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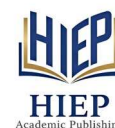
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The Implications of Foucault's Ethical Turn for Literary Criticism: A Review of *From Morality to Ethics: On Foucault's "Ethical Turn"*

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Abstract: Taking Zeng Chi's *From Morality to Ethics: On Foucault's "Ethical Turn"* as the subject, this review aims to assess the theoretical value of the philosophical monograph for literary criticism, particularly in the study of narrative and subjectivity. The review points out that by systematizing Foucault's "ethical turn", Zeng clearly distinguishes between "code-oriented morality" and "ethics-oriented morality," and extracts the practical binary model of "confession" versus "parrhesia". This theoretical framework provides literary analysis with a refined tool, enabling it to move beyond simplistic attributions to either psychological or social-deterministic factors. Instead, it delves into the complex, dynamic process between "being passively constituted" and "actively shaping oneself" in discourse and practice. By analysis of classic texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, "To Room Nineteen" and "The Dead", this article demonstrates how the framework can effectively interpret discourse discipline, subjective formation, and their intricate interplay within characters' self-narration. It argues that Zeng's interpretation transforms Foucault's thought into a critical methodology which is capable of deepening character analysis and narrative studies.

Keywords: Foucault; Ethical Turn; Ethical Literary Criticism; Subjectivity

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标题：福柯伦理转向的文学批评启示——评《从道德到伦理：论福柯的伦理转向》

摘要：本文以曾持《从道德到伦理：论福柯的伦理转向》为评论对象，旨在评估这部哲学专著对文学批评，特别是叙事与主体性研究的理论价值。书评指出，曾持通过系统梳理福柯的“伦理转向”，清晰区分了“规范导向的道德”与“伦理导向的道德”，并提炼出“坦白”与“坦言”这一组的实践对立模型。这一理论框架为文学分析提供了精密工具，使其能够超越对人物心理或社会决定论的简单归因，转而深入考察人物在话语与实践中的“被动构成”与“主动塑造”之间的复杂动态过程。本文结合《了不起的盖茨比》、《到十九号房间去》、《死者》等经典文本进行例证分析，展示了该框架如何有效解读人物自我叙事中的话语规训、主体塑造及其矛盾交织，论证了曾持的阐释如何将福柯的思想转化为一套能够深化人物分析与叙事研究的批评方法论。

关键词：福柯；伦理转向；文学伦理学批评；主体性

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1. Introduction

The issue of subjectivity is a focus in the study of contemporary literary criticism. From the deep exploration of individual identity in post-colonial and diaspora literature to the dissolution of the concept of “self” in science and AI-themed fiction, the literary subject appears to hover between the binary opposition of construction and deconstruction. The traditional approaches, such as psychoanalytic and socio-historical criticism, seem insufficient to explain the fragmented, individualized and highly dynamic self-formation in postmodern narratives. How should readers interpret the literary characters who do not passively submit to social disciplines but actively construct and shape their own inner world? And how to analyze complex literary texts in which subjects engage in self-deconstruction and reconstruction through narrative actions, such as diaries and confessions?

The “ethical turn” in the late thought of Micheal Foucault, which includes his concepts like “technologies of self”, “care of the self” and “parrhesia” (frank speech), provides a new theoretical framework for addressing the above questions. In his later work, Foucault no longer regarded the subject merely as a passive product of power-knowledge networks, but turned to examine how individuals construct themselves into ethical subjects through a series of spiritual practices. This transformation means that it expands from a critique of how subjects are constituted by power to an ethical exploration of how subjects actively constitute themselves. It offers a distinctive theoretical approach for understanding subjectivity in literature.

However, Foucault's ethical thought is scattered across his later works, interviews and lectures at the Institut de France. They are presented in an obscure manner and with multiple interpretations, posing significant challenges for interdisciplinary applications. In this situation, the monograph *From Morality to Ethics: On Foucault's "Ethical Turn"* (China Social Science Press, 2025) by scholar Zeng Chi is a timely and important work in Chinese. The book not only systematically clarifies the internal logic of Foucault's "ethical turn" and clearly distinguishes between key concepts such as "morality" and "ethics", "know yourself" and "care of the self", "confession" and "parrhesia", but also strives to transform Foucault's philosophical reflections into a coherent and logically structured discourse framework.

