INTRODUCTION

The work of Michel Foucault, now so abruptly and arbitrarily completed, can be fruitfully analyzed and evaluated from a wide range of contemporary intellectual standpoints. He can be regarded as a philosopher, a social historian, a literary analyst, a social and political critic; each of these perspectives focuses on something integral to his achievement. But his intellectual métier, through which he develops all his ideas about philosophy, literature, society, and politics, is the history of thought. With one exception, all his major books are histories of aspects of Western thought, and the exception (AK) is a methodological reflection on this historical work. Foucault's choice of title for his chair at the Collège de France was entirely appropriate: Professor of the History of Systems of Thought.

Foucault was not, however, interested in the history of thought merely for its own sake. His historical work was guided by a "philosophical *ethos*"[1] deriving from the Enlightenment values of human liberation and of autonomous human thought as an instrument of that liberation. Foucault's work is a search for truths that will make us free. But he develops this Enlightenment ideal in an

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1. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 45.

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essentially self-critical mode, exhibiting an acute awareness of how specific employments of reasons, even bodies of scientific knowledge, can themselves constrain and oppress human beings. The project of Foucault's history of thought is, accordingly, two-fold: to show how particular domains of knowledge have constrained human freedom and to provide the intellectual resources for overcoming these constraints.

Foucault characterizes this project by comparing and contrasting it to Kant's eighteenth-century project for a critique of reason. According to Foucault, Kant's basic aim is implicit in his response to the *Berliner Monatschrift's* question, "What is enlightenment?" His famous answer was that enlightenment is man's release from his "inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another,"[2] an inability that was to be overcome by finding the courage to use one's own reason rather than submit it to books, pastors, physicians, and other external authorities. Kant felt that his own age was the beginning of reason's emergence as the autonomous force directing human life and so required a careful assessment of its precise scope and limits. As Foucault puts it:

> It is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped. Illegitimate uses of reason are what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion; . . . It is when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles that its autonomy can be assured.[3]

Kant, however, thought that the limits of reason revealed by his critique derived from necessary a priori structures that defined the very possibility of our knowledge – that is, from "formal structures with universal value."[4] (We will see below, in our discussion of OT, how, according to Foucault, this connection of the limitations of knowledge to its possibility is characteristic of the modern conception of knowledge.) It is at this point that Foucault's project for a critique of reason differs from Kant's. Unlike Kant, he is not

2. I. Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" translated by Lewis White Beck, in *On history* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 3.
3. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 38.
4. Ibid., 46.

concerned with determining the a priori, necessary conditions governing the exercise of reason but with reflection on what *seem* to be such conditions to reveal the extent to which they in fact have a contingent historical origin. Through such reflection – carried out by histories of thought – he aims at showing how we can free ourselves from ("transgress") the constraints of these conditions.[5] As a result, Foucault gives a new meaning to the project of a critique of reason.

> Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has been turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.[6]

Foucault's project of historical critique represents an important reconception of the cultural role of philosophy. He gives up the traditional philosophical goal of grounding theoretical and practical knowledge in an understanding of the essential, universal structures of thought and reality and instead applies the philosopher's analytic and synthetic skills to the task of uncovering and, when possible, dissolving contingent, historical constraints on thought. He thus abandons the venerable but empty pretension that philosophy provides a privileged access to fundamental truths.[7] But, at the same time, he offers a more concrete and effective approach to the equally venerable goal of liberating the human spirit.

Foucault's project also differs from Kant's in its point of application. Kant was primarily concerned with the scientific knowledge of nature, mathematics and physics, his idea being that an understanding of the conditions of possibility of these paradigms of knowledge would reveal the a priori structures of

5. This theme of transgression shows the influence of Georges Bataille on Foucault and is present as early as FD (Preface to the first edition, iii–v).
6. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 45.
7. In this sense, Foucault's view is skeptical. For a good discussion of Foucault as a skeptic, cf. John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: the freedom of philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2–7.

knowledge as such. Foucault, by contrast, is concerned with the much more dubious disciplines ("the human sciences") that try to provide knowledge of human beings. This is because he sees these disciplines, rather than the natural sciences, as the primary source of contemporary constraints on human freedom. We can, accordingly, characterize his fundamental intellectual project as a philosophical critique of the human sciences, carried out by a history of thought in the service of human liberation.

