

## INTRODUCTION

Freedom is a concept that it is repeatedly used today in discourses ranging from political philosophy and rhetoric to self-help guides, yet it seems that it has never been less clear what it means. This is not only due to conceptual confusion or lack of philosophical precision. The effects of the rapid process of economic and cultural globalization have made many of our traditional ways of thinking and living redundant, and have raised critical questions about our ‘freedom’ to command our lives. On the other hand, neo-liberalism and the extreme individualism characterizing our culture have made ‘freedom’ itself a contestable value.

One strand in this present ‘crisis’ of freedom is the critique of an autonomous subject which characterizes post-structuralist thinking. Michel Foucault’s thought – and post-structuralist thinking as a whole – is often read as a rejection of the subject. This ‘rejection’ is interpreted in varying terms. The subject cannot ground knowledge, meanings or morality. It is not the agent of social or epistemic changes, but rather the effect of them. There is no subject in itself prior to the normalizing cultural coding that turns the human being into a subject. All possible ways to comprehend oneself and to act in a coherent fashion are conditioned by a historically varying cultural matrix.

The charges against Foucault’s thought in contemporary debates often focus on the question of the freedom of the subject and the notions that are understood as intrinsically tied to or dependent on it: autonomy, authenticity, responsibility, political agency. According to many of Foucault’s critics, the denial of an autonomous subject leads to the denial of any meaningful concept of freedom, which again leads to the impossibility of emancipatory politics. When there is no authentic subjectivity to liberate, and power, as the principle of constitution,

has no outside, the idea of freedom becomes meaningless. Since we are always the products of codes and disciplines, the overthrow of constraints will not free us to become natural human beings. Hence, all that we can do is produce new codes and disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that, rather than dismissing post-structuralist thinking as politically dangerous and trying to hold on to the autonomous, humanist subject for political or simply conservative reasons, it is more fruitful to take seriously the major impact post-structuralist thought has had on our ways of thinking about the subject, and also to try to rethink freedom. The post-structuralist understanding of the subject clearly makes problematic many of our traditional and accepted ways of conceiving of freedom. It cannot be understood as an inherent capacity or characteristic of the subject. We cannot say that we are born free. Neither can freedom be linked to emancipation: it does not lie in finding our true or authentic nature and liberating it from the constraints of power or society. For Foucault, freedom is not the freedom of protected rights that must be safeguarded. Neither does there seem to be much point in arguing that it is the ability to choose between different courses of action and to govern oneself autonomously, if our choices themselves are culturally constituted. Freedom cannot be conceived of negatively either: it cannot be linked to the ability to think or act despite external constraints, when the external constraints are understood as the condition of possibility of subjectivity. I will show that Foucault's thought, however, opens up alternative ways of thinking about freedom. It provides us with important tools for trying to answer the question, perhaps more burning than ever: what is freedom?

While it is thus strongly argued by many commentators that there is no freedom in Foucault's thought, at the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, others argue that the main motive and theme in his work is precisely freedom. Gary Gutting (1989, 1), for example, writes that Foucault's thought is a search for 'truths that will make us free'. John Rajchman (1985, 50) claims that Foucault is 'the philosopher of freedom in a post-revolutionary time'. Given the obvious differences in commentators' understandings of philosophy, and of Foucault's thought in particular, it seems plausible to look for the source of the contrasting interpretations in the different ways of understanding freedom in his philosophy. My work will explicate the different meanings of freedom that can be found in Foucault's works, and inquire into the possibilities he opens up for us in thinking about freedom today.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Walzer 1986, 61.

Before focusing on the topic of freedom, I will explicate the understanding of the subject to which the question of freedom in Foucault's thought is essentially tied. When it is argued that there is no freedom in it, the argument rests on the claim that there is no autonomous subject. When, on the other hand, it is argued that freedom is what Foucault's thought is fundamentally about, it is often claimed that this is due to the fact that his work reveals constraining forms of subjectivity as historically contingent.

