

Foucault, Hegel, and Philosophy

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Was Foucault a philosopher? Bureaucratically, most certainly: he had advanced degrees in the subject up to the highest level, the *doctorat d'état*, and was a professor in several philosophy departments. But we know how little Foucault cared for what bureaucrats think, and he himself was ambivalent about his philosophical identity. In 1978, he said, "I don't regard myself as a philosopher. What I do is neither a way of doing philosophy nor a way of discouraging others from doing philosophy" (2000: 240–1). But in 1984 he said that his writings "are the record of a long and tentative ... philosophical exercise" (1985: 9). An interesting answer to questions about whether X is a philosopher requires a relevant specific context, something most readily found through a paradigm example of a philosopher. For our modern age, Kant is an obvious choice, and Foucault's much discussed essay on Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" provides a good opening for discussions of what might be his philosophical project (Gutting 2005b). Nonetheless, as I hope to show, Foucault's encounter with Hegel is even more significant for understanding his relation to philosophy. I shall begin with some background on Hegel's place in twentieth-century French philosophy.

The French warmed to Hegel very slowly, despite a number of attempts from the early nineteenth century on to import his thought. In particular, the neo-Kantianism that dominated the French university from the Franco-Prussian War until just before World War II had a strong antipathy to absolute idealism. The founder of the neo-Kantian school, Jules Lachelier, is said to have told his students: "There'll be no Hegel here as long as I'm around" (Sartre 1978: 25). This began to change with the publication of *Le Malheur de conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (Wahl 1929). Jean Wahl taught history of philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1927 to 1967. His books on Hegel and Kierkegaard were an important influence on the development of

existentialism (Sartre also particularly mentions *Vers le concret* (Wahl 1932), which, however, oddly centered on William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gabriel Marcel – although there were frequent references in the footnotes to Heidegger). Later, Wahl worked closely with Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and was a good friend of Levinas. Jean Hyppolite's role came later, but was even more important. He became professor in the history of philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1949 and was also, from 1954, director of the École normale supérieure. Hyppolite held both positions until 1963 (when he was elected to the Collège de France), teaching influential courses on the history of philosophy (especially Hegel) and directing many theses, including those of Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze.

Wahl approached Hegel through the famous chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the “unhappy consciousness.” In Hegel's presentation, this chapter corresponds to just one stage in the dialectical development of spirit, the stage that Hegel calls “the Alienated Soul which is the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a doubled and merely contradictory being” (#207). The division is that between the contingent, multiple and changeable, self of my experience and the essential, simple and unchanging, self that I know I must be. On the one hand, this unhappy consciousness is the higher truth implicit in the preceding stage of skepticism, in which the doubting self unreflectively accepts the contradiction between its explicit effort to question everything and its implicit acceptance of truths essential for its life in the world. The “doubling” of the unhappy consciousness is its reflective awareness of both the explicit, contingent doubting self and the implicit, essential self that escaped genuine doubt. On the other hand, at the stage of unhappy consciousness, spirit continues to see the essential self as outside of its own contingent being in the world, thinking of it as an unattainable (though deeply desired) end (e.g., the transcendent God of Christianity). At the next stage, that of Reason, spirit realizes that the unhappy separation of its contingency from essential reality is an illusion: spirit itself *is* the essential nature from which it seemed to be separated. This, for Hegel, is the first stage of idealism, where the spirit begins to realize its identity with the essential, absolute truth.

Wahl, however, suggests that the unhappy consciousness, which Hegel presents as just one stage of spirit's development, can in fact be taken as the condition of consciousness at every stage of the dialectic short of the final synthesis in the Absolute's self-knowledge. At each point, there is a lived division between what spirit experiences itself as being and an apparently unattainable other that it aspires to be. From this standpoint, unhappy

consciousness becomes a basis for interpreting the whole of the *Phenomenology*. Given such an interpretation, Wahl is led to what came to be called an “anthropological reading” of Hegel. Hegel’s description of the unhappy consciousness is taken as corresponding to the quintessential human experience, as, for example, embodied in the great Greek and Shakespearean tragedies that we see as the fullest expression of our lived reality. Human experience, then, becomes the privileged model for the life of Hegel’s spirit. The result, as Wahl puts it, is a “pantragicist” interpretation of Hegel, which extends the tragic vision of human life to Being itself.

Apart from its (debatable) merits as Hegel interpretation, the beauty of Wahl’s book was that it showed how even philosophers who had no sympathy with Hegel’s general approach or final conclusions could extract an attractive core from his system. Whether or not you accepted the dialectical method or the absolute idealism to which Hegel thought it led, you could appreciate the power of applying the method to the special case of human consciousness. Even if relentless dialectical self-negation is vapid as an account of nature or implausible as an account of history, it rings true of the endlessly self-reflective and self-questing of our lived experience. Whatever else Hegel achieved, he honed a language well suited – precisely because of its continual self-conflict – to describe the complex torsions of consciousness.

