The Power of "Gaze": Reflecting on the Visual Elements Implicit in Biopolitical Theory

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Abstract—**Visualism is a typical "sensory" manifestation of Western philosophy, especially traditional metaphysics, in the epistemological dimension. Biopolitics, as a governance-regulatory technology in modern Western countries, is closely related to visualism. When examining biopolitics based on visualism, we can find that under the influence of the tradition of visualism, biopolitics "opens" and "restores" individual and group life, achieving the construction and reconstruction of governance objects with the purpose of power governance. Through the analysis of Foucault's works, it can be seen that biopolitics has not only been a historical phenomenon for a long time, but also has not fundamentally transcended traditional metaphysics. The way biopolitics treats life is not a simple "governance technique". Rather, it implies trampling and contempt for life. The factors of visualism in biopolitics are revealed everywhere in the specific historical process, and may become a new path and direction for reflection on biopolitics.**

Keywords—**biopolitics, visualism, open vision-reduction, the technique of government**

I. INTRODUCTION

Is there the possibility of micronarratives in political philosophy? It is generally believed that Western political philosophy has ushered in a new renaissance since the publication of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, and has occupied an increasingly important position in modern and contemporary philosophical research. However, the foundation of Western political science research norms, structures, and categories can be traced back to Aristotle's empirical method research. The transformation of Western political science since the 20th century reminds us that political philosophy may have also undergone changes in theoretical models from macro-theoretical construction to micro-theoretical analysis, and in methodology from abstract speculative argumentation to concrete empirical analysis. The fundamental driving force behind this change comes from the higher demands placed on theoretical explanations by the complexity of our era.

Foucault confesses: "There is a traditional problem, I think, in political philosophy, which one might sum up this way: how can discourses of truth, or simply philosophy as, in particular, discourses of truth, be able to determine the legal limits of power? [1]. After Foucault's long-term efforts, a new power analysis framework—biopolitics (*Biopolitics/Biopolitique*) was born. Biopolitics is the theoretical frontier and latest achievement in the microscopic research field of contemporary Western political philosophy, and it belongs to the left-wing ideological research in French philosophy. This field originated from Foucault's post-structuralist social critical theory. Foucault first proposed the potential and invisibility of modern biopolitics as a Western liberal social governance technology in the book *Society Must Be Defended*, which was later published in the French Course Lecture Series in 1976. It is generally believed that the development of modern biopolitics has gone through the development process of Foucault-Agamben-Esposito-Negri and Hardt, and its research has a distinctive social critique and power critique of Western political philosophy. Foucault's "discipline-punishment society", Agamben's "*homo sacer*" – the "*bare life*" model and Esposito's "*immune politics*" all contain the typical theoretical presumption that power is inherently evil in classical political science. The above developments initiated and initially formed the critical tradition of biopolitics research.

How to understand contemporary biopolitics is related to whether the final conclusion of theoretical analysis is correct or not. In this sense, changing the theoretical perspective of observing problems is an extremely important methodological innovation. Since the modern Enlightenment, Western political thought has been based on the abstract assumption that human nature is inherently evil and distrustful of rulers who hold political power. Foucault and others inherited this tradition, that is, the critical dimension of power, which is in line with the great tradition of Western political philosophy. But it needs to be acknowledged that the critique of power can have multiple dimensions. Foucault's "genealogy" is only an idea of theoretical construction, and it does not represent all theoretical answers to understanding biopolitical issues. This article uses the traditional metaphysical perspective of "visualism" to analyze biopolitics. It mainly relies on Foucault's relevant works to analyze the factors of visualism implicit in his related works, and further digs into the inherent rationality of biopolitical theory in the metaphysical context and the "long-term rationality" of metaphysics in the context of modern political philosophy.

II. THE POSSIBILITY OF BIOPOLITICAL UNDERSTANDING UNDER VISUALISM

The development theory of Platonic-Hegelianism in traditional metaphysics is an essentialist and rationalistic vertical transcendence-abstract logic from perceptual finitude to rational infinity. In the sense of logical transparency and understandability, a system is "reasonable" and can be "known" and "viewed". The traditional metaphysics represented by Plato-Hegelianism forms the contemplation and understanding of the "dichotomy of subject and object", which is a process of continuous abstraction and construction of objects by reason. At the same time, it is also about constantly questioning "what is" and achieving a "rational" understanding of the world at the intellectual level. This understanding has a strong color of modern natural science.