Foucault himself claimed that the general theme of his research was the subject (e.g. SP, 208). Even though many commentators argue that his own interpretations of his work were continuously changing, not compatible, and were therefore not to be trusted,<sup>2</sup> I take this claim to be significant. I will argue that Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies not only contain implicit assumptions and presuppositions about the subject while their actual objects of study, focus and domain are elsewhere – for example, systems of thought, power, social history – but that they also contain explicit efforts to rethink the subject. Foucault characterized his work as *a genealogy of the modern subject*: a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. He further distinguished three modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects. These modes correspond with three relatively distinct periods in his thought (SP, 208.)

The first is the modes of inquiry that give themselves the status of science. Human beings are turned into subjects in processes of scientific study and classification, for example, into speaking subjects in linguistics, subjects who labour in economics, subjects of life in biology. Foucault's archaeology deals with this first mode in analyzing systems of knowledge. In *The Order of Things* he showed how the discourses of life, labour and language historically developed and structured themselves as sciences, and how human sciences further constituted man as their object of study.

The second phase of Foucault's work, his genealogies, studied what he himself called 'dividing practices' (SP, 208). These are practices of manipulation and examination that classify, locate and shape bodies in the social field. His books *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* are inquiries into this second mode of objectification. He shows how modern disciplinary technologies constitute the subject as their object of control: human beings are examined, measured and categorized. This process defines them as modern

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Hoy 1986, 2.

individuals. The disciplinary mechanisms do not shape subjectivity only by external coercion; they also function through being ‘interiorized’. In *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Foucault shows how our belief in a true sexual nature is a disciplinary mode of knowledge that makes us objects of control as well as subjects of sexuality. Our self-understanding, sexuality and even embodiment are constituted by the normative ideas of what is healthy, true and beautiful.

The third phase of Foucault’s work, represented by volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality*, studies the way the human being turns himself or herself into a subject. It is an analysis of the subject’s relationship to itself in the domain of sexuality. He asks how human beings recognize and constitute themselves as subjects of sexuality. The subject’s self-understanding and relationship to the self are important dimensions in the constitution of forms of subjectivity. The subject is studied now not only as an effect of power/knowledge networks, but also as capable of moral self-reflexivity – critical reflection on its own constitutive conditions – and therefore also of resistance to normative practices and ideas. Subjects constitute themselves through different modes of self-understanding and self-formation.

Foucault’s ‘ethical turn’ does not essentially change his understanding of the subject, however, it is only the perspective that shifts. He still denies the autonomy of the subject: the subject is always constituted in the power/knowledge networks of a culture, which provide its conditions of possibility. The modes of self-knowledge and techniques of the self that subjects utilize in shaping themselves as subjects of sexuality, for example, are not created or freely chosen. Rather, they are culturally and historically intelligible conceptions and patterns of behaviour that subjects draw from the surrounding society. Self-understanding is internally tied to historically varying social and discursive practices – *techniques of governmentality*. The governing of oneself is tied to the governing of others.

My study of Foucault’s understanding of the subject is traversed by two axes: feminist philosophy and phenomenology. Phenomenology acts as Foucault’s interlocutor and as a point of comparison. Feminist philosophy traverses the work in the sense that it motivates the questions I pose to Foucault. Even though my starting point is Foucault’s thought, the aim is also at reappropriation, bringing it closer to my own questions and concerns stemming initially from feminist philosophy. Rethinking subjectivity is essential in feminist philosophy, as several feminist writers have argued. Rather than arguing that women too are subjects