Wahl’s approach also had the advantage of allowing French philosophers to assimilate Hegel’s phenomenology – construed as the careful description of concrete experience – to that practiced by Husserl and also by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. (The last two were closely connected, because the Husserl imported into France – e.g., by Koyré and Levinas – was read through Heideggerian lenses.) Add the vocabulary of Hegelian unhappy consciousness to a Heideggerized Husserlian phenomenology and you have the means to carry out Sartre’s ontology of freedom. For example, the key formulation that *human consciousness is not what it is and is what it is not* came to Sartre from Hegel through Wahl.

Although Wahl’s strategy for appropriating Hegel fit perfectly with the project of existential phenomenology, it lost its charm when, in the wake of structuralism, the French turned away from subjectivity and lived experience as royal road to philosophy. But the new “death-of-man” orientation was well served by the reading of Hegel put forward by Hyppolite.

In the very beginning of the chapter on “The Unhappy Consciousness” in his magnum opus, *The Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hyppolite (1974: 190) acknowledges the validity of Wahl’s interpretation, saying that “unhappy consciousness is the fundamental theme of the

Phenomenology. Consciousness, as such, is in principle always unhappy consciousness.” But he goes on to point out that “nonetheless unhappy consciousness, in the strict sense of the term, is the result of the development of self-consciousness” (ibid.), thus implicitly distinguishing Wahl’s broad sense of “unhappy consciousness” from the narrow sense Hegel has in mind in his chapter explicitly on the topic, which treats unhappy consciousness as due simply to reflection on the specific form of self-consciousness that makes explicit the contradiction of skepticism. Wahl, he implies, is right because “this reflection implies a split with life, a separation so radical that consciousness of it is consciousness of the unhappiness of all reflection” (ibid.). But Hyppolite restricts his own detailed discussion to Hegel’s narrow sense.

Later in his chapter, Hyppolite alludes to the use made of Wahl’s interpretation by the existentialists. He points out that in Hegel’s idealism there is eventually a synthesis whereby the division of the unhappy consciousness is overcome and spirit achieves an “objectivity that is no longer the pure and simple in-itself; it has become the in-itself for-itself or the for-itself in-itself.” The result is “a substance that is at the same time subject, a substance that poses itself as what it is” (ibid.: 204). Hyppolite then notes that “most contemporary thinkers deny the possibility of such a synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself, and it is precisely on this ground that they criticize Hegel’s system as a system” (ibid.). Instead:

[T]hey generally prefer what Hegel calls “unhappy consciousness” to what he calls “spirit.” They take up Hegel’s description of self-certainty which fails to be in-itself; but they abandon Hegel when, according to him, specific self-consciousness – subjectivity – becomes the universal self-consciousness – thingness – a movement through which being is posed as subject and subject is posed as being.

In other words, “they accept Hegel’s phenomenology but reject his ontology” (ibid.: 204–5). Hyppolite diplomatically says that his brief here is not to debate this issue, but simply “to elucidate as clearly as possible the endeavor of the *Phenomenology*.” In this regard, he concludes, “there can be no doubt about the meaning of the dialectic of unhappy consciousness. As Hegel put it explicitly: ‘Self-consciousness that reaches its fulfillment in the figure of unhappy consciousness is only the torment of spirit struggling to rise again to an objective, but failing to reach it’” (ibid.: 205). Hyppolite at least makes it entirely clear that the existentialist reading is not Hegel’s own.

Hyppolite's later book on Hegel, *Logic and Existence* (1952), moves more decisively away from the existentialists' anthropological reading and gives central place to language rather than to human consciousness. He begins with the idea that there are aspects of being that are ineffable and so not accessible to knowledge but only to some sort of non-cognitive apprehension. The ineffable might take the form of an immediate sensation "beneath" knowledge, which Hegel discusses at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, or, at the other extreme, a faith in an absolute that transcends knowledge, which Hegel discusses in his early critique of Jacobi (in *Faith and Knowledge*). As Hyppolite emphasizes, the existence of an ineffable contradicts Hegel's fundamental assertion that knowledge is absolute; that is, complete and all-encompassing.

To appreciate this point, Hyppolite briefly recalls some basic features of Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology*. In that book, Hegel tries to demonstrate through a detailed analysis of various sorts (stages) of experience that all being is pervaded by conceptual structures that make it exhaustively knowable. Of course, the subject that has this knowledge is not the finite human consciousness as we experience it in everyday life but rather the spirit that the *Phenomenology* ultimately reveals as identical with being itself, which thus turns out to be its own self-knowledge. But the project of the *Phenomenology* is to examine successive forms of finite human experience, starting with the immediate certainty of our sensations and moving through perception of physical objects, the understanding achieved by experimental and theoretical science, etc., to the highest cultural forms of experience (art, religion). For each stage of experience, Hegel develops arguments purporting to show that the stage contains contradictions, resulting from the fact that the knowledge it achieves leaves out something that appears to be essentially unknowable. The process of working through these contradictions is what Hegel calls "dialectic."

