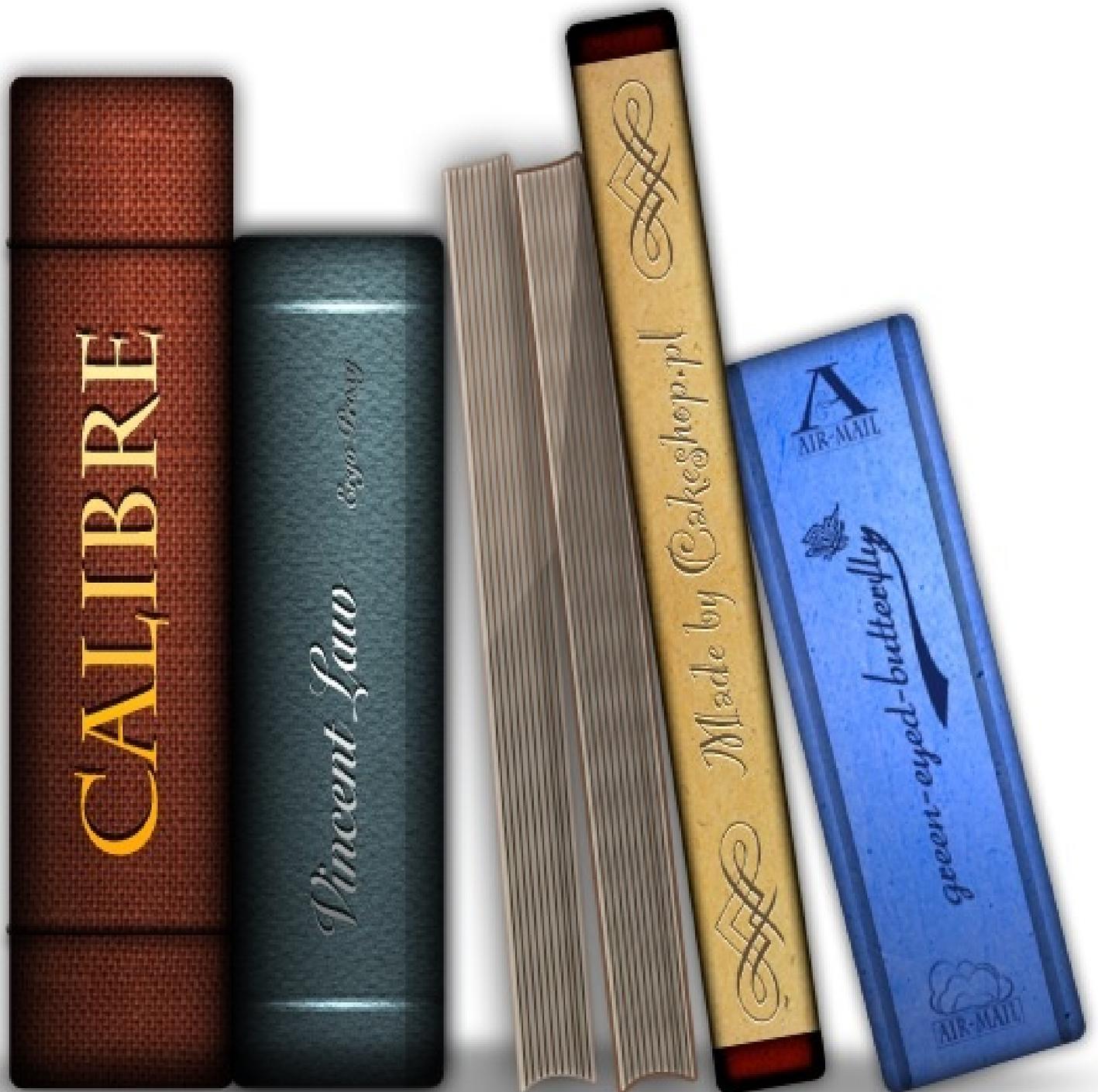


Starting with Foucault

C G Prado



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Starting with Foucault

An Introduction to Genealogy

SECOND EDITION

C. G. Prado

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Preface to the Second Edition

