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Philosophy 489  
Commentary

*Garrett and Foucault on the Question: How Free is Our Will?*

In short, Garrett's paper addresses the philosophic question: do we have free will? Garrett believes we do. However, the will (according to Garrett) is not totally free; by analyzing Foucault's explication of the role of docile bodies in institutions Garrett wants to claim that, though we are individuals who make our own autonomous decision, our will is *constrained* by the economy of power relations we find ourselves participating in.

"This is the task I wrestle with," Garrett claims on page 2, do we in fact have a free will that is independent from all others or is it constrained by those others?" As we know, Garrett believes it is constrained. To make this clear to readers who are outside of our class (as well as those who aren't Foucaultians) Garrett introduces several concepts: docile bodies, surveillance, examination, and partitioning. The contemporary economy of power found within institutional settings makes use of all of these concepts.

Before explaining this in detail, however, Garrett chooses to summarize Kant's view of freedom and just/unjust actions; in doing so he takes care to note that Kant's concept of justice and injustice is grounded in the law of non-contradiction. To make Kant's view clearer, Garrett proposes the thought experiment which he dubs the "classic ax-murderer scenario." To summarize, should one proclaim it unjust to lie and then, when asked by an ax murderer looking to murder one's family where they are located, it would be unjust to lie. This is because everyone has an autonomy which they themselves govern; should one govern themselves as one who believes lying is wrong, then it would be unjust for them to lie as they know (and have decided for themselves) that lying is

wrong. With a definition of autonomy now established, Garrett moves on to his Foucaultian analysis of people and their wills. As I have said, he explains several Foucaultian concepts to do so. The first one he mentions, on page 5-6, is that of the *docile body*. A docile body belongs to an autonomous individual who, to increase productivity potential, is trained to act in various institutional settings. The explosion in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century of a more modern and technologically advanced economy/society bred the need for these bodies as work became increasingly complex and costly and men more frequently had to work under masters than in guild settings.

Next Garrett mentions exams (page 6) as well as space (page 7). Exams serve two purposes to administrators/masters in the economy of power: first, it allows them to test and quantify an autonomous individual's understanding/obedience of a given socio-institutional situation. Next, as these exams do not disappear but are recorded, a *file* or record of an individual can be created for master's to objectively measure the efficiency of a body who is being trained. Space also dictates people's roles in a given institution, as if there is no space for a worker to work within, there is clearly no job for him to do there and thus his role is non-existent. The docile bodies then become *agents* of the institution's will, subsuming their own autonomy into their institutional role to further economic, or merely prescribed, aims.

With this established, Garrett then poses the question, ““is it possible for there to be a docile body that still acts outside the social construct? Is there a way for a docile body to comprehend what is happening to them, yet still act independently of those influences?” (9). Garrett and Foucault seem to think not; after all, Foucault calls this trained agent one's “natural body” even (*Discipline and Punish*, 155). Garrett also notes

that in the economy of power there is no sovereign (one who decides on the exception) and so the role reversal between master and subject is possible at any time in concrete reality.

Garrett uses the example of a hospital to make show how institution's make sue of all of these concepts and techniques (11). He does this to show how an individual *voluntarily* allows others knowledge, or power (power which, following Nietzsche becomes happiness; knowledge really is happiness!) over her. This power/knowledge may seem to border a form of tyranny, but as Foucault points out this power is *productive*.

This leads Garrett then to examine this constrained will (which occurs as we must create economies of power which inherently limit us) versus determinism. Determinism, though entailing a loss of autonomous control for the individual, is too necessarily absolute to explain power economies. Garrett concludes by noting that, "In my view we already laid out with things that will constrain our decision," (14). As our actions are necessarily altered by the possibilities institutions and societal life (ie. Having parents) our will, for Garrett, is necessarily constrained. I myself disagree with this; I agree that institutions and societal norms may inhibit our willingness to choose but, following Walker Percy, I believe, "a person does not have to be this or be that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free." (*Lost in the Cosmos*). Institutions may limit us in a societal sense, but one can always choose to operate outside society's confines. One can join a monastery, live in the woods, or do what they please in prison; a person always has the ability to do what one likes in the immediate moment; having the *capacity* to do whatever you like (ie. Fly, afford medical school) may be limited, but one can always choose how

one acts in the immediate moment; this I feel, can overcome Foucault's limitations.