For example, the certainty of sensation derives from what seems to be the sheer immediacy of the sensory experience; that is, the experience is apparently not "mediated" by interpretive concepts, which would open up the possibility of our misunderstanding the experience's content. We are, we think, certain because we are in direct contact with a unique object (a "this") in its full concrete singularity. But, Hegel argues, the exclusion (in the name of certainty) of conceptual content is inconsistent with the singularity of the "this" we are experiencing. For if there is no conceptual content in our experience, there is nothing to distinguish the "this" from any other concrete "this" of which we might have a sensation. As a result, the "this," which

seemed to apply to a unique singularity, applies universally to all possible sensations. But this result contradicts the claim that we are in direct contact with a unique object and thereby undermines the certainty of the experience. Later stages of consciousness can be analyzed in a parallel way. One that Hyppolite (1997: 16) discusses (§§360–3) is illustrated by an episode from Goethe's *Faust*, in which "consciousness, weary of the universality of knowledge and of the burden of mediation, ... claims to back completely to ineffable pleasure." Another is that corresponding to the development of philosophical empiricism (§558).

After working through many successive stages of experience in this way, Hegel eventually reaches the stage of "absolute knowledge"; that is, an experience that encompasses unlimited knowledge of all being. Each successive stage resolves the contradictions of the preceding stage by reconciling ("sublating") them under a higher, synthesizing concept. For example, the stage of unhappy consciousness, discussed above, resolves the contradiction between the doubt and the certainty of skeptical consciousness by ascribing the doubts to a finite self and the certainty to an infinite self from which the finite self is separated. The final stage, the experience of absolute knowledge, effects a total synthesis, a total reconciliation, of the contradictions of all the preceding stages. The subject of this experience is, as we noted above, not our ordinary human consciousness but "absolute spirit," the totality of all being existing as the historical process of its knowledge of itself. Since absolute spirit contains literally everything in its total self-knowledge, there is no ineffable that would escape its final conceptual synthesis.

So far, we have spoken of knowledge as knowledge of being. Such knowledge is universal, which means that, in particular, "it sublates and absorbs all the consciousnesses of singular selves" (Hyppolite 1997: 10). On Hyppolite's reading of Hegel, this implies "the possibility of a universal recognition, of an intelligible discourse which is simultaneously this 'I' and all 'I's.'" In other words, "language ... is the universal instrument of mutual recognition" (ibid.). It follows that "knowledge ... is not only knowledge of being, it is also what makes the instituted community of consciousnesses possible," which means that knowledge is essentially linguistic, since language is the instrument of communication. Nor is language present only in the final synthesis that is absolute spirit. Each stage of Hegel's dialectic can be understood as a process of dialogue ("originally, what does the word dialectic mean, if not the art of discussion and dialogue?"). "Human life is always language, sense, without which human life loses its character and returns to animal life." At any stage, "dialectical discourse could be

interrupted, and skepticism [about the conceptual synthesis that moves the dialectic forward] is in effect always possible." This happens when consciousness "rejects language and discourse and claims to reach an ineffable absolute." But such a claim either "says the opposite of what it intends [by trying to say anything at all], and [then] it is language which is right"; or else, if a consciousness "stubbornly renounces language, this consciousness can only get lost, dissolved." What is supposed to be the ineffable is merely "the abstraction of nothingness" (ibid.: 11).

Granted that Hegel has established that language is the engine of his dialectic, the "*Dasein* [*l'être-là*] of spirit" (ibid.: 19), the next question is just how to understand language in this sense. Hyppolite rejects the "humanistic" interpretation (which is just a variation on the anthropological interpretation in terms of lived experience). Even "in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel does not say man, but self-consciousness. The modern interpreters who have immediately translated this term by man have somewhat falsified Hegel's thought." Hyppolite agrees that, for Hegel, "the Logos appears in the human knowledge that interprets and says itself." But he emphasizes that, nonetheless, "man is only the intersection of this knowledge and this sense. Man is consciousness and self-consciousness, but consciousness and self-consciousness are not man." We need to understand "that Hegel's philosophy results at least as much in a speculative logic as in a philosophy of history" (ibid.: 20).¹ Correspondingly, the language that drives the dialectic is not that of ordinary "natural" human speech; it is, rather, "the authentic language of being" (ibid.: 26). Nonetheless, natural human language is not separate from the "language of being," any more than finite human consciousness is separate from absolute spirit. According to Hegel, spirit is not a transcendent reality, existing outside human history; on the contrary, it is ultimately identical with that history. Accordingly, as Hyppolite puts it, the language of being exists "within natural language," even though it is not the same as the merely human language spoken in any particular stage, short of absolute knowledge, of Hegel's phenomenology of consciousness. What we need to understand, however, is "how is this language, which is no longer that of anyone, which is being's universal self-consciousness, to be distinguished from human, all-too-human language? In other words how does the passage from *Phenomenology* to absolute Knowledge work?" (ibid.: 26–7). This, Hyppolite tells us, "is the Hegelian question par excellence" (ibid.: 27).