Since the Enlightenment, reason has been understood by modern philosophers as the "light of nature". "*Enlightenment*" means "illumination" and uses reason as the only criterion for judging right and wrong. Max Weber believed that the modernization path of Western civilization since the Renaissance was the process of cultural "disenchantment" and secularization, and the path it took was rationalism. This path is illuminated by the "light" of reason.

But how can we say that a rational object that is completely different from perceptual reality is in a certain sense "intuited" by reason in the same way as perceptual things? Here, rationality is an advanced cognitive ability in terms of its application. The metaphor of what the eyes see illustrates the relationship between truth (wisdom) and what the eyes see, which hints at the unique love of vision at the origin of Western culture.

Let's take Plato's philosophy as an example. As early as the classical period, Plato had clearly recognized the "antinomy" between human perceptual cognitive abilities and rational cognitive abilities. Therefore, Plato advocates promoting the "soul turn" of the rational subject, so that the mind's "gazing" on reality can rise in the dialectical movement of rational sublation of sensory limitations, and achieve the "knowledge" of pure knowledge – "idea". Idea comes from the Greek word "*edios*", implying that the highest knowledge (being as being, *to on*) is nothing more than something within vision and thinking. This tacitly acknowledges the intrinsic connection between vision and truth at the beginning of metaphysics: truth is the cognitive object of the "eye of reason" and is therefore knowable. To the extent that it is knowable, the truth must be "seen" in one way or another. In addition, Plato's "sun" metaphor also attempts to use light as a medium to bridge the senses and all things. The sun is the source of light, which is the idea of "goodness". Under the "illumination" of the highest ideal, all things are endowed with the essential definition of "genus", and the essence is simultaneously set as "truth" that is higher than perceptual individuality, so it is distinguished from "opinion". Plato's "metaphor of the cave" most vividly expresses the division of "two worlds". The world of truth is just like the world outside the cave. The "prisoners" who escaped from the cave can only correctly understand the way things are when they see the real things with their own eyes. This classification of all individualities into the logic of universality means the birth of "metaphysics", and also lays the hidden danger for rationality to eliminate individuality and then lead to the degradation of intelligence.

In class on March 17, 1976, after a whole semester of theoretical preparation, Foucault finally proposed the emergence of "biopolitics" *(biopolitique)* after the "anatomo-politique" in the 18th century. Foucault defined it as a "nationalization of life", "the right to live and to die" [1]. In the following years of teaching, Foucault's views gradually matured. For example, he mentioned that the so-called "biopolitics" is "from the 18th century onwards, people tried in some way to make those the various problems raised by the practice of governance are rationalized by the unique phenomena of health, sanitation, birth rate, life span, race, etc., which are the totality of living people in the population" [2]. The reason why Foucault's theory deserves attention is that Foucault used an erudite historicism method to sort out

historical materials from the transformation process of modern Western society, and truly empirically pointed out that biopolitics gradually played a role in modern society. Prominence in governance methods. Foucault very concretely made biopolitics a fact with historical content, thus sublating the abstract form of pure metaphysics and subverting the general understanding of the objects of power in traditional political philosophy. To put it simply, Foucault's method is to define knowledge with "genealogy" and "archaeology" and construct a metaphysical "meta-narrative". The classical philosophical model is transformed into a sorting out of events in the historical process.

Agamben points out, "One of the most enduring features of Foucault's work is his decisive abandonment of the traditional approach to the study of power based on juridical-institutional models (definitions of sovereignty, theories of the state). approach, instead supporting an unbiased analysis of the following question: How does power specifically penetrate the bodies of subjects and various forms of life?" [3]. This perfectly illustrates the purpose of Foucault's biopolitical theory. Simply put, biopolitics is a technology that directly governs people. The focus on biopolitics is not simply to divide power, but to point out the boundaries, scope, and influence of power to achieve an analysis of modernity in a specific context. According to Foucault, the underlying concept of biopolitics is the interrelationship of knowledge and power. The combination of the two has produced prisons, schools, hospitals, and other facilities at the level of concrete things, and has produced governance-control science for living people at the level of abstract concepts, constructing life, body, and a series of dominated narratives such as population. The emergence of biopolitics is the result of a multi-factor, interconnected structural transformation. Foucault's work has a philosophical rather than a purely historical status.