Five years ago I tried to present Foucault's genealogical analytics as clearly as I could in the first edition of *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy*.¹ My targeted audience was philosophers and philosophy students in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. In my experience, too many members of this group simply do not bother to read Foucault, much less engage with his ideas, because of a generally negative impression and the strong tendency to lump him in with various "postmodernists." From what I have been told by students, colleagues, a few readers who have written me, people met at conferences, and not least Westview Press's reviewers, the first edition was quite successful. But after more than five years, I think it needs updating. For one thing, I have used the book in my classes and it is surprising how student response to it has changed since its publication. At that time, few of my students had encountered Foucault. Now students read or read about Foucault in their Political Science courses, Sociology courses, Women's Studies courses, Cultural Geography courses, Film courses, and even Commerce and Business courses. More important is that, like other intellectual innovators, Foucault's ideas have been "appropriated" and are now widely used in diverse contexts and ways. Often they are used with only the most cursory gesture toward their source and with the barest grounding. As a colleague, Bryan Palmer, remarked to me, Foucault is the most referred to and most pirated from but least read contemporary thinker.

The widespread appropriation of philosophical ideas is hardly new. For instance, the notion of a social contract is extensively and variously used without reference to Thomas Hobbes. It is a mark of the importance of new philosophical ideas that they are integrated into common thought and achieve a kind of transparency and anonymity. Foucault's ideas, especially his notion of power, are now taken for granted by many. "Power" may be employed by a cultural geographer concerned with how use of space defines minorities, by a feminist concerned with patriarchal shaping of identities, or by an organizational behaviorist concerned with how institutional

hierarchies affect the implementation of policy. What is interesting is that Foucault's notion of power is seldom discussed, much less used, by academic philosophers in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. This has

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changed little since publication of the first edition. Too many North American universities still offer more courses on Foucault outside their philosophy departments than in them. Even where one would expect serious engagement with Foucault's ideas there tends to be a kind of diminishment of his importance. The main reason for this lack of engagement is perception of Foucault as a radical relativist and irrealist. That is, analytic philosophers see Foucault as leveling all claims and as denying any reality outside of consciousness and language.

What prompted the writing of this second edition were a stylistic and a substantive failing. One reviewer captured the stylistic failing well, saying that the first edition contained too much "Continentalese." The reviewer nicely parodied the style by defining "Continentalese" as "a form of expression in which sentence subjects become monstrously complex and verbs appear so late in the sentence, or in such a subordinate role, that the reader grows weary." I have tried to correct this failing by rewriting the entire book in a more acceptable and accessible style. The substantive failing was that I did not go deep enough in addressing the source of resistance to Foucault on the part of analytic philosophers. I have added a chapter in which I address the issue of perceived irrealism in Foucault. Even more than relativism, apparent irrealism or denial of "external" reality prevents analytic philosophers from giving Foucault's work the attention it merits. It is my hope that these changes will make this introduction to Foucault's genealogical ideas more effective, prompting more of my intended readers to avail themselves of what Foucault offers.

Kingston, 2000

Note

- [1.](#) Prado 1995.

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Chapter One

Foucault: Challenge and Misperceptions

"At the time of his death . . . Michel Foucault was perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world." ¹So opens James Miller's biography of Foucault. Alan Ryan goes further, asserting that Foucault "was the most famous intellectual figure in the world" when he died. ²David Macey's biography makes the more modest claim that at his death Foucault "was without doubt France's most prominent philosopher." But

Macey adds that Foucault's international reputation had "almost eclipsed his reputation in France."³ Miller goes on to say that "scholars were grappling with the implications of [Foucault's] empirical research" across the academic spectrum and "pondering the abstract questions [he] raised."⁴ Jonathan Arac outdoes Miller in claiming that "Foucault's work . . . changed the basis for the work of all scholars."⁵

This high estimation of Foucault is shared by many North American academics in disciplines ranging from political science and cultural geography through sociology to literary criticism and film studies. Many students in these disciplines consider Foucault a champion in the struggle against what they regard as stultifying disciplinary traditions. The striking exception is "analytic" philosophers, who largely dismiss Foucault. Most philosophers whose post-Kantian canon prioritizes the work of Frege, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein do not consider Foucault a philosopher, much less a philosopher who has something to say to them. They regard Foucault as a paradigmatic "Continental" thinker, one whose post-Kantian canon emphasizes the work of Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty.⁶ Their negative perception of Foucault goes further than seeing him as a member of a different intellectual tradition. They dismiss Foucault as holding "post-

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modern" views that are inimical to proper philosophizing. Didier Eribon observes in his biography of Foucault that Foucault "drew huge crowds" on his visits to North America⁷ but was "completely ignored by most American philosophers."⁸ For example, Foucault's visits to the University of California at Berkeley⁹ were at the invitation of departments other than philosophy. The philosophers did not consider Foucault to be doing anything relevant to their interests and areas of expertise.¹⁰ Foucault was not just ignored; he was disparaged. Richard Rorty notes that "a distinguished analytic philosopher . . . urged that 'intellectual hygiene' requires one not to read . . . Foucault."¹¹ Foucault was not only aware of this hostility; he seemed to relish it. He claimed that he was "very proud" that some thought him dangerous for being, in their view, "an irrationalist, a nihilist."¹²