Even at the end of Hyppolite's detailed reflection on this question, the answer is not entirely clear. What is clear is that "Hegel believed himself able

to comprehend human reflection in the light of absolute knowledge,” and Hyppolite allows that “the principle of this comprehension is contained in the meaning of Hegelian ontology.” In other words, given Hegelian dialectic, we are able to understand how finite human existence is included (sublated) into the final synthesis of spirit’s absolute knowledge. But Hegel also believed that he could “exhibit human consciousness’s becoming-absolute-knowledge, as if this becoming were a history”; that is, an occurrence within the temporal framework of human history. If this were not the case, how could we, who exist in human history, move to the level of absolute knowledge? Hyppolite (*ibid.*: 189) agrees that human history “is the place of this passage” of human consciousness to absolute knowledge, but he notes that “this passage is not itself a *historical fact*.” This is because, for Hegel, although absolute knowledge does not exist outside of the historical world (the historical world is the only world), there is still a priority of the absolute over history: “The Logos [absolute knowledge] is absolute genesis, and time is the image of this mediation, not the reverse” (*ibid.*: 188). But the passage of human consciousness to absolute knowledge is precisely the genesis of absolute knowledge, so if this passage were an event of human history, time would be the ultimate source of absolute knowledge. Hegel seems to have no answer to this final question about how we reach absolute knowledge.

The young French philosophers, including Foucault, who studied Hegel with Hyppolite were not concerned with saving the self-consistency of the Hegelian system. Like their existentialist predecessors, they found no plausibility or even charm in the idea of absolute knowledge and, indeed, insisted on giving priority to the finite world of human existence. But, again like the existentialists, they found Hegel’s vocabulary of dialectical negation a perspicuous medium for philosophical reflection, particularly in fact for exploring the differences (“contradictions”) that remain irreducible given the failure of absolute knowledge. On the other hand, they rejected the existentialists’ prioritization of human consciousness and accordingly found attractive Hegel’s emphasis (at least in Hyppolite’s interpretation) on language, which they could use to de-center lived experience. Indeed, they thought they could use dialectical arguments à la Hegel to refute existentialist claims about the absolute position of human consciousness. Such arguments could, moreover, show that consciousness existed only in an ontological field of linguistic structures, which themselves had to be understood in terms of broadly Hegelian differences. The result was a domain of investigation that occupied, to adapt a phrase of Leonard Lawler’s (2003),

the Hyppolitean middle: a turbulent space delimited by the two unacceptable resting points of existential phenomenology and Hegelian absolute knowledge. It is this domain that, for the young Foucault, would have defined his possibilities as a philosopher.

This focus on the Hyppolitean middle reflects a long-standing concern of French philosophy with the tension between the concrete experience of the lifeworld and the universal concepts of rational thought. Alain Badiou (2005), for example, has recently emphasized the role of this tension in French thought at least from the days of Bergson and Brunschvicg (with roots as far back as Descartes) and, in particular, proposed reading the story of French philosophy since 1940 as an effort to combine a philosophy of concrete life with a philosophy of the abstract concept.² After about 1960, younger philosophers who had found existentialist reductions of Hegel to the endless dialectic of unhappy consciousness philosophically inadequate (and likewise, as the French always had, rejected a culmination of dialectic in absolute knowledge) were naturally drawn to a rethinking of the role of the concept (rational structure) in Hegelian terms.

In 1969, in his eulogy for Hyppolite at the École normale, Foucault formulates the problem in terms of the fundamental question Hyppolite posed for Hegel: how to unite the standpoint of the *Phenomenology* and that of the *Logic*. “M. Hyppolite has always, from the beginning,” focused his work on “the point where the tragedy of life finds its meaning in a Logic, where the genesis of a thought becomes the structure of a system, where existence itself is articulated in a Logic” (Foucault 1969: 134; my translation). This, indeed, was the theme of Hyppolite’s *Logic and Existence*, which Foucault calls “one of the great books of our time” (ibid.: 136; my translation).