The main purpose of analyzing biopolitics from the perspective of visualism is not to define an additional theoretical origin for biopolitics, but to see in what specific operational processes biopolitics embodies "vision", which integrates sensibility and rationality and is highly concentrated in traditional metaphysics. Factors can even provide a more reasonable explanation for a series of phenomena caused by biopolitics. We assume that the above understanding of "visualism" in traditional philosophy is reasonable, and start our analysis of biopolitics with the nature and structure of the so-called "visual".

III. BIOPOLITICS' "OPEN VISION AND RESTORATION" OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE

A. *"Open View": "Opening" and "Planarizing" Life Objects*

In the third chapter of "Discipline and Punish", Foucault first proposed the concept of "panopticism". The invention of the term was directly inspired by Bentham's prison design structures. The "Panopticon" designed by Bentham was not only an innovation in architectural structure, but also marked the spatial redistribution of prison power. The cell leader standing on the central monitoring tower can record, observe, and evaluate everything that happens in each cell at all times without being discovered by the prisoners in the cell from any

angle; on the other hand, the position of the prisoners in the cell Since the outside-in perspective cannot determine whether there are actually police officers inside the central surveillance tower, they can only survive subconsciously under the assumption of the possibility of being observed at all times – thus causing unlimited psychological pressure in the prisoners' hearts. This then forms the prisoner's potential psychological obedience, which is transformed unconsciously. In this way, the design of the prison enables power to operate in such a way in this structure: In this state, if the observer observes the observed, power is invisible at all times and everything is visible; The observer is observed by the observer, and power is always visible and invisible to all visible persons. Foucault summed it up: "The perfect disciplinary institution should make everything clear. The center point should be both the light source that illuminates everything and the convergence point of everything that needs to be understood. It should be the eye that sees everything and the center to which all eyes turn" [4].

In *The Birth of Clinical Medicine*, Foucault combed through the transformation of medicine from closed "categorical medicine" to open "empirical medicine" before and after the French Revolution, and also demonstrated the way in which the bourgeois revolutionary government linked the identity of doctors to social and political governance. Institutional changes imply the supremacy of visual perceptual positivism as a new "knowledge type". Hidden in doctors' analysis and treatment of diseases is the reduction of diseases into a series of understandable perceptual events and phenomena. In the historical stage when anatomical medicine surpasses classification medicine, disease events are not only regarded as the dominance of causal laws or the manifestation process of symptoms, but as the "dark and dense" internal human body in an absolutely real spatial position. "Lesions", and this understanding has not appeared in any previous period. Clinical medicine reached this conclusion in the process of dissecting cadavers. It abandoned the classification of medical tables, clinical records, interviews, and other things that were used to confirm the names of diseases. Instead, it relied more on what the eyes saw to enter the truth of the facts: It turns out that the occurrence of the disease is fundamentally caused by the lesion, a visible change in spatial position, and the ultimate cause that determines all complications. In order to obtain absolutely individualized knowledge, "we sought to obtain a complete and objective view of his situation; we compiled everything we knew about him into his dossier".

How to understand the "panopticon" design and the same structure as the autopsy? In fact, the deepening direction of the rational-scientific-power trial is not only a penetrating process of understanding the body from the outside in, but also a "opening and dissecting" of things that are not present so that they appear present, exposed, and controlled. process under a rational gaze. Scientific rationality needs to find a deterministic explanation, with the purpose of understanding, transforming, appropriating, and correcting what it considers to be wrong, incomprehensible, and dangerous. The eyes of power demand absolute certainty, and the calm gaze implies coldness and ruthlessness. Acquiring absolutely individualized knowledge is the prerequisite for absolutely observing, understanding, and then controlling the individual.