Foucault's critique of the human sciences is, in every case, a matter of questioning key aspects of their contemporary self-understanding. For example, contemporary psychology and psychiatry regard themselves as scientifically objective disciplines that have discovered the true nature of madness as "mental illness." They further see themselves as employing their knowledge of mental illnesses for the purely humanitarian purpose of curing those who suffer from them. In his first major book, FD, Foucault traces the historical origins of psychology and psychiatry with a view to showing, first, that there is no privileged status to the modern conception of madness as mental illness. Second, he tries to show that the mad are regarded as threats to the moral order of modern society and that their "medical" treatment has been more a matter of social control than of compassionate relief.

In Foucault's second book, BC, he moves from "mental illness" to physical illness. Like psychiatry, modern medicine sees itself as based on a body of objective, scientific knowledge (e.g., that of pathological anatomy). Moreover, it thinks it has achieved this knowledge simply by, for the first time, looking at the human body and its diseases with a clear and unbiased empirical eye. Foucault, however, sets out to show that modern medicine is no more a matter of pure observation than was, for example, the medicine of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. In both cases, medical knowledge was based not on a pure experience, free of interpretation, but on a very specific way of perceiving bodies and diseases, structured by a grid of a priori conceptions.

FD and BC were studies of particular human sciences. Moreover, they primarily dealt with knowledge of deviations (madness, illness) from "normal" human states. In OT (in many ways his major work), Foucault provided a comprehensive, though often very schematic, account of the entire body of modern positive

knowledge of human beings. Here his central claim is that all such knowledge is based on a particular conception of human beings (a conception he labels *man*). The distinctive feature of man, in this sense, is to be both an object in the world and the knowing subject through which there exists a world of objects. Although modern thinkers tend to take this conception of ourselves as definitive of human reality once and for all, Foucault maintains that it is just one historical construal of it – and one that is presently passing away. Overall, OT can be regarded as a critique of the concept of man carried out in three stages. First, Foucault shows that the concept had no role at all in the Classical Age that preceded our modern period. Second, he analyzes modern philosophical efforts to develop a coherent understanding of man and exhibits their failure. Finally, he analyzes the more successful efforts of the human sciences to attain a knowledge of man and shows that they themselves are based on disciplines that undermine the concept of man. Foucault concludes that the age of thought dominated by this particular conception of human reality is nearing its end and that, accordingly, we are in a position to break free of the constraints on our freedom that it imposes.

In the course of developing his critique of the human sciences, Foucault became increasingly sensitive to questions about the methods of historical analysis he was using. Specifically, he came to see himself as employing a distinctive method of analysis that he called *archaeological*. The use of *archaeology* as a methodological metaphor goes back at least to Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault initially uses it in a very casual and vague way.[8] By the time he wrote BC, he was sufficiently taken with it (though still not entirely clear about its meaning) to subtitle the book "An archaeology of medical perception [régard]". In the book following OT – AK – Foucault offered an extended reflection on the archaeological method he had developed in his preceding studies.

8. Cf., for example, M. Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis," in Alden Fisher, ed., *Essential writings: Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1969), 86. Here Merleau-Ponty characterizes psychoanalysis as an archaeology. Earlier, Cavaillès (referring to Fink's 1933 *Kantstudien* article), refers to phenomenology as an archaeology. (I owe these references to my colleague, Steve Watson.) Foucault's own first use of the term seems to be in MMP, where he says that Freudian "neurosis is a spontaneous archaeology of the libido" (26). His first use of it to refer to an approach to the history of thought is in the Preface to the first edition of FD, where, speaking of the end of reason's dialogue with madness in the Classical Age, he says that he wants to write "the archaeology of this silence" (FD, ii).

