U3A Philosophy Group

The session for March considered the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984).

Part One: Foucault's ideas about the construction of knowledge through discourse, and the relationship between knowledge and power led to some lively discussion (and criticism), as did Foucault's ideas about disciplinary power, which could be overt - in terms of institutional discipline (for example in schools, and prisons), and also more subtle forms of discipline exerted through the expectations and norms which encourage conformity and self-discipline. (*NB social media, and the increased surveillance in everyday life)*

Part Two: The second part of the session considered some of Foucault's well-known work, and its influence: 'Madness and Civilisation' (1961) and 'The Birth of the Clinic' (1963).

Foucault approached the concept of 'madness' from a broadly historical point of view, finding that early societies, such as the 'Renaissance' often tolerated the alternative to reason that madness presented and in circumstances where sufferers claimed visions or dialogue with God, they might even be venerated.

During the period of growth of 'rational' and scientific knowledge ('Enlightenment'), however, the 'mad' were more likely to be perceived as sub-human, deviant, and they could be locked and chained up in asylums (sometimes for the benefit of paying visitors).

In the nineteenth century, the efforts of Pinel (France) and Tuke (York Retreat) ushered in a more comfortable and kindly approach to encourage sufferers of mental disorders to moderate their behaviour. Foucault disagreed with the perception that this represented a more humane approach, writing that '…the mad are freed from their chains but they are imprisoned in a moral world…'.

Foucault was also critical of the basis on which later psychiatrists claimed authority over the 'mad' (the exercise of Knowledge/Power as discussed in part one).

'The Birth of the Clinic' was the last of Foucault's work to be discussed. This identified how doctors had previously ignored the patient as a whole and simply focussed their 'Medical Gaze' on the physical cause of an illness ('the gall bladder in bed three'). Foucault's work (amongst others) highlighted the need to take a more holistic view of factors influencing ill health and there had been a gradual shift in health care to put the patient, rather than their disease at the centre of care.

Again, this generated a lot of discussion (and digression!) about current practices and attitudes to mental ill-health and health care.

Do come and join the philosophy group at our next meeting: **Tuesday 23rd April or Tuesday 28th May at 10am at Enterprise House.** We will be looking at how we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress and equality, with the focus on the western world and how Christianity has shaped it.

Christine Price