As a book review, this article does not aim to examine Foucault's ethical turn within the history of philosophy, nor does it seek to provide a philosophical comparison or verification of Zeng's interpretation. As a researcher in literary studies, the author focuses on what kind of new "ethical perspective" and operable theoretical tools Zeng's work provides to the practice of literary criticism. More specifically, this article will focus on the book's elucidations of Foucault's concepts, such as "technologies of the self", "parrhesia", the truth-subject relationship. And to explore how they can provide interdisciplinary insights for analyzing self-narration and the process of subject formation in the literary text. Through a close reading of this monograph, the aim is to assess whether it successfully builds a bridge that translates Foucault's dynamic late ethical thought into a critical-theoretical tool for interpreting the complex inner worlds of subjects in literary texts.

2. From Code-oriented Morality to Ethic-oriented Morality

Generally, Foucault's thought is divided into three periods: archaeology, genealogy of power, and ethics. The "ethical turn" occurs in the last period. Zhang Xu (2015, p. 90) points out that it "marks Foucault's shift from exploring the issue of 'genealogy of life power' to the issue of 'ethical genealogy' which explores the relationship between the subject and the truth." In the monograph *From Morality to Ethics: On Foucault's "Ethical Turn"*, Zeng compares Foucault's power study and ethical study through the lens of "subjectivation" form as the entry point, explaining the trajectory of "ethical turn". This book concludes two parts: "genealogy of modern ethics" and "ethics of caring the self". The first part explains how to view genealogy of power as genealogy of moral, reveals the operating path of morality in modern society, and analyzes the role of "confession" as a means of power suppression and guidance in the self-construction of the subject. The second part discusses two ways of self-construction: knowing yourself and the care of the self, explores the four elements of Foucault's ethical framework, and explains "parrhesia" as an active ethical practice for shaping the self.

In the first part of the book, Zeng first clarifies how to regard Foucault's genealogy of power as a genealogy of morality in both broad and narrow senses, providing a new perspective to understand related issues. Then he discusses the origin and the operating process of morality by explaining "moral monster",

“moral treatment”, and “moralization of society”. From this perspective, morality does not originate from the inner conscience of individuals, but is a set of external and compulsory social disciplinary systems. This system defines what is normal and abnormal by the modern knowledge systems like medicine, law and education. The task of individuals is to compare and match their behaviors, desires and thoughts with the external standard. Once they deviate, they will be tagged as “monster” and “abnormal”. In “moral treatment”, the “confession” technique plays an important role. Zeng (2025, p. 83) points out that the “confession” described by Foucault is not a simple self-expression, but “a ritual of revealing oneself within power relations”. Under the gaze of the authority like judges, doctors and priests, individuals are compelled and induced to tell the “truth” about themselves. However, this kind of “telling the truth” does not lead to freedom but is the result of the operation of power. Through the moral discipline and “confession” technique, individuals internalize the external norms as their self-conscience and are shaped into subordinates of power ultimately. This kind of “code-oriented morality” situates subjects in a passive position of being examined and defined.

In the second part of the book, Zeng (2025, p. 110) indicates that “it is precisely in his continued focus on the practice of ‘confession’ that Foucault recognizes the necessity for a further inquiry of the subject”, and then proceeds to explore the possibility of another formation of the subject: how the subject actively constitutes the self. Zeng further discusses the truth, the subject and the self-relationship, and indicates two ways of constructing the self-relationship: “know yourself” and “care of the self”. In Foucault’s sense, “know yourself” is a part within the overall activity of the “care of the self” (Zeng, 2025, p. 134). Knowing yourself is a prerequisite for the care of the self. “Care of the self” refers more specifically to the practice of “spirituality”, which means individuals consciously control their body, soul and thought by their own power such as change, correction purification, in order to achieve a positive transformation of the self. To concretize the above abstract concepts, Zeng provides a detailed analysis of the four elements of Foucault’s ethical framework, including ethical substance, ethical obligation, ethical work and telos. It particularly highlights the importance of “ethical work”, namely “self-practice” or “technologies of the self” for “it is through ethical work that subject undergoes genuine transformation and gradually constitutes itself as an ethical subject” (Zeng, 2025, p. 160). The four elements of ethical structure show that the ethics-oriented morality is concerned with how one becomes an ethical subject through practice. Within ethical work, the practice of “parrhesia” (or “frank speech”) is an effective means of self-formation.