The acquisition of knowledge has always been a process in which the interior of the individual is deeply penetrated and exposed to the spatial distribution of the absolute plane under the clarification of vision. We see that the prerequisite for the disciplinary mechanism to function more deeply is "insight into all possibilities". Foucault analyzed: "In order to exercise this power, it must be equipped with a permanent, insightful, and omnipresent means of surveillance... There are thousands of eyes distributed everywhere, and the flowing attention is always alert, there is a huge hierarchical network… What is recorded here are behaviors, attitudes, possibilities, doubts – a continuing description of an individual's behavior" [4]. If we say that vision has an impact on other sense organs because it elevates the diversity of representations into a comprehensive and unified consciousness and makes it an object of cognition. With the pre-existing nature of obtaining perceptual materials, the preliminary synthesis of intuitive representations must be a flat spatialization process that occurs at a distance from specific things. "Open vision" and "flattening" are two aspects of the same process. Any individual who enters the vision of power will inevitably be "flattened" and exposed to a gaze with a specific purpose. The flat space of rational production is not without depth. It precisely forms a field where power and knowledge are intertwined. The two work together on the living subject, "opening up" everything it needs to know like a scalpel. That is to say, "for clinical experience to become an awareness…the patient must be included in a collective homogeneous space" [5].

B. "Reduction": The "Visual Construction" of Individual Life by Power

Visualism separates the individuality of the objects to be studied from each other, which is the "reduction" of the objects. The biopolitics under visualism is to "restore" life. For example, according to Foucault, if medicine wants to progress, it must continue to obtain more typical cases for "teaching". As a result, the patient's "life" is reduced to "death" and "corpse", and becomes the object of observation for the empirical eyes to seek knowledge – his healthy part becomes redundant, and his disease part becomes his medical significance. The whole essence. After the theory of cadaver anatomy was widely used in medical research, the role of patients' accompanying diseases was further seen and interconnected with death, a deeper life phenomenon. Doctors understand the human body directly from death. "Death exposes the black box of the human body to the light of day: dark life, clear death, these oldest imaginary values in the Western world are intertwined here in a strange sense… The latter turns life into corpses, and then finds fragile and broken ribs of life in the corpses. "Doctors directly consider and even recreate disease symptoms based on their understanding of the structure of corpses". ...valuing certain skills that can suddenly detect lesions has once again become a scientifically based idea... Establishing these man-made or natural signs is to protect the entire network of anatomical pathological localization markers on a living human body: A point map depicting a future autopsy" [5]. The preset premise of autopsy is nothing more than that doctors can "restore" individual life directly through death. Death jumps from the tragic end of life to the beginning of understanding life. Death

is a direct manifestation of the moving essence of disease, a more real presence than the phenomenon of life.

The "reduction" of life objects is also reflected in the process of the construction of objects by ruling power, that is, "power circulates through the individuals it constructs" [1]. In his lecture on "Security, Territory and Population" from 1977 to 1978, Foucault compared the fundamental differences between the "pastorat system" (pastorat) and the politics of Greek city-states, pointing out that the former directly separated rulers and civilians The relationship is regarded as the relationship of "shepherd-sheep". The "shepherd" should lead the "sheep" to "happiness", and the "shepherd" should make every "sheep" "saved". There is no doubt that "pastoral power" contains the germ of biopolitics, because the power of the "shepherd" penetrates the collective nature of the "flock" and points directly to the individual of each "sheep". The Bible records: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what do you think? Wouldn't he leave the ninety-nine and go into the mountains to find the lost sheep?" [6]. However, Foucault pointed out that this kind of political relationship of "pastoral power" is rare in the political concepts of ancient Greek city-states (on the contrary, its tendency is implicit in Plato's thought). "Pastoral power", the essence is to reduce the people to "sheep" waiting for the guidance of the savior: "The Greek gods never lead the people like a shepherd leading his sheep" [7]. "The Greek gods mainly manifest on the city walls to defend his city" [7]. Foucault believes that the "pastoral power" directed at the "flock" is a concept unique to Judeo-Christian which brings stronger strength to Western culture. The Hebrew "pastoral power" is a "hidden line" that is completely different from the Greek democratic political tradition but runs parallel to it. Foucault concluded from this: "The great formation and layout (*économies*) of Western power" were formed in a process of "judicial (pastoral) state-administrative (regulatory-disciplinary) State—The governing (security) state".