when the subject is understood as the independent, autonomous and rational subject of the Enlightenment, a lot of contemporary feminist theoreticians consider it important to question traditional notions of subjectivity. Theorists from diverse philosophical frameworks – such as Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti – have argued that we should not seek to simply redefine the subject in neutral terms, but we should rather define a whole new sense of subjectivity: both problematize the subject and embrace a new subjectivity for women. While the Enlightenment characteristics of the subject – autonomy, independence and rationality – have been firmly associated with masculinity, Braidotti's nomadic subjects, Haraway's cyborgs and Irigaray's images drawn from female morphology represent new figurations aiming to subvert traditional imaginings of female subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist theory does, on the one hand, share with Foucault and post-structuralist thought the aim of rethinking the subject of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the idea of feminist emancipation is both historically and theoretically connected to the Enlightenment ideal of freedom: the autonomy of subjects. This tension between the modernist legacy of feminist theory and its radical challenging of some of the most fundamental assumptions of the Enlightenment characterizes much of the contemporary feminist debate. This debate has often been cast in terms of feminism versus postmodernism. Since there is no consensus over the meaning of either one of these terms, the debate has taken many different forms, ranging over diverse issues and positions.<sup>4</sup> My aim is not to take part in it, but rather to study critically some of the underlying ideas constitutive of the tension between emancipatory politics and post-structuralist understanding of the subject.

The feminist task of rethinking female subjectivity is often understood as one of finding an in-between position: we must manage to argue for the culturally constituted status of female subjectivity without losing agency, singularity or the Enlightenment values of freedom and

3 See e.g. Irigaray 1977/1985; 1984/1993, Haraway 1991, Braidotti 1994.

4 The debate involves large epistemological questions about how postmodern feminist critiques of objectivity can avoid falling into relativism; debates about whether the concept of gender functions as a false generalization transcending boundaries of culture, class and race, or as a unifying and empowering notion; aesthetic issues contesting the borders between high and mass culture; analyses of the material changes involved in postmodernism, for example, in the structure of the family, and in work and class distinctions. See e.g. Butler 1990, Haraway 1991, Hekman 1990, Nicholson 1990, Braidotti 1991 and 1994.

equality motivating the feminist movement. Susan Hekman (1990, 81), among others, has argued that Foucault's understanding of the subject is a fruitful approach for feminist theory for the very reason that it manages to question the dichotomy between a constituting subject that is autonomous and active versus a constituted subject totally determined by external circumstances. Hekman claims that Foucault's conception of the subject avoids the eclecticism of many feminist approaches by describing a subject that is capable of resistance and political action without any reference to elements of a disembodied and autonomous Cartesian subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> I agree with Hekman that Foucault's understanding of the subject may well provide a fruitful point of departure in feminist efforts to rethink subjectivity, but my stance is more critical. I will argue that Foucault managed to retain the subject's capacity for resistance, self-reflection and criticism, but only by leaving open important questions. My work will explicate these questions and discuss the problems involved in answering them. I will also argue that when Foucault's thinking about the subject is applied to feminist theory, the question of female emancipation has to be rethought.

Another axis in my study of Foucault, in addition to feminist philosophy, is phenomenology. Foucault is normally presented as being in opposition to phenomenology, both to its fundamentals in Husserl's thought and to existentialist reinterpretations.<sup>6</sup> The common claim is that he rejected Husserl's transcendentalism and focused on concrete historical facts. He did not align himself with Husserl and his philosophy of transcendental (inter)subjectivity, but rather followed Nietzsche and the 'postmodern' thinkers celebrating the death of the subject, meta-narratives and reason.

My study questions this common understanding of Foucault's relationship to phenomenology. I will argue that the simple opposition is based on a narrow reading of phenomenology, and on a simplification of Foucault's thought, and that there are interesting connections between Foucault and phenomenology which are not adequately understood. I will show that, although Foucault clearly rejected existentialist readings of phenomenology, he did not deny all links to it. The aim of his critique of phenomenology was rather to reveal its problems (as he saw them), and to deal with them through a different approach.

5 On Descartes' conception of the body and feminist critiques of Cartesian mind-body dualism, see e.g. Reuter 2000, Judovitz 2001.

6 The few exceptions are e.g. Mohanty 1997, Flynn 1997, Han 1998/2002, Visker 1999.

I will argue that Foucault's thought links up with the phenomenological tradition in at least two senses: (1) it is a critical inquiry into the conditions of possibility of knowledge and the historicity of reason; and (2) as a philosophical study of the subject, it is an effort to rethink critically the phenomenological subject.