AK clearly marks the end of one major stage of Foucault's work. After its publication in 1969, he remained relatively silent for six years. DP, published in 1975, resumes his critique of the human sciences but now in a mode that places far more emphasis than his previous work on social and institutional mechanisms of power. Here Foucault's primary concern is to show how bodies of knowledge – particularly the modern social sciences – are inextricably interwoven with techniques of social control. They are not, he maintains, autonomous intellectual achievements applied, à la Bacon, as instruments of social power. Rather, their very constitution as knowledge depends essentially on (although it is not reducible to) mechanisms of power. In DP, for example, Foucault details the essential dependence of criminology on the development of prisons in the nineteenth century, and he suggests similar ties between other social sciences and such controlling social structures as schools, military camps, and factories. Similarly, in the first volume of HS he argues that the "sciences of sexuality" developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are integral parts of another aspect of modern society's control of its members. Roughly, the disciplinary techniques associated with "disciplines" such as criminology and pedagogy control by making men objects, whereas the sciences of sexuality make them self-monitoring subjects.

The theme of the essential connection of knowledge with power develops fully and explicitly what was suggested at numerous points in Foucault's earlier work. What is distinctive in DP and HS is Foucault's new conception of the nature of power. He rejects the standard view that power is a purely negative, repressive social force that is challenged and overcome by the liberating light of truth. According to Foucault, power, although frequently destructive and always dangerous, is also a creative source of positive values (including those of truth and knowledge). He further rejects the common picture of social and political power as flowing from a single dominant center (e.g., the ruling class, the monarch). Instead, he sees a society as shot through with a multiplicity of power relations, interacting but mutually irreducible.

In order to analyze the development of bodies of knowledge out of systems of power, Foucault employs a new historical method that he calls *genealogy*. Genealogy does not replace archaeology, which is still needed to uncover the discursive rules

that constitute bodies of knowledge. But genealogy goes beyond archaeology by explaining (through the connections with power) changes in the history of discourse that are merely described by archaeology.

As Foucault researched and wrote the later volumes of his history of sexuality, his conception of the project broadened considerably. Instead of just looking at the emergence of the modern notion of the self as subject, he proposed to trace the Western concept of the self from the ancient Greeks on. Moreover, he began to combine this historical project with the ethical one of constructing alternatives to modern moral codes. Two volumes on Greek and Roman views of sexual ethics (*The use of pleasure* and *The care of the self*) appeared in 1984 just before his death. Another volume (*Les aveux de la chair*), centering on the Christian practice of confession, may appear posthumously.

The focus of this study will be the earlier period of Foucault's work, beginning with the somewhat confused emergence of an archaeological approach in FD, through its eventual crystallization in BC and especially OT, to the explicit reflective formulation of AK. As essential background to an understanding of Foucault's archaeology, we begin with a discussion of the work of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem.

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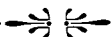
BACHELARD AND CANGUILHEM

Foucault himself emphasized the importance of Bachelard and
Canguilhem not only for French thought in general but also for
his own intellectual orientation. In an essay on Canguilhem, he
proposes a fundamental division within post-World War II
French philosophy between a "philosophy of experience, of
meaning, of the subject and a philosophy of knowledge [*savoir*], of
rationality, and of the concept."[1] The former he associates with
the existential phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the
latter with the history and philosophy of science of Cavaillès,
Koyré, and especially Bachelard and Canguilhem. Foucault notes
that this division can be traced back well into the nineteenth cen-
tury, beginning with the opposition between Maine de Brian and
Comte and continuing in the differences separating Lachelier
and Courturat as well as Bergson and Poincaré. In the twentieth
century, the division is reflected in the two different ways French
thinkers appropriated the thought of Husserl after his Paris lec-
tures in 1929. On the one hand, there was Sartre's existential
reading (in *The transcendence of the ego*); on the other, there was

1. Michel Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science," *Revue de métaphysique et de
   morale* 70 (1985), 4. An earlier version of this paper was published in English
   as the introduction to the English translation of Georges Canguilhem, *On the
   normal and the pathological,* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978).