Despite analytic philosophers' disdain, Foucault had a huge influence on North American humanities and social sciences. He raised questions about "the reach of power and the limits of knowledge, the origins of moral responsibility and the foundations of modern government, the character of historical inquiry and the nature of personal identity."¹³ Yet despite some of these questions being philosophical by any reasonable standard, Foucault still does not figure in the bulk of the writing and teaching of North American analytic philosophers. They ignored Foucault when he began to achieve global notice and continue to ignore his work. Some of them have taken a belated interest in that work, if only because of its current prominence and its having defied predictions of modish transiency. But when analytic philosophers do consider Foucault's work, treatment of it usually runs more to invective than to sympathetic investigation or exposition. A paper typifying this treatment describes

Foucault as not only wrong about nearly everything he did say, but as ultimately having "nothing to say" with respect to "philosophical theories of truth and knowledge." ¹⁴

Foucault remains intellectually distant to most analytic philosophers. This is not only because he is outside their tradition; they also believe his writings belong to a tradition the standards and methods of which fall short of their own. ¹⁵ Analytic philosophers see Foucault as in a tradition that is more literary than rigorous and technical. Speaking of Foucault's work, Eribon remarks that North American philosophers "saw no need of this 'literature,' which they ranked in the . . . French tradition of Bergson and Sartre." ¹⁶ Analytic philosophers' perception and characterization of Foucault as unrigorous and too literary adversely affects their students. If the students are curious about his work, because of his importance in other disciplines, they are predisposed to find it beyond the pale of technical (read "tough-minded") philosophy. Students then see Foucault as someone whose work does not merit the close study it requires. Alternatively, the exclusionary attitude of their professors prompts other students to revere Foucault as an iconoclastic champion opposed to technical (read "sterile")

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philosophy. They then are predisposed to find in his work all sorts of ideas supportive of their agendas. The upshot is that the combination of Foucault's importance outside philosophy, and characterization of Foucault's work by analytic philosophers as too problematic in conception and development, elicits opposed and equally unproductive responses. On the one hand, aspirants to orthodoxy ignorantly dismiss Foucault as too literary on the implicit or explicit say-so of their professors. On the other hand, would-be radicals fervently but equally ignorantly embrace various more-or-less popularized versions of Foucault's views. In numerous seminars on Foucault, I have had to work as hard to disabuse ardent students of basic misconceptions as to engage the unresponsive ones.

Foucault's writings are not difficult in the way that Immanuel Kant's are difficult. But his mode of expression and his style are unfamiliar enough to North American readers to mislead and even to irritate them, thereby making what is not inherently difficult nonetheless inaccessible. ¹⁷ Style aside, Foucault's work has characteristics that invite misinterpretation. His work exhibits a topical specificity at odds with abstract philosophizing and is deliberately marginal. Foucault employs a measure of provocative intellectual craftiness. Some important shifts in his thinking conspire to invite misunderstanding. There is no single work that adequately represents the complex, variegated, and evolutionary totality of Foucault's philosophical vision. In fact, Foucault's work resists holistic interpretation. ¹⁸ In spite of his own avowals about the unity of his project, his books "hardly ever refer back to his previous works." ¹⁹ This is why those who read only spottily in his work, basing their impressions on one or two books or articles, invariably form distorted and often astonishingly different ideas of his views. ²⁰ Many are introduced to Foucault through *The History of*

Sexuality because of its popularity. They then encounter the concept of "power" as it is used to advance a particular thesis about sexuality. The consequence is that power quite wrongly looks to them like covert manipulation. It is difficult to understand the concept of power without first reading *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault develops the idea. Reading *The History of Sexuality* first, and then reading, say, the quite differently conceived *Archaeology of Knowledge* poses another interpretive trap. In this case the results are most likely bafflement or misguided dismissal of one or the other work. Unfortunately, even systematic reading of several works does not ensure understanding of Foucault by those who approach his work from outside his intellectual tradition. This is in part because of differences in idiom and tradition and in part because of internal development in his thought. Additionally, Foucault always addresses circumscribed issues and always in opposition to established philosophical and historical scholarship. He leaves it to his readers to make the connections, and the connections often are made in varying ways.