It may seem difficult to defend a view linking Foucault's thought to phenomenology, given the fact that he explicitly distanced himself from it in various texts and interviews. *The Order of Things*, for example, contains explicit criticism, which I discuss in chapter 2. In his introduction to the English translation, he furthermore presents his whole method specifically as an alternative and antidote to phenomenology.<sup>7</sup> His criticism of phenomenology in *OT* is, however, partly self-criticism. Foucault's first published works – a monograph *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (1954) and an introduction to the French translation of Ludwig Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* (1954) – were both strongly influenced by existential phenomenology. He argues in the first edition of *Maladie mentale et personnalité* that to understand mental illness we have to take into account the lived experience of the patient, we need 'a phenomenology of mental illness'. The second edition, published in 1962, was radically rewritten. Keith Hoeller (1993) notes that it reflects the views of mental illness that Foucault put forth in *Madness and Civilization* in 1961: we need a historical study of madness. Hoeller dates the marked turn in Foucault's thought from the lived experience to a broader historical and political analysis of its preconditions in these intervening years. Foucault himself describes his turn away from phenomenology:

I belong to the generation who as students had before their eyes, and were limited by, a horizon consisting of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism . . . at the time I was working on my book about the history of madness [*Folie et déraison*]. I was divided between existential psychology and phenomenology, and my research was an attempt to discover the extent that these could be defined in historical terms . . . That's when I discovered that the subject would have to be defined in other terms than Marxism or phenomenology.

(PS, 174)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See *OT*, xiv.

<sup>8</sup> The French original is not available. Wherever possible, I will give the French or German original of the long English citations in a footnote.

Hence, while it is uncontested that Foucault was a critic of phenomenology and not a phenomenologist, phenomenology nevertheless forms an important background from which he sought to differentiate and distance his own thought. He started from phenomenology, but he also significantly returned to it in his late texts by reformulating his relationship to it: it no longer appears in terms of an opposition, but is rather presented as a continuum. In a text on the Enlightenment written in late 1970s, he turns to Husserl's late writings, reading him not essentially as presenting a philosophy of the subject, but as inquiring into the legitimacy of reason. Foucault associates the Enlightenment firmly with critique, a critical attitude that questions not only obstacles to the use of reason, but also reason itself and its limits. According to Foucault, this critical attitude took the form of questioning reason in its connection with power, 'the relationships between the structures of rationality which articulate true discourse and the mechanisms of subjugation which are linked to it' (WC, 45). Foucault saw the critique of reason as responsible for excesses of power taking different forms in the history of philosophy from the Hegelian left to the Frankfurt School. Husserl is also used as an example here, who, according to Foucault, referred to the crisis of European humanity as something that involved the changing relationship between knowledge and technique. Foucault considered Husserl's thought as importantly questioning rationalization and hence studying reason as a historical phenomenon.

In an introduction to the English translation of Georges Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault argues that, in his late works, Husserl was not asking traditional epistemological questions about the universal nature of knowledge or its timeless conditions of possibility, but he was rather posing a *critical* question about our epistemic history as well as about our present reality.<sup>9</sup> He thereby situates Husserl in the tradition of thought that questioned western rationality about its claims of universality and autonomy, and hence penetrated the historico-critical dimension of philosophy. Foucault writes:

9 Foucault distinguishes two different modalities according to which French thinkers appropriated Husserl's thought after his Paris lectures in 1929. One was the existentialist reading of Sartre, which took Husserl in the direction of a philosophy of the subject, and the other was Cavailles' reading, which, according to Foucault, brought it back to its founding principles in formalism and the theory of science (INP, 8–9). Foucault situates his own thought in the tradition of Cavailles, which developed as the history of thought and the philosophy of science.



