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Horace L. Fairlamb

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Contemporary theoretical debates reveal contradictory views on the foundations of knowledge: hermeneutics challenges epistemology, politics challenges science, identity theory challenges critical theory, pragmatism challenges formalism, and so on. Horace Fairlamb contends that philosophy's foundationalist quest has usually been misconceived as a choice between a "super-science" and anarchy. Through an examination of the history of foundationism and detailed analyses of the work of such leading thinkers as Fish, Foucault, Derrida, Gadamer, and Habermas, Dr. Fairlamb argues for a conception of foundations that is neither reductive nor arbitrary. Providing a sophisticated critique of contemporary foundationist debate, this work contributes significantly to the current reevaluation of theoretical discourse with implications for philosophers as well as literary theorists.

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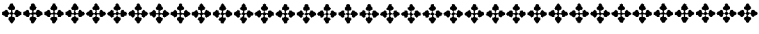
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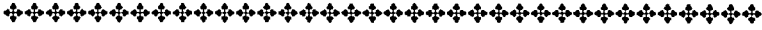
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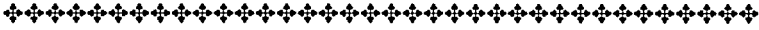
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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1994

First published 1994

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Fairlamb, Horace L.

*Critical conditions: postmodernity and the question of foundations* / Horace L. Fairlamb

p. cm.—(Literature, culture, theory)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 45047 0 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 45665 7 (paperback)

1. Postmodernism (Literature) I. Title. II. Series.

PN 98 P67F35 1994

149—dc20 93-25034 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45047 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 45665 7 paperback

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## Preface



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This project attempts to address the problem of the foundations of knowledge and meaning, an issue that has recently received much attention. The list of authors discussed in the following chapters shows the interdisciplinary nature of the problem and its relevance for a host of debates being conducted in different disciplinary terms. Yet, while the problem of foundations will be familiar to the veterans of these debates, the strategy of this book is perhaps less obvious than appears on the surface, in which case some prefatory remarks are in order.

This volume is part of a larger project which links epistemology, hermeneutics, and critical social theory. Whereas I hope to provide separate treatments of epistemology and critical theory in subsequent volumes, the current focus stresses the linkage between the most basic assumptions of foundational discourse and the politics of the modern/postmodern debates. Thus this approach runs the risk of being both insufficiently theoretical for the more abstract concerns of epistemology, and insufficiently wide for the complexity of social theory. I believe, however, that my intermediary strategy is justified by my central argument about the issue of foundations. In its simplest form, the argument holds that the much politicized debate between modern and postmodern perspectives rests on a deeper, even more pervasive misunderstanding of the issue of foundations. For diagnostic purposes, however, both the political and foundational aspects of the problem are important: the foundational question because it highlights the starting points for understanding and argument; the political implications because they reveal the problems that follow from misleading assumptions about foundations.

My Introduction summarizes the larger argument on the foundationist debate. (I depart from the more common usage, “foundationalism” and “conventionalism,” with “foundationism” and “conventionism.”) I argue that this debate has traditionally and

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currently been misconceived as a false dilemma (the strong foundational antithesis or antinomy) which forces a choice between too narrow and too loose notions of grounds. The too strong version hopes to reduce knowledge and meaning to some epistemic or hermeneutic principle. The too weak version merely repudiates the necessity of any particular constraints on knowledge or meaning. Foundations, in other words, are thought to be a one-or-none proposition. I argue that both of these options are too extreme, and that they represent a false dilemma insofar as the real significance of foundations lies between these alternatives.

In my view, foundationism only errs when it hopes to reduce the conditions of knowledge to *one kind* of foundation instead of explaining the different but equally necessary conditions of knowledge and meaning. Likewise, while the foundational antinomy (the one-or-none dilemma) offers only reduction or anarchy, I suggest that the point of foundationist theory is to account for the necessity and significance of three kinds (the *heterology*) of epistemic conditions: formal, objective, and conventional. If I am correct, then to require that foundations be either reductive or arbitrary systematically misleads, and certain predictable problems should follow. The theme of my eight chapters is that the problems found in many major theorists are in fact consequences of misconceiving the foundationist question along the lines of this false dilemma.