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The basic premise of this book is that a special strategy is necessary to read Foucault productively. Not only is it insufficient to read only one or two of his books or articles to get the gist of his thought, one should not begin at the beginning as with most philosophers. To start with *Madness and Civilization* is to risk an erroneous initial impression that Foucault's work is not philosophical enough. To start with the much discussed and in some ways most imposing major "archaeological" work, *The Order of Things*, is to risk misconstruing his middle and last books as less philosophical than they actually are. Despite their originality, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are methodologically and even thematically closer to traditional philosophy than are the books that follow them. Of greatest importance in Foucault are his challenges to traditional philosophical methods and assumptions and to established conceptions of truth and knowledge. Those challenges are raised most clearly and definitively in his "genealogical" works. It is counterproductive to approach his work in a manner that in any way erodes the philosophical force of these works.

To get a good understanding of Foucault, one must begin in the middle, with the major genealogical works: *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. That is where we find the most pointed indictments of traditionally conceived truth, knowledge, and rationality. That is where we find the sharpest articulations of the ideas that truth and knowledge are products of power, that the subject is product of disciplinary techniques, and that rationality is itself an historical product. Once the nature and scope of these challenging ideas is appreciated, it is possible to go back to *Madness and Civilization* or *The Order of Things*, and forward to *The Use of Pleasure* or *The Care of the Self*, and productively understand the progression of Foucault's thought. Moreover, the major genealogical works comprise what is most philosophically significant in Foucault's work for my audience: analytic philosophers. It is in those works that Foucault most directly addresses what he describes as of greatest moment: "truth itself." [21](#)

The aim of this book is to provide those who have not read or have only dipped into Foucault's writings with an accessible introduction to his genealogy. Once readers grasp Foucault's radical ideas concerning truth, knowledge, the subject, and rationality, and understand how these are products of power relations, they will have what is most important in Foucault's thought. This book also has a therapeutic aim. Whether or not because of their philosophical significance, though one would hope because of it, *Discipline and Punish* and especially *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, are Foucault's most widely read books. Unfortunately, these also are the most often misinterpreted and misused of his works. The ideas presented in these books are prone to distortion and hasty appropriation. Not only are they difficult ideas, they are Foucault's most revolutionary insights and therefore what is most intellectually exciting in his work. Ex-

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citement about the concept of power, in particular, often prompts uncomprehending appropriation and application. ²²My intent, then, is to provide a clear and accessible account of what Foucault is doing in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 in order both to provide an introduction to his genealogy and, hopefully, to dispel misconceptions and misinterpretations.

Readers with broad philosophical backgrounds may consider *The Order of Things*, with its emphasis on linguistic and epistemological topics, to be Foucault's most properly "philosophical," and therefore significant, work. They will wonder why that work receives cursory treatment in this book. It is precisely because *The Order of Things* is most recognizable as a philosophical work that one should focus elsewhere to discern the deeper import of the ideas of a most anti-philosophical philosopher. Gilles Deleuze observes that Foucault offers "counterphilosophy" and that his work is most productively read as a counterpoint to established philosophical assumptions and practices, especially analytic ones. ²³There is less to be gained by concentrating on those of Foucault's books that better meet disciplinary expectations than on those that seem to flout good philosophical sense. As will be considered later, Foucault exalts mind-stretching alterity in intellectual pursuits. To achieve alterity of thought, particularly in his genealogical period, he concentrates on the unfamiliar, the enigmatic, the shunned, the obscure, the neglected, and the suppressed. In the spirit of his work, then, if the philosophical tradition prefers *The Order of Things* to *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, it is the latter two that most deserve our attention.

Necessary Scene-Setting

I need to clarify the reasons for the negative view that analytic philosophers have of Foucault and his work to situate both with respect to my analytic reader's background and expectations. This is necessary to orient my exposition and to make it more accessible, but there is another reason. Beyond exposition, I also try to make a substantive contribution to understanding of Foucault's philosophical vision of truth.

To that end I complement the expository chapters with one on truth (Chapter 6) and a related one on realism (Chapter 7). In those two chapters I address the fundamental sources of analytic impatience with Foucault's contentions and work. My objective is not only to make Foucault's work more accessible to analytic philosophers but to interest them in it. Doing so requires disabusing analytic philosophers of the idea that Foucault's thought is hopelessly relativistic and unrealistic.