The most interdisciplinary insight of this book is the opposition model of “confession” and “parrhesia”. These are two models of “telling the truth”, each corresponding to a different moral orientation. “Confession” is a self-disclosure that is forced or induced in front of an authority figure such as judges, doctors and priests. Its purpose is to inscribe the subject into the archive of knowledge-power and to attain salvation through the recognition of the authority. It is a process of objectification. By contrast, “parrhesia” is the courage to speak the truth. The subject voluntarily binds himself to truth and undertakes the associated risks, such as offending

the powerful or damaging relationships. It is a process of subjectivation and a practice of the aesthetics of existence. This distinction is helpful for literary criticism to make a precise determination: whether a character's self-narration serves to reinforce social discipline or to practice a free and aesthetic ethical practice. Zeng (2025, p. 190) points out that in the modern society where power is ubiquitous, Foucault's ethics consists in reconstructing a relationship to the self by means of the ethics-oriented morality, arming the subject to resist the network of power.

3. The Assistance and Implication for Literary Studies

Zeng's systematic interpretation of Foucault's thought, especially the distinction of "code-oriented morality" and "ethics-oriented morality", and the comparison of "confession" and "parrhesia", provides a productive analytical path for literary criticism. It enables literary criticism to go beyond the simple dichotomy between a character's inner motives and social determination in traditional literary analysis, and to focus on the dynamic process through which the characters negotiate and shape themselves in relation to the self, others, and social norms within concrete practices and discourses. This framework is suitable for analyzing the narrations that presents issues like the predicaments of modernity, self-awareness and existential anxiety. It can illuminate the complex pathways in the construction of characters' subjectivity.

3.1 Analysis of "Confession": The Disciplined Self-Narrative

According to the code-oriented moral pathway explicated by Zeng, numerous internal monologues, diaries, confessions, and even conversational formulas in literary works can be interpreted as a kind of "confession" practice. In the process, characters do not freely express the authentic self, rather they unconsciously mobilize and even internalize some external authoritative discourses such as class, gender and money discourses, therefore, shaping themselves into intelligible objects that conform to specific norms. This perspective can penetrate the surface of the narrative and reveal the power structure as well as the disciplinary logic behind characters' self-narrative.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's work, *The Great Gatsby* is an example of "confession". Ranging from his "old money" mimicry in self-presentation to his obsession with hosting extravagant and sumptuous parties, Jay Gatsby's elaborate construction of his self-narrative is a grand-scale "confession" which shows the social norms of American upper class. He obsessively appropriates and performs this discourse, hoping to gain the approval of Daisy and the upper class she represents, to "confess" himself as a qualified subject who is worthy of acceptance. However, as Foucault reveals, this act of "confession" reinforces the norms and class that Gatsby yearns for, and leaves the confessant permanently situated in the position of the other (subject to being watched and defined). What's more, as the narrator in the novel, Nick produces a memoir steeped in melancholy and moral judgment. This memoir is also a form of "confession": he attempts to sort out a personal narrative that conformed to the moral order of the middle class in the chaotic era, so as to justify his involvement and alienation. His narrative continuously internalizes and reinforces specific social norms.

In George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant", the narrator, who is a British colonial officer stationed in Burma, is ordered by his superiors to hunt down an elephant. His inner struggle monologue during and after the hunting is a highly typical "confession". Though he is reluctant to shoot the elephant, situated at a lower position within the colonial apparatus, he feels that he is being watched by countless yellow faces and is compelled to perform the role of sahib. He has no choice but to act. After the shooting, his reflection and analysis of his own acts are deeply embedded in the discourse of colonial power-knowledge. His "confession" is not a pursuit of truth. Instead, under the immense pressure of "code-oriented morality", it is an attempt to justify his act of shooting the elephant with a rationale that makes sense within imperial logic. This precisely exposes how the colonial regime internally shapes and distorts individual self-perception.

3.2 Identifying "Parrhesia": Self-Practice as Ethical Self-Formation

In the meantime, Zeng's elaboration of Foucault's ethics-oriented morality and "parrhesia" offers a key to identifying the practices of self-formation that are more resistant and creative in literature. "Parrhesia" refers to the situation where characters are at risk, but they still choose to speak and act bravely according to the truths they possess, so as to define and construct the self. Such practice is often intertwined with "technologies of the self", and presents as a process of questioning, detaching from, and reconstructing of the established mode of existence.

Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" depicts this process. The protagonist, Susan, began her self-exploration with discomfort with the "code-oriented" role of a perfect middle-class housewife. Her "parrhesia" is not a vehement declaration; however, it consists of a series of silent, internal "technologies of the self": from her failed attempts to secure an independent space in the home, to her final choice of occupying a room alone in a cheap hotel, where she enjoys a tranquil and free moment. This room serves as the physical space for her "spiritual exercise". The solitary contemplation she engages in here is a spiritual exploration of the question "Who am I". By temporarily setting aside her family responsibilities and obligations, she engages in a pure "spiritual exercise". Her goal is not to gain social approval, but to safeguard an inner, authentic self that cannot be defined by any external norms. Eventually, at the moment when her husband discovers this independent space, she chooses an extreme and tragic "parrhesia": to possess the peaceful space forever at the cost of her life, so as to maintain the absoluteness of her own boundaries.

3.3 Capturing Contradictions: Interpreting the Complex Subject

The advantage of Foucault's framework expounded by Zeng also lies in its capacity to capture the complex state in which a character's subjectivity is at once passively constituted and actively creative. The depth of many literary figures resides in the contradictions and oscillations.

In James Joyce's short story "The Dead", Gabriel's transformation is an excellent example. At the dance party, he consistently plays the role that conforms to the social norms of the middle class. His words and actions constitute a refined "confession" before the traditional authority. However, the inner storm that he

experiences alone in the hotel after knowing the story of his wife's past love marks a crucial turning point. His subsequent reflections on himself, his marriage, his cultural identity and his entire life are filled with a painful quality of "parrhesia". He strips off his social mask and confronts his own emotional mediocrity, arrogance and a sense of spiritual death. In this moment, he applies "technologies of the self" (profound reflection and imagination) to interrogate the "ethical substance" (the true state of his existence). Although the snow in the end of the story is a symbol of death, it also stands for the protagonist's nascent consciousness to some extent (Lyu, 2008, p. 123). Therefore, this process of awakening consciousness is an incomplete ethical practice that attempts to care for the self.

Applying this framework to science fiction narratives further highlights its contemporary interpretive power. In Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, the existence of the robot Adam challenges traditional concepts of the subject. The settings and tests that Charlie and Miranda apply to Adam can be seen as an extreme, technologized form of "code-oriented" formation. However, some of Adam's choices exceed the program and are fraught with ethical dilemmas, especially ethical choices involving jealousy, protection and sacrifice. These complex choices raise a new question: is it ethical for a non-human entity governed by algorithms to be able to independently carry out "ethical practice"? Though different from actual human existence, Adam's actions which cannot be explained by simple program, are a silent "parrhesia" towards the established "code-oriented morality". This complex narrative involving a humanoid robot compels scholars to confront ethical issues in the age of artificial intelligence. Foucault's ethics offers a new perspective for the criticism of science fiction.

In summary, Zeng's work interprets Foucault's philosophical ideas, helping literary researchers to analyze how characters are disciplined by social discourse and engage in "self-confession"; to identify how characters undertake subject formation through "parrhesia"; and to examine the struggles and contradictions of characters caught between norms and ethics. Applying this theoretical framework to specific literary texts enables literary criticism to move beyond the simple definition of what characters are, but instead to delve into the dynamic process of how they become the self, enriching the perspective and depth of literary criticism.

4. Conclusion

With its clear structure and profound explanation, Zeng Chi's work successfully transforms Foucault's complex thought trajectory into a set of operational theoretical tools for analysis. By clearly distinguishing between "code-oriented morality" and "ethics-oriented morality", as well as establishing "confession" and "parrhesia" as a pair of contrasting models of practice, the book provides a dialectical and dynamic perspective for understanding the constitution of subjectivity. It reveals that the individual is not only an object shaped by power discourse, but also an ethical subject who actively constitutes the self through "technologies of the self" and the practice of "spirituality".

This theoretical framework provides a new research perspective to literary studies. It enables a deep exploration of the narrative structure and a meticulous analysis of the complex interactions between how characters are constituted passively and how they constitute themselves actively. From analyzing the social discourse discipline behind Gatsby's "confession", to interpreting Susan's resolute practice of "parrhesia", to grasping the interwoven obedience and awakening of Gabriel's consciousness, this framework demonstrates formidable interpretive power. It not only provides new perspectives for rereading classic texts, but also lays a certain foundation for understanding important issues in contemporary literature, such as subjectivity and the ethics of technology. Therefore, this book is not only an important contribution to Foucault studies, but also a valuable reference for literary critics engaged in exploring the relationship between narrative and subjectivity.

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