About two years later, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, where he succeeded Hyppolite, Foucault (1972), in a warm and informative concluding tribute to his former teacher, put the matter in more personal terms. Hyppolite, he said, was crucial for his own effort to “truly escape from Hegel,” an enterprise requiring “an exact appreciation of the price we must pay to detach ourselves from him” and of “the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us” (ibid.: 236). The price of escaping Hegel (and the risk of failure), Foucault suggests, arises from what he sees as the central concern of Hyppolite’s study of Hegel: “Can one still philosophize where Hegel is no longer possible? Can any philosophy continue to exist that is no longer Hegelian? Are the non-Hegelian elements in our thought necessarily non-philosophical? Is that which is antiphilosophical

necessarily non-Hegelian?” (ibid.: 236–7). In short, is being a Hegelian a necessary and sufficient condition of being a philosopher?

We may well wonder why Foucault thinks there’s a serious question of whether there can be a non-Hegelian philosophy. For Foucault, at least, a clue to the answer immediately follows in his text where he makes reference to modernity. Hyppolite, he says, “wanted to turn Hegel into a schema for the experience of modernity (is it possible to think of the sciences, politics and daily suffering as a Hegelian?) and he wanted, conversely, to make modernity the test of Hegelianism and, beyond that, of philosophy” (ibid.: 236). Foucault accepted the (Hegelian) idea that philosophy, at any given time, must “comprehend its age in thought,” which for us means the age we call “modern” – in the Kantian sense of an age of free individuals who strive to define their own identity rather than accept the definitions of external authorities. But, although Foucault’s broad characterization of modernity is Kantian, he rejects Kant’s view that the role of philosophy is to discover universal transcendental principles for understanding and grounding our freedom. In the essay, “What Is Enlightenment?” Foucault embraces the modernity of Baudelaire rather than of Kant: “Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth, he is the man who tries to invent himself” (2000: 311) For this project of invention, we need to invert the Kantian method of finding the necessary conditions for the possibility of our knowledge and ask, instead, “In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory” what is in fact merely “singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (ibid.: 315). In short, we need a philosophical approach tuned to the full historicity of our current situation. Who but Hegel offers such an approach?

But, at the same time, Foucault’s modernism leaves no room for Hegelian absolute knowledge, which, from the viewpoint of the historical individual, is the ultimate threat to free self-invention. The question, then, becomes, as Hyppolite saw, whether the Hegelian dialectic can be adapted to provide a philosophical understanding of our modernity, or will our effort to deploy it either lead us back to the illusion of absolute knowledge (“motionless, waiting for us”) or be inadequate to the realities of our situation? Further, given that Hegelian dialectic is, *de facto*, the only current philosophical approach geared to a genuinely historical understanding, will its failure mean the failure of philosophy as such? Or will we be able to invent a new, non-Hegelian approach? On Foucault’s reading of Hyppolite, these are genuine questions, which will determine the fate of philosophy in the modern period: Hyppolite “never saw the

Hegelian system as a reassuring universe; he saw in it the field in which philosophy took the ultimate risk" (Foucault 1972: 236).

In formulating these questions, Hyppolite, Foucault tells us, effected five fundamental alterations "not within Hegelian philosophy, but upon it." First, he gave up Hegel's claim that philosophy could culminate in a "totality" that synthesized and reconciled all oppositions, and instead presented philosophy, as Husserl did, as "an endless task, against the background of an infinite horizon." Second, and following from the first, he replaced the finality of absolute knowledge with the idea of "continuous recommencement," thereby transferring "the Hegelian theme of the end of self-consciousness into one of repeated interrogation" (recalling Kierkegaard's category of repetition). Third, rather than absorbing all non-philosophical experience and knowledge into spirit's final philosophical synthesis, Hyppolite, in the manner of Bergson, "reestablish[ed] the contact with the non-philosophical" in a non-reductive manner. Fourth, the irreducibility of the non-philosophical led him to look back, like Fichte rather than Hegel, to the question of how philosophy might find its beginning in the non-philosophical. Specifically (and this is the last alteration), Hyppolite invoked the challenge of Marx, and asked: "[I]f philosophy must begin as absolute discourse, then what of history and what is this beginning which starts out with a singular individual, within a society and a social class, and in the midst of struggle?" (ibid.). This invocation of the "singular individual" refers to the fixed point of French philosophy throughout the twentieth century, the irreducibility of the free individual, which had always stood as the fundamental obstacle to a French appropriation of Hegel's thought. Although, for Foucault (as for Deleuze and Derrida), this obstacle was, in moral and political terms, as strong or stronger than ever, Hyppolite had led them to an appreciation of Hegel's power as a thinker of historical realities that required their coming to terms with his dialectic. Hyppolite's five "alterations" provided the matrix from which Foucault hoped to effect this "coming to terms" with Hegel.