There are a number of more specific reasons for analytic philosophers' dismissal of Foucault than the general view of his work as unrigorous or too

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literary. These reasons can be gathered under four headings that have to do with Foucault's predecessors, his peers, his motivation, and his ontology. ²⁴

Problematic Predecessors

Foucault was trained and worked in the "Continental" or European philosophical tradition. That means that Nietzsche and especially Heidegger loomed very large in Foucault's intellectual development. Foucault recognizes this: "I am simply a Nietzschean"; "Heidegger has always been for me the essential philosopher." ²⁵ Miller quotes Foucault as saying that his "entire philosophical development was determined by [the] reading of Heidegger." ²⁶ Heidegger's influence on Foucault was more than narrowly philosophical, for he was deeply affected by Heidegger's interest in pressing beyond the limits of conventional intellectual inquiry. This legacy is anathema to analytic philosophers. Miller captures the heart of the matter when he notes that someone prepared to "descend into what Heidegger called the 'lunthought' " must be prepared to probe "beyond the limits of reason" and to think "without statute or rule, structure or order." ²⁷ For Heidegger and Foucault, this is an intellectual challenge. For analytic philosophers, it is rejection of reasoned inquiry in favor of undisciplined speculation.

Nietzsche often serves as a model of intellectual excess for many analytic philosophers and many do not consider him a philosopher. Bertrand Russell offers a typical assessment: "Nietzsche . . . was a literary rather than academic philosopher. He invented no new technical theories in ontology or epistemology." ²⁸ But if analytic philosophers have their doubts about Nietzsche, they have perceived Heidegger as the paradigm of pretentious obscurity from the time of his initial prominence. ²⁹ Heidegger does not even warrant an entry in the index to Russell's history of philosophy. W. T. Jones's four-volume history also ignores Heidegger and leaves a yawning intellectual gap between the two twentieth-century European figures it does discuss, Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. Wallace Matson's history of philosophy runs to nearly five hundred pages but allots only sixteen lines to Heidegger. ³⁰ There are exceptions to the rule. There have been efforts to link the work of leading analytic philosophers to that of prominent European philosophers, despite Heidegger's strong influence on

them. One example is trying to connect Donald Davidson's more recent views on language to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. ³¹Efforts at crosspollination, however, have had limited success ³²and association with Heidegger remains preclusive of analytic interest.

Problematic Peers

Foucault is not only shunned because of his Heideggerian provenance; he is disassociated from contemporary European philosophers who are taken se-

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riously by analytic philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas. Foucault instead is ignorantly lumped with Jacques Derrida as a founder of postmodernism and recent French "irrationalism." In the eyes of most analytic philosophers, Derrida inherited Heidegger's mantle of undisciplined speculation and arrogant impenetrability. John Searle, who in effect acted as a spokesperson for analytic philosophers, wrote off Derrida as not being a serious philosopher nearly two decades ago. ³³That dismissal was reiterated in 1992 when Cambridge University awarded Derrida an honorary degree. Nineteen philosophers, including W.V.O. Quine and D. M. Armstrong, ³⁴wrote to *The Times* in an unsuccessful attempt to block the granting of the degree. They contended that philosophers "working in leading departments throughout the world" judged that Derrida's work "does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigor." ³⁵The irony was that those objecting to award of the degree "made themselves . . . absurd because the authority to which they were appealing was none other than themselves." ³⁶Foucault and Derrida were friends, but their work differs greatly in nature and intent. Nonetheless, analytic philosophers see Foucault as like Derrida in embodying and contributing to the intellectual fragmentation and bankruptcy that supposedly characterize contemporary French philosophy in particular and the last decade of the twentieth century in general. ³⁷This assimilation is a mistake. As Vasile Munteanu notes, "putting together Foucault with . . . other French contemporaries . . . especially Derrida, is a disservice both to Foucault and to the important ideas that he can bring to North American philosophy." ³⁸

Problematic Motivation

Foucault's philosophizing is significantly motivated by political considerations, like the work of many European philosophers of our time, such as Sartre and Habermas. What looms largest is the need to come to terms with ideological failures leading to World War II and recent disillusionment with Marxism. ³⁹Moreover, the developments that culminated in World War II insured that Foucault grew to adulthood with "a particular sense of menace" that heightened his political awareness. ⁴⁰Most Europeans perceive political motivation in philosophical thought as legitimate, admirable, and even necessary. However, analytic philosophers perceive political motivation as violating what they understand to be the sacrosanct objectivity of philosophy.

Foucault's views are therefore seen not as informed by political considerations but as tainted by nonphilosophical motives and interests.

