem of studying the connections that link power and alethurgy come to be the problem of studying the types of relations that bring together the alethurgies, their procedures and the subjects who are their operators, spectators or objects.

Foucault develops this analysis further, by expanding the examination the relationship between truth and deliverance where the inner-self is the object of knowledge. Taking as an example the rite of baptism in the early Christianity. Foucault observes that this rite that embodies the passage between the condition of corruption of the soul and that of purification is organised around two distinct, yet linked alethurgies: the preparation to/for the baptism and the rite of passage itself.

In the preparation stage the postulant is taught some truths that are the truths of theories, theses, notions, ideas and precepts of the specific way of life that he/she is willing to join. This way the postulant is lead to a belief that must be

manifested in specific truth acts that can be verbal or non-verbal and physical or spiritual and culminate in the act of profession of faith. At this point the rite can be celebrated. The rite stage is when the inner-self passes from the condition of corruption to that of deliverance through a set of structures, practices and dynamics. In this stage truth is not just content of knowledge (in the forms of things to be known or dogmas to be believed) but for the one who “knows” it is his/her own deliverance that is verified as true. As such, one important contribution of Foucault’s investigation is that it uncovers the “structure of teaching” that both supports and links the alethurgies of deliverance in which the postulant is gradually qualified as operator and spectator of knowledge to the extent that it becomes the object of the truth itself.

The ways in which Michael Foucault conceptualised the relationship between governing power, manifestation of truth and subjectivity lead to several questions that would benefit from in-depth academic research, particularly in research about the versions of alethurgies overlapping the fields of sustainability, ecology and social and environmental accounting domain:

- What constitute an “alethurgy of sustainability” and what role does social and environmental accounting research play in it?
- How and to what extent will the *téchne* of accounting affect the alethurgy of sustainability?
- Which sites can be identified as “alethurgic spaces” and how is the organization of these alethurgies structured?
- How and to what extent “accounting alethurgy” respond to people’s discomfort of un-sustainability?
- How and to what extent will the accounting profession affect the alethurgy of the subject?
- What role do power relationships among stakeholders play in the alethurgy of sustainability?
- What is the role of “sustainability’s regime(s) of truth” in the post-modern form of deliverance of man?
- How and to what extent sustainability regime(s) of truth come to be invented (or established, or institutionalised, or generalised, or extended)?

In addition to the above questions, several areas are yet to be explored and represent fertile ground for future academic research over numerous topics, such as:

- the alethurgic re-read of social, environmental, accountability accounts;
- the analysis of ecological alethurgy and ecological regime(s) of truth;

- the “analytics of truth” as tool of understanding the alethurgic potential of social and environmental accounting;
- the processes of invention, establishment, institutionalization, generalization, and extension of sustainability regime(s) of truth;
- the alethurgic value of the notion of materiality.

Overall, this book provides insights for all those interested in the connections between accounting, subjectivity and conduct. It has the potential to offer researchers in the social and environmental accounting domain considerable inspiration.

*“you cannot direct men without carrying out operations in the domain of truth, and operations that are always in excess of what is useful and necessary to govern in an effective way” (2014, p. 17)*

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### **References:**

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