The first two alterations suggested a philosophical project that gave up the goal of final truth and became an "infinite task" continually starting over (what we might call Sisyphean philosophy). The second two alterations proposed giving up the goal of autonomy and admitting that philosophy itself originates from and is in constant interaction with irreducibly non-philosophical domains of experience and understanding. The last alteration in effect sums up all the others by recognizing that a philosophy that is neither final nor autonomous provides no escape from the vicissitudes of human history.

It is clear that Foucault himself accepted all of these alterations. But concretely, what were the alternatives to Hegelianism in its absolute form? In a 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault describes the “intellectual panorama” presented to him in his student days (the early fifties) as he tried to choose his own approach. The two extremes of the panorama were “Hegel’s theory of systems” and “the philosophy of the subject ... in the form of phenomenology and existentialism.” Outside the university, “it was Sartre,” with his particular version of the philosophy of the subject, “who was in fashion.” Within the university, Hegelianism was dominant, although “it was a Hegelianism permeated with phenomenology and existentialism, centered on the theme of the unhappy consciousness.” A third alternative, “establishing a meeting point between the academic philosophical tradition and phenomenology, was the work of Merleau-Ponty (friend of Sartre but also a Sorbonne professor), “who extended existential discourse into specific domains” (Foucault 2000: 247).

In assessing these alternatives, the young Foucault, already reflecting the viewpoint of his late essay on Enlightenment, sought an approach that offered “the broadest possible mode of understanding the contemporary world” (ibid.: 246). Nor was this just a vague matter of wanting a philosophy that was “up-to-date.” Foucault saw an urgent need to escape from the mistakes that had led to the horrors of World War II. “The experience of the war had shown us the urgent need of a society radically different from the one in which we were living, this society that had permitted Nazism, that had lain down in front of it, and that had gone over en masse to de Gaulle.” Foucault shared the “total disgust toward all that” with “a large sector of French youth” (ibid.: 247). As a result, “we wanted a world and a society that were not only different but that would be an alternative version of ourselves: we wanted to be completely other in a completely different world” (ibid.: 247–8).

This desire for a complete break with the past excluded “the Hegelianism offered to us at the university,” since Hegel’s dialectic, “with its model of history’s unbroken intelligibility,” required the continual inclusion of the past in the future (ibid.: 248). But, at the same time, Foucault was firmly opposed to existential phenomenology, whether formulated by Sartre or by Merleau-Ponty, because he questioned “the category of the subject, its supremacy, its foundational function” (ibid.: 247). *The Order of Things* deploys philosophical critiques of the subject, but apart from such critiques, Foucault found a philosophy of the subject incapable of taking him beyond the self that the society he rejected wanted to mold for him:

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a way of bringing a reflective gaze to bear on some object of "lived experience," on the everyday in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meanings. ... Moreover, phenomenology attempts to recapture the meaning of everyday experience in order to rediscover the sense in which the subject that I am is indeed responsible, in its transcendental functions, for founding that experience together with its meanings. (Foucault 2000: 241)

Foucault did not deny that there is a subject in this phenomenological sense. No doubt, "the subject dispenses significations"; "that point was not called back in question." Rather, he says, "the question was: Can it be said that the subject is the only possible form of experience? Can't there be experiences in the course of which the subject is no longer posited, in its constitutive relations, as what makes it identical with itself?" (*ibid.*: 248).

Foucault saw postwar society as turning its youth into subjects who would continue the sordid history that had produced the war. Mere descriptions of the essential characteristics of all subjects, à la phenomenology, would do nothing to stop this process. What was needed, rather, were "experiences in which the subject might be able to dissociate from itself, sever the relation with itself, lose its identity" (*ibid.*). It was the need for such radically transformative experience that turned Foucault away from the Hegelian and existentialist ways of understanding his world.

What he turned to were two avant-garde literary figures, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, who then referred him to Nietzsche, who, because of the way the Nazis had used him, "was completely excluded from the academic syllabus" (*ibid.*). "What struck me and fascinated me about those authors," Foucault tells us, "and what gave them their capital importance for me, was that their problem was not the construction of a system but the construction of a personal experience." Whereas "phenomenological work consists in unfolding the field of possibilities, related to everyday experience," the personal experiences constructed by Bataille, Blanchot, and Nietzsche are "limit-experiences" that "have the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution." This is what Foucault calls "the project of desubjectivation" (*ibid.*: 241) and makes the purpose of all his books: "however boring, however erudite my books may be, I've always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same" (*ibid.*: 241–2).