Problematic Ontology

When analytic philosophers give philosophical reasons for dismissing Foucault, they invariably talk about his relativism. He is perceived as having

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opted out of serious philosophy by adopting a wholesale relativism diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment values, presuppositions and goals that still constitute bedrock for analytic philosophical thought. The question of Foucault's relativism is labyrinthine in complexity, as we will see, but the important point is that he is wrongly thought to deny truth by relativizing it to discourse and sociopolitical contexts. This is a common misinterpretation that I hope to dispel. Foucault's own comment on it was: "Those who say that for me the truth does not exist are simple-minded." ⁴¹But relativism actually is not the fundamental issue that divides analytic philosophers and Foucault. The real problem is irrealism. Foucault's relativism is taken to entail irrealism. His relativization of truth to discourse is taken as denial of extra-discursive reality. His relativistic pronouncements about truth and discourse are considered to imply that our reality is only a function of discourse. ⁴²

Despite the foregoing, there undeniably has been some interest in Foucault on the part of analytic philosophers. ⁴³But widespread perception of Foucault's work as unrigorous, as philosophically compromised by political considerations, and as vitiated by relativism and irrealism has drastically limited such interest. This perception has constrained even those philosophers likeliest to be sympathetic to Foucault's ideas. A case in point is Charles Taylor, who is analytically trained but comfortable with and even proselytic about Foucault's intellectual tradition. Yet Taylor portrays Foucault's work as bad philosophy and discusses it primarily to focus his own criticisms of postmodernist ideas. Taylor casts Foucault as a disciple of Nietzsche's and as having inherited Nietzsche's confusions and reliance on rhetoric. Specifically, Taylor wrongly takes Foucault's conception of power as Nietzschean and argues it is incoherent because it lacks contrast. ⁴⁴But proper understanding of Foucauldian power renders Taylor's arguments unpersuasive. I hold no brief for Derrida, but Taylor's treatment of Foucault as doing bad philosophy is comparable to Searle's tendentious reading of Derrida. Rorty tells us that the weakness of Searle's treatment of Derrida is that he thinks of him as doing amateurish philosophy of language rather than as asking metaphilosophical questions about the value of such philosophy." ⁴⁵In a similar way, Taylor treats Foucault's work in a way that precludes its radicalness.

Even more striking than Taylor is the case of Rorty himself. Rorty is the North American philosopher who has the most in common with Foucault. But Rorty has not made as much use of Foucault as one might expect. He invokes his name surprisingly little. ⁴⁶Unlike Taylor, Rorty does not think Foucault philosophizes badly, but he is

distrustful of what he feels are traditional epistemological implications in Foucault's work. What he does value in Foucault's work he claims to find elsewhere. Rorty maintains that John Dewey waits at the end of the road Foucault travels and that Deweyan pragmatism is capable of yielding "all that is politically useful in the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Derrida-Foucault tradition."⁴⁷ Rorty also thinks Fou-

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cault offers too bleak a vision of political reality and possibility, a view he shares with a good number of North American academics. Rorty claims that Foucault had a "dangerous" influence on the American political left, prompting "disengagement," and that his lack of a political program produced "profound resentment."⁴⁸

Despite Rorty's ambivalence about Foucault, there are important similarities between the two. I trade on those similarities in exposition of Foucault. Even if the reader is as unfamiliar with Rorty's work as with Foucault's, Rorty's idiom is more immediately accessible to North American readers. Where there is congruence of ideas, Rorty's articulation of those ideas facilitates understanding of Foucault's.

In contrast to most analytic philosophers, many North American feminists have engaged Foucault in serious debate.⁴⁹ Feminists have focused on the political implications of Foucault's work and related his ideas on power and the body directly to their own projects. They have rightly concentrated on those parts of Foucault's work that most immediately interest them or affect their own positions. This engagement has yielded mixed results because Foucauldian power is sometimes misrepresented as covert domination. Unfortunately, neither feminist criticism nor sympathetic development of Foucault's views has gained for those views the wider philosophical recognition they deserve.