IV. THE DEEP ENTANGLEMENT BETWEEN VISUALISM AND BIOPOLITICS

From the above analysis, we can see that the relationship between biopolitics and visualism is complex. The two are mutually inclusive and have a deep logical interaction.

First, biopolitics has never been an exclusive theory of modern philosophy. Foucault examined the social structure of the 17th to 18th centuries through "genealogy" and believed that at this stage the "*raison d'État*" replaced the Christian God and Machiavelli's monarchy and transformed into a more abstract control of state power. understanding, thus opening up the field for the successive emergence of new governance technologies, namely "disciplinary mechanisms" and "security mechanisms". If we agree with Foucault's recognition and understanding of "pastoral power" above, we can immediately see that in the modern and pre-modern times, biopolitics under the understanding of visualism, as a kind of micro-political power, has played a vital role in Western civilization. There are roots in the medium to long term.

Second, the visual elements contained in biopolitics indicate that it has not completely escaped the influence of traditional metaphysics. Visualism is a key quality of Western philosophy, which runs through and appears in the

consciousness of various philosophers from Plato to Hegel, either explicitly or implicitly. Biopolitics, as the theoretical frontier and latest achievement in the field of microscopic research in contemporary Western political philosophy, originated from Foucault's post-structuralist social critical theory and belongs to the study of left-wing thought in contemporary French philosophy. As far as the development of intellectual history is concerned, biopolitics is a postmodern theory and should have the nature of general subject deconstruction and anti-traditional theory. However, after the above analysis, it is found that visualism is still reasonable as a theoretical perspective for re-understanding biopolitics. This shows that although many historical facts borrowed by biopolitics scientists play a very good role in "archaeology" of knowledge and micro-critique of power. But it is not enough to completely draw a clear line between biopolitics and traditional metaphysics, especially the philosophy of subjectivity. Visualism is the remaining trace of biopolitics in metaphysical methods, indicating that the relationship between biopolitics and old philosophy still needs to be studied in depth.

Third, it is difficult for biopolitics under the visualist approach to maintain value neutrality. As pointed out above, biopolitics borrows visualism to "open upvision and restore" the phenomenon of life, highly abstracting the original rich dimensions of individual life and constructing it into a knowledge-based object closely related to governance. Recognizing this process itself is a criticism of power, indicating that at least the process in which power directly points to individual lives by resorting to "visual" methods is a manifestation of the evil nature of power. We see that whether it is the "patient" as a "corpse", the "prisoner" as a "flesh", the "people" as a "flock", or the "sacred man" as a "bare life", their reality must be recognized It acquiesces to the absolute visual visibility and the positivity of objective objects. To put it bluntly, whenever similar narratives appear, it means "not treating people as human beings". In this sense, although biopolitics as a "government" can be a purely political means and therefore "value-neutral", biopolitics as a "visualism" can never be good because it has already been predicted. The destruction, contempt, and trampling of life is the "Ring of Gugos" that we must clearly understand and not use wantonly. Nietzsche seemed to have guessed the occurrence of a distinction very early. He thought angrily: "This is society, our tame, mediocre, castrated society. In such a society, a person who comes from the mountains or has experienced sea adventures The natural man will inevitably degenerate into a criminal".

V. CONCLUSION

The governance of physical life by contemporary biopolitical power is becoming more and more obvious. Together with freedom, democracy, justice, and other macro-political philosophies, it has become an inescapable reality in contemporary society and has participated in supplementing the categories of traditional political philosophy. Visualism is the fundamental nature of Western metaphysics, and it is natural that we can use it to observe biopolitics. This is a transformation of theoretical perspective, which enriches the existing power critique content of biopolitics with the help of metaphysical tradition without falling into pure empirical

analysis. The relationship between the two still needs to be further studied and investigated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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