And if phenomenology, after quite a long period when it was kept at the border, finally penetrated in its turn, it was undoubtedly the day when Husserl, in the *Cartesian Meditations* and the *Crisis*, posed the question of the relations between the ‘western’ project of a universal development of reason, the positivity of the sciences and the radicality of philosophy.  
 (INP, 11)<sup>10</sup>

According to Foucault, the critique of rationality led Husserl to develop a new mode of questioning (VES, 767). Husserl did not just study the universal structures of knowledge, he also proposed an inquiry into the historical meaning of knowledge, that is, into the meaning that the ideas of science and philosophy have for us now, at this very moment. Foucault thus considered his thought to be in line with phenomenology to the extent that the answers to the question ‘What is philosophy?’ would be similar: philosophy is understood essentially as a critical practice responding to our present. It is, however, not only critical towards other forms of knowledge or practices of living, but it is also significantly self-critical. It must turn to question its own conditions of possibility, the legitimacy of reason and its own historicity.

I will argue that understanding Foucault’s background in phenomenology and relating his work to it is important for understanding his philosophical position. I will show how many of Foucault’s central philosophical issues and methodological directions are motivated by the problems arising out of the phenomenological enterprise. By constructing a dialogue in this book between Foucault and three major phenomenological thinkers – Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas – I aim to bring to light some common forms of questioning and points of fruitful exchange as well as of fundamental contrast. By focusing on Foucault’s relationship to phenomenology, however, I do not want to claim that it is the only or even the most important influence on his thought. His work had many different themes and influences: Nietzsche’s philosophy, structuralism, French historiography and philosophy of science, for example. Any study of Foucault’s thought representing one choice of many possible perspectives is therefore a distortion of his multifaceted and original thought.

10 ‘Et si la phénoménologie, après une bien longue période où elle fut tenue en lisière, a fini par pénétrer à son tour, c’est sans doute du jour où Husserl, dans les *Méditations cartésiennes* et dans la *Krisis*, a posé la question des rapports entre le projet occidental d’un déploiement universel de la raison, la positivité des sciences et la radicalité de la philosophie.’ (IMF, 432)

This book is divided into three parts: *Language* (chapters 1, 2, and 3), *Body* (chapters 4, 5, and 6) and *Ethics* (chapters, 7, 8, and 9). These three parts explicate the three constitutive modes of subjectivity in Foucault's thought, and they also correspond loosely with the three chronological periods in it: archaeology, genealogy and his late writings on ethics. The structure of the book is primarily thematic, however. I do not offer a chronological reading of the development of Foucault's thought, or a philosophical reconstruction of 'Foucault's theory of the subject'. Instead, I ask what freedom means at different points in his work and study its preconditions as well as its problems. My argument is that *language, the body* and *ethics* are the domains in which the different senses of freedom can be found. My focus on certain Foucault texts, and the omission of others, are based on this thematic priority.

The first part of the book, *Language*, inquires into the idea of freedom present in Foucault's archaeology. The focus of my reading is on *The Order of Things*, which studies the question of language most explicitly. I explicate Foucault's philosophical position by contrasting it to Husserl's phenomenology, particularly to his late work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. This is illuminative in terms of understanding the philosophical implications of Foucault's treatment of the history of science in *OT*. I also make a stronger claim about the importance of reading *OT* in relation to phenomenology. I will show how many of the central philosophical issues, as well as the methodological directions, that are present in *OT* are motivated by the problems arising out of the phenomenological enterprise.

In *OT* Foucault advocates the idea of language as something that always outruns the subject, who can never completely master it. Language is not simply an instrument of expression, it also generates an excess of meanings. Foucault gives language a regulative role in the mode of scientific discourse, but it also demarcates a domain of freedom in the mode of literature, particularly as avant-garde writing. There is an ontological order of things implicit in the theories of scientific discourse. Language as avant-garde writing is, however, capable of forming alternative, unscientific and irrational ontological realms: different experiences of order on the basis of which different perceptual and practical grids become possible, and hence lead to new ways of seeing and experiencing. While Foucault's archaeology is generally viewed as emphasizing the necessary structures of thought and opposing humanist aspirations of looking for the freedom of man, there is an anti-humanist understanding of freedom as an opening of new possibilities