For the most part, then, analytic philosophers regard Foucault's work as largely external or even inimical to their philosophical projects. This is the case even with respect to his views on the most fundamental philosophical issues. For instance, Foucault said a lot about truth, but to cite him in a discussion of truth conducted by analytic philosophers likely would be seen as facetious. I have observed a great deal of joking dismissal of Foucault in philosophical conversation. The dismissal is not acknowledged as such, but one need only look at one or another feminist work on the negative roles of humor to appreciate how real it is.⁵⁰ Foucault's views on truth should be considered relevant to most discussions of the topic, if only because his pluralistic view of truth challenges the traditional unitary conception and may get us past the impasse the latter generates. For example, a pluralistic understanding of truth may resolve our apparent inability to jettison the notion of truth as correspondence in spite of not being able to viably articulate the notion of correspondence. This is why this introduction to Foucault, aimed at readers trained in analytic philosophy, is not only an attempt to win respect for work that is of peripheral interest. The point is to enable a productive dialogue.⁵¹

Making a Start

Foucault offers historicist views of truth, knowledge, and rationality. He thinks that the most important philosophical projects have to do with un-

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derstanding how and why we hold some things true, how and why we deem some things knowledge, and how and why we consider some procedures rational and others not. Foucault also offers a historicist view of the subject. Basic to his work is the idea that subjectivity is a complex product rather than a preexistent condition. These views look to many analytic philosophers as at best relativistic sociology of knowledge and at worst absurd. But that perception presupposes just the methodological assumptions and particular conceptions of the nature of truth, knowledge, rationality, and subjectivity that Foucault challenges. If Foucault argues, against the tradition, that there is no Truth but various truths, he may have something more useful in mind than a simple relativism. If, as Todd May puts it, Foucault argues against the tradition that "[t]here is no Knowledge; there are knowledges" and that "[t]here is no Reason; there are rationalities," then Foucault may be contending more than that inquiry and its standards are contextual. If he insists that "it is meaningless to speak in the name of -- or against -- Reason, Truth, or Knowledge," he may be teaching us a valuable lesson about justification rather than denying its possibility. ⁵²And if he maintains that subjectivity is manufactured, he may be disabusing us of illusory autonomy.

As to what Foucault does contend, analytically trained or influenced readers will expect exposition of theories and arguments in what follows. However, Foucault mainly offers not so much theories and supporting arguments as persuasive and sometimes compelling characterizations and "pictures." In this his can be compared to the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Many readers will be impatient with claims about the value of views not presented as theoretical claims and supported by arguments. But tolerance of unfamiliar presentation is the price that must be paid to appreciate Foucault's radical thought.

Although Foucault does not proceed in the expected manner of making theoretical claims and offering detailed arguments for them, that should not obscure ideas that are initially startling but ultimately productive. These are many. There are his Nietzschean misgivings about the absolute value of truth. There is his historicist view of knowledge. There is his distrust of the evident, of what manifests itself as obvious. There is his view of truth and knowledge as functions of how we make ourselves certain kinds of subjects for whom the world is then a certain way. There is his querying of how we came to regard ourselves as objects of disciplined knowledge. There's his insightful conception of disciplines as both fields of study and systems of control. And there is his "decentralization" of the subject or his vision of the self, and hence the knower, as emergent from social and discursive relations and practices. All of these ideas are decidedly postmodern in the sense of being opposed to conception of truth as of ultimate worth, as evident to reasoned inquiry, and as objective. They are

also opposed to

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conception of knowledge as possession of truth, and to conception of the self as the unitary condition of cognition. We cannot reasonably expect these radical ideas to be presented in the idiom and style that are the staples of traditional philosophy.

I should add that this introduction to Foucault's genealogy is not an ecumenical exercise. It is not my intent to reconcile diverse traditions. ⁵³That is far too ambitious a project and almost certainly bound to fail. Neither is this introduction a misguided attempt to present the "real" Foucaultan effort Foucault would have despised. ⁵⁴I have no intention of trying to offer either a new interpretation or a comprehensive outline of a body of work that ranges from the brilliant to the possibly incoherent. ⁵⁵There are some excellent comprehensive treatments of Foucault's work. ⁵⁶As indicated, my objective is to introduce my targeted audience to the most central and productive of Foucault's ideas, and in my view that is to ideas that are most fully developed in his middle works. I offer an introduction that concentrates on Foucault's genealogical analytics. These are his investigations into how the development of discursive practices produces truth and knowledge and so shapes and defines subjects and subjectivity. These are the Foucauldian ideas with the greatest epistemological import; these are also the ideas most perplexing to those trained in analytic philosophy.

Foucault's genealogical contentions represent an extreme point of contrast to the basically Cartesian assumptions and methods that still dominate epistemology. This is especially true with respect to the subject. ⁵⁷Foucault does not offer the sort of constructivist alternative to the Cartesian subject that George Herbert Mead offered. Constructivists such as Mead regard the subject as a product of cognition rather than a condition of cognition, but that is basically an ontological thesis about the origin and nature of the subject. Taylor comments on the difference between Mead's and Foucault's conception of subjectivity. He observes that Mead "does not seem to take account of the constitutive role of language in the definition of self." ⁵⁸In a sense, Foucault's subject is more emergent than constructed. As I consider in Chapter 4, subjectivity for Foucault is a matter of *saying* and not a matter of *being*. In short, his is not an ontological or metaphysical thesis about the self.