Specifically, the central essays show how – through the strong foundationist antithesis – the emerging postmodern positions continue to be shaped by the foundationist conception they are trying to subvert. My argument examines (a) how both defenders and critics of foundations are still infected with the traditional reductive ideal of epistemology, (b) how anti-foundationists attempt to critique the traditional notion of foundations without having a sufficiently clear notion of their own theoretical presuppositions and constraints, and (c) how a heterological model of critical conditions avoids those problems.

The key to the argument is the introductory thesis about the heterology of critical conditions, without which the purpose of the subsequent chapters is liable to misunderstanding. The risk is that my reader will assume that the individual discussions are supposed to be entirely representative of the various thinkers discussed or be fit substitutes for critiques already available. But the focus of the argument is not on authors *per se*. Being an argument about the



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structure of foundational discourse, the specific thinkers discussed are chosen only to exemplify typical discursive strategies, their theoretical constraints, and their practical implications. My point, therefore, is neither representational completeness regarding individuals nor comprehensiveness of overview regarding the critical literature about them. While my discussions attempt to provide enough of their work to represent the thrust of the discursive strategies in question, I do not claim to represent the entire range of these authors' works and thought, nor all their subsequent revisions and recantations. In short, this is not a survey of postmodern thinkers but an analysis of how certain strategies fail to address foundational problems.

An equally important limitation of this project is its relation to the material reserved for other works, including one more exclusively focused on the history of epistemology, and another devoted to critical social theory. The theoretical apparatus of my present argument is, by necessity, largely compressed into the introduction and conclusion. And while my critiques dialectically exemplify my defense of heterological foundations, like all dialectical arguments mine is often more symptomatic and negative than systematic. That is, my analyses often show what happens when one does *not* share the assumptions and theoretical commitments I have summarized in the introduction. I hope, however, that the heterological pattern of foundational discourse is powerful enough to be visible through the different critiques.

Still, some may consider the lack of a full blown epistemological presentation of my commitments to be a more than negligible void. Strategically, however, I believe that the dialectical presentation of this argument is justified for reasons of reception as well as for reasons of space. A purely theoretical approach to foundations at this point in time is likely to be welcomed by only half of the parties involved in the foundationist debates, a suspicion to which the currency of anti-theory, anti-epistemology, and anti-system all give credence. If the underlying thesis must finally be made in stages, I believe that it makes sense to begin by discovering in the context of contemporary debates the widespread need for a more fully theoretical understanding of critical conditions.

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## Acknowledgements



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The many versions of these chapters have profited from the intelligence and consideration of Ed Freedman, Dan Jaeckle, Richard Macksey, Michael Sprinker, Jeffrey Geller, Dolora Ann Wojciehowski, Angelika Rausch, Paisley Livingston, Virgil Lokke, John McNamara, and others. From the Cambridge staff and series editors, the encouragement and patience of Kevin Taylor, Richard Macksey and Michael Sprinker were more than generous. An early version of the project owes much to Ernst Behler's National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar of 1987 on the Romantic origins of literary theory. The University of Houston-Victoria lent consistent support over the years. Mark Poster graciously made available the resources of the University of California at Irvine's Institute for Critical Theory in the summer of 1991. The hospitality and support of the University of Oregon Humanities Center was much appreciated during the final stages of the project. Susan Tesar's thoughtful editing helped improve the manuscript substantially. And from the earliest stages of the project, Richard Macksey's interest and advice have been an indispensable support.

As a final note, even with the satisfactions of a dialogue as stimulating as today's, one cannot help regretting that the negativity of one's role so often neglects the debts that remain invisible. Thus my attention to limitations overlooks the extraordinary virtue of Rorty's reawakening of metaphilosophy and the exemplary professionalism of Fish's classes.

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## Abbreviations

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- AP Stanley Fish, "Anti-professionalism," *New Literary History*, vol. xvii (1985).
- AT Stanley Fish, "Consequences" in *Against theory: literary studies and the new pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, Chicago, 1985; pp. 106–131.
- BI Stanley Fish, "Being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do," *Profession 89*, New York: Modern Language Association, 1989.
- CP Richard Rorty, *Consequences of pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982.
- FR Michel Foucault, *The Foucault reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Random House, 1984.
- ITC Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?: the authority of interpretive communities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- OG Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.
- PC Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- PH Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- PK Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Random House, 1980.
- PM Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, Princeton University Press, 1979.
- TM Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, New York: Crossroad, 1988.