His emphasis on such extreme experiences might suggest that Foucault's books are anti-Hegelian in the very strong sense of evoking ineffable states that cannot be expressed through the shared categories of language and so escape the rational structures of philosophical explanation. Nonetheless, limit-experiences themselves play little role in his books. The *topics* of these books are things associated with extreme experiences: madness, sickness and death, crime and punishment, sexuality. Even the apparently more sober topic of knowledge in *The Order of Things* deals with radical differences in fundamental frameworks of thought – as in Borges's fictional "Chinese encyclopedia," of which "we apprehend in one great leap ... the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (Foucault 1970: xv). But, despite a certain amount of evocative prose (e.g., in the original Preface, later dropped, of *History of Madness*), the bulk of Foucault's discussion is about how (quite ordinary) people in various ages viewed madness, death, sex, etc., not the actual limit-experiences of the mad, the dying, the sexually ecstatic, etc. Since, according to Foucault, outside perceptions of madness and the like were, no longer ago than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, radically different from our own, his explications of these perceptions can help shake us out of the dogmatic doze that hides alternatives to our conventional ways of thinking. But such increased alertness to possibilities is far from the explosion of identity Foucault says he was seeking. Even if the process of writing his books had such an effect for him, this was not expressed in their contents.

Rather than evocations of limit-experiences, we typically find analyses of the deep rational structures that Foucault eventually calls epistemes: conceptual systems underlying the thought and language of a given historical period. In his earlier works – up through *The Order of Things* – Foucault avoids Hegelianism by ignoring questions about the transition from one system to another, restricting his discussion to the excavation of the implicit cognitive rules (hence his label, "the archaeology of knowledge"). But although this synchronic focus blocks the dialectic, it is tempting to regard Foucault's project as a historicized version of transcendental philosophy, a temptation reinforced by his frequent claim that his archaeology is concerned with the "historical a priori."

Béatrice Han (2002), in particular, has made an elaborate and instructive case for a transcendental Foucault. In my view, however, she does so by taking with a high philosophical seriousness what are in fact just Foucault's heuristic (and sometimes ironic) use of a variety of vocabularies, especially Kantian and Heideggerian, to characterize what are his essentially historical

projects. (We will return to Han's interpretation below.) I say that Foucault's projects are essentially historical because their success or failure depends ultimately on their fidelity to the total body of contingent historical details. It is true, as I have argued elsewhere, that, as histories, Foucault's accounts are not simple empirical generalizations open to instant refutation by a few pointed counter-examples (Gutting 2005a: 65–9). Rather, they provide broad interpretive frameworks – characteristic of what we might call idealist rather than empiricist history – that must be judged by their ability to understand an overall body of data, not to accurately reflect each single data-point. So, for example, when Foucault, in *History of Madness*, says that confinement of the mad in asylums was a distinctive feature of the classical age's treatment of the mad, he is not asserting (as certain critics have assumed) that there were no asylums prior to the seventeenth century. His point is that, in the classical age, confinement was, for the first time, regarded as the canonical way of treating the mad. Such a claim is not inconsistent with earlier examples of confinement and with the existence of other classical ways of treating the mad. Nonetheless, it remains empirically refutable by, for example, evidence that confinement was merely an occasional ancillary to medical treatment. Even the most comprehensive views about how people thought in the past are not distinctively philosophical – and certainly not transcendental – if their justification requires the support of specific bodies of empirical data. Since Foucault's general claims about thinking in the classical and modern ages do require such support, those claims are essentially historical, not transcendental.

After *The Order of Things*, beginning with *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault finally turned to questions about the diachronic, causal development of thought, questions he had earlier avoided because he found the standard ways of treating them – by evoking a broadly Hegelian “spirit of the times” or Marxist references to technological and social changes or academic historians' appeals to intellectual influences – were “more magical than effective” (Foucault 1970: xiii). His rejection of the first two approaches also no doubt reflects his fear of slipping into the totalizing syntheses of the Hegelian system or similar “grand narratives.” Eventually, however, Foucault developed what, with an overt nod to Nietzsche, he called his genealogical method for explaining changes in ways of thinking.

This method decisively escaped anything resembling Hegelianism by insisting on explanations that were multiple, contingent, and corporeal. Epistemes shifted, he claimed, not because of pervasive monolithic forces such as spirit's elimination of contradiction or Marxist materialist equivalents, but because

of the chance convergence of specific practical techniques for, e.g., teaching children how to write, training soldiers in the use of their rifles, making factory workers more efficient producers. Genealogy, accordingly, provides historical explanations without any reference to anything approaching the general, a priori principles of Hegelian thought.