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Cavaillès's "formal" reading in *Méthode axiomatique* and *La forma-
tion de la théorie des ensembles*. Whereas Sartre moves Husserl's
thought forward to the concerns of Heidegger's *Being and time,*
Cavaillès brings it back to its origins in the philosophy of mathe-
matics. After World War II, the philosophy of the subject was
inextricably tied to phenomenology in the work of Sartre and
Merleau-Ponty. However, the philosophy of the concept was de-
veloped by Bachelard and Canguilhem in essential independence
of Husserl's work. According to Foucault, "these two forms of
thought have constituted in France two frameworks that have
remained, at least for a time, quite profoundly heterogeneous."[2]

From 1945 to the late 1950s, existential philosophy, along with
Marxism as a social and political outlook, dominated French
thought. During this period, the central concern (which culmi-
nated in Sartre's *Critique of dialectical reason*) was to develop a
synthesis of existential phenomenology and Marxism. But, ac-
cording to Foucault, by the end of the 1950s, existential phe-
nomenology began to founder on the problems of language and
the unconscious, and structuralism presented itself as a superior
alternative. "It was clear that phenomenology was no match for
structural analysis in accounting for the effects of meaning that
could be produced by a structure of the linguistic type, in which
the subject (in the phenomenological sense) did not intervene to
confer meaning." Further, "the unconscious could not feature in
any discussion of a phenomenological kind. . . . the phenomeno-
logical subject was disqualified by psychoanalysis, as it had been
by linguistic theory."[3] As a result, the efforts of the 1940s and
1950s to unite Marxism and phenomenology were replaced by
efforts to connect Marxism with various forms of structuralism
(particularly, Lacan's structuralist Freudianism). "With phenom-
enology disqualified . . ., there was simply a succession of fian-
cées, each flirting with Marxism in turn" in the effort to produce
a "Freudian-structuralist-Marxism."[4] This remained the domi-
nant theme of French thought until the end of the 1960s.

However, according to Foucault, this was the line of develop-
ment only for those on the dominant side of the basic division in
French thought – that is, for those who worked in terms of the

2. Ibid.
3. Gerard Raulet, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: an Interview with Mi-
   chel Foucault," *Telos,* 1983, 198.
4. Ibid.

categories of experience, meaning, and subjectivity. "There were also people who did not follow [this] movement. I am thinking of those who were interested in the history of science. . . . Particularly around Canguilhem, an extremely influential figure in the French University – the young French University. Many of his students were neither Marxists, nor Freudians, nor structuralists. And here I am speaking of myself."[5]

By Foucault's own account, then, his intellectual development did not fit the pattern followed by many in France during the 1960s precisely because he was connected to what he calls the "network" of thought then represented by Canguilhem.[6] This is not to say that Foucault did not try to come to grips with Marxist, Freudian, and structuralist thought; these were some of his major concerns. But it is essential to realize that his reaction to these dominant movements is based on a fundamental orientation toward the history of science that is strongly influenced by Canguilhem (and, through him, Bachelard).

The centrality of this influence is particularly apparent in light of Foucault's specification of the Bachelard–Canguilhem "network" as the primary French locus of the historical critique of reason that he sees as the main concern of his own work. He notes that in Germany this critique has been carried out in the context of "a historical and political reflection on society" from "the post-Hegelians to the Frankfurt School and Lukàcs, by way of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Max Weber." But "in France, it is the history of science which has above all been the basis for raising the philosophical question of what enlightenment is." Specifically, "the work of Koyré, Bachelard, Cavaillès, and Canguilhem" poses questions "to a rationality that claims to be universal even while it develops in a contingent manner."[7] In this way it examines "a reason whose structural autonomy carried with it the history of dogmatisms and despotisms – a reason that, as a result, produces emancipation only on the condition that it succeeds in freeing itself from itself."[8] As we saw in the Introduction, this is equally a characterization of Foucault's own approach to the history of reason.

It is apparent, then, that Foucault himself situates his work

5. Ibid.
6. Foucault, "La vie." The French term Foucault uses is *filiation*.
7. Ibid., 6.
8. Ibid.