Some (both critics and supporters) have found a grand narrative – philosophical or at least high-level social scientific theorizing – in Foucault's views on the relation of power and knowledge. In particular, it is claimed that Foucault presents knowledge as so dependent on the power structures of the society in which it is produced that it has no independent cognitive authority. Consequently, he is either hailed or denounced as a proponent of epistemological relativism or skepticism. But Foucault has no interest in skepticism as a general philosophical thesis or attitude. His skepticism is directed toward quite specific and local claims to cognitive authority on the part of psychiatrists, criminologists, sexologists, etc. He has no brief against the authority of, say, mathematicians, physicists, chemists, or evolutionary biologists; or, for that matter, most historians and economists. Further, the general remarks he does make (e.g., in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*) about the nature of power are designed to emphasize the diverse forms and locations of power in a society (his “micro-physics” of power) and thereby oppose any monolithic account of its operation and effects – hardly the basis for a general skepticism based on the distorting effects of power. Even so, some may maintain that the mere fact that Foucault presents all knowledge as intimately tied to power structures implies a global skepticism. This is not *prima facie* obvious; it is hard to think that, for example, its support and direction by government agencies undermines the cognitive authority of nuclear science. More generally, there may well be a viable epistemic compatibilism that reconciles knowledge and social causation. In any case, apart from any suggestive speculations he may offer on how to think about power/knowledge in general, Foucault's specific histories do not require a global skepticism.

It is also possible to read Foucault's last two books (on ancient Greek and Roman sexuality) as implying a return, in an ethical context, to a philosophy of the subject. Here Foucault's histories work along not just the previous two axes of knowledge (archaeology) and power (genealogy) but add an axis of the individual subject, which “constitutes” itself in the context of the first two axes. But, of course, merely bringing into the discussion the individuals who are the subjects of knowledge and power hardly requires accepting a transcendental standpoint, which requires a very particular

conception of the subject (that which Foucault denotes in *The Order of Things* as “man”). Han (2002: 187), however, maintains that Foucault’s subject is a transcendental ego: “Foucault reactivates the perspective of a constitutive subjectivity and understands the constitution of the self by means of the atemporal structure of recognition,” a position which would put him firmly back into the philosophy of the subject.

Han takes Foucault to be making this surprising move because he presents the subject as forming itself by a process of reflection and action, as, for example, when he says that thought (that whereby the subject gives itself a specific meaning) is “freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.” On Han’s reading, such passages imply that Foucault’s subject is “autonomous” (ibid.: 172), even, she suggests, in the radical sense of Sartrean existentialist humanism (ibid.: 169). She goes so far as to claim that:

[Foucault’s] insistence on the importance of problematization and recognition as *voluntary* and *reflective* activities leads Foucault to envisage the relationship to the body in a purely unilateral manner, as an action of the self on the self, where the body only appears as material for transformation while consciousness seems to be paradoxically reinstalled in the sovereign position that genealogy had criticized. (Ibid.: 165)

As I see it, Han’s reading of Foucault ignores the fact that freedom and reflection need not be read as the technical terms of idealist philosophy but may refer to everyday features of human life (the metaphysical equivalent to Freud’s famous reminder that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar). In their everyday sense, freedom and reflection do not imply Kantian (or Sartrean) autonomy. They may, for example, represent the small spark of subjectivity in a context heavily constrained by the social system of power-knowledge. In his books on ancient sexuality, Foucault of course often uses Platonic vocabulary, which smacks of strong autonomy. Moreover, since the power-knowledge constraints of ancient Greece and Rome are no longer relevant to us, he has little to say about them. He is simply looking for modes of thinking about the self (e.g., in terms of an aesthetics of existence) that might suggest strategies in our struggle with modern disciplinary society. None of this provides grounds for concluding that Foucault has lapsed into transcendentalism.

Foucault’s work is not a contribution to philosophy in the sense that has defined the discipline since at least Kant and Hegel: a body of theoretical

knowledge about fundamental human questions. He had no such theoretical conclusions to offer us, just ethical and political commitments to the kind of life he wanted to live. This was a life of continual free self-transformation, unhindered by unnecessary conceptual and social constraints. His intellectual enterprise was the critique of disciplines and practices that restrict the freedom to transform ourselves. He did not object to those who continued to build new theoretical structures, and, in some cases, such as Deleuze, he seemed to endorse their results. But he was not really a philosopher in the modern sense. Of course, Foucault's books, like other classics of intellectual history, exhibit enormous philosophical talent and are often of great interest to philosophers. Moreover, as his final work makes clear, he was a philosopher in the ancient sense of someone who sought, if not to know, then to live the truth.

Notes

- 1 By "speculative" here, Hegel does not mean "improbable" or "unwarranted" but, rather, "operating at a level of reason, above ordinary human consciousness."
- 2 This recalls Foucault's similar distinction between the philosophy of experience and the philosophy of the concept, although, speaking of his student days, he presented this as a choice between existential phenomenology and philosophy of science (as developed by Bachelard and Canguilhem), not a project of reconciliation. From a broader perspective, however, the choice between, say, Merleau-Ponty and Canguilhem was between two ways of resolving Badiou's tension, the first giving priority to experience and the second to concepts.

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