A caution is now necessary. The radicalness of Foucault's ideas should not lead to counterproductive exaggeration of the differences between his thought and more familiar philosophy. I disagree with those who anguish over "the demise of the tradition" and construe Foucault's work as part of some alleged holistic displacement of modernism by postmodernism. ⁵⁹Foucault explicitly dismisses the idea that postmodernism constitutes some sort of wholesale intellectual reorientation: "There is no sense at all to the proposition that reason is a long narrative which is now finished, and that another narrative is underway." ⁶⁰Rorty admits similarities between his

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own views and Foucault's. He tolerates the label "postmodern" applied to him, but is "not fond of the term" precisely because he also rejects the idea that it designates a new and systematically different way of thinking. ⁶¹Rorty thinks postmodernism is simply "the gradual encapsulation and forgetting of a certain philosophical tradition." ⁶²We should try to make productive use of Foucault's ideas rather than misguidedly exaggerate the magnitude of presuppositional and methodological changes and innovations. Some of those ideas pose the most pointed challenges to traditional conceptions of truth and knowledge in the 350 years since *Meditations on First Philosophy* and the two and a half millennia since *Theaetetus*. But they are challenges, not a new and alien way of thinking.

As acknowledged earlier, these challenging ideas are not as accessible as they might be because of idiomatic and background differences. Regretfully, they are made even less accessible by Foucault's own interpretive excursions. Foucault was a highly regarded French intellectual, which means he was a public figure, a celebrity, in a way academics never are in North America. As a consequence, not only must his readers and interpreters contend with his substantial and diversely oriented primary writings, they must also deal with a profusion of interviews, many anthologized, in which Foucault has too much to say about his own work. ⁶³Foucault had a "revisionist" view of his own work and tended to retrospectively see more coherence and progressive development in it than it actually exhibits. His view of his work as incrementally developmental was in sharp contrast to his often speaking of having changed his mind and of later works superseding earlier ones: "To write a book is . . . to abolish the preceding one." ⁶⁴Foucault was also impatient with others' misunderstanding of his work and especially with what he deemed ignorant or ill-conceived criticism. So in addition to his revisionary statements, there are many corrective pronouncements in various secondary writings -- commentaries, forewords, afterwords, and annotations that were solicited or volunteered and published in anthologies on his work. There are similar contentions in transcribed lectures that have been published in various collections. A great deal of what Foucault says in these "clarifications" of his work relates to his perspective of the moment. Additionally, a fair bit is ironic, provocative, and, on occasion, has all the earmarks of unconsidered extemporaneous remarks.

The upshot is that, aside from the complexity of his primary writings and whatever problems they may raise, Foucault's secondary writings and interviews, taken together with his primary writings, support too many diverse interpretations. ⁶⁵There are passages at odds with some central contentions and comments suggestive of alternative readings of important pronouncements. The breadth of interpretive possibility would be troublesome enough if inadvertent or only a consequence of continuous revision, but a great deal of it was quite deliberate. We will see that providing interpretive possibility

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is integral to Foucault's conception of philosophizing. Eribon quotes Georges Dumézil, "who knew [Foucault] better than almost anyone else," as saying that Foucault "wore

masks, and he was always changing them." Eribon adds, "there are several Foucaults - a thousand Foucaults." [66](#)

Though Foucault often speaks of his work as of a piece, the integration he saw is problematic. Even a cursory reading of Foucault's claims to unity, found mostly in interviews and pieces like his "Two Lectures" and "The Subject and Power," shows this. The integration he speaks of has more to do with the topics that interest him than with what he has to say about those topics. [67](#) This is evident in the emphasis put on the formation of the subject, the topic that shows the greatest measure of continuity and consistency in his investigations. Foucault insists that the goal of his work "during the last 20 years" was not to analyze the phenomenon of power but rather "to create a history of the different modes by which . . . human beings are made subjects." [68](#) He lists as one of the most basic questions he considers that of how "the human subject took itself as the object of possible knowledge." [69](#)

This question illustrates how many of Foucault's most intriguing ideas are often articulated in uncharacteristically compact ways and as often buried in a mass of detail. The brief way he puts this complex question serves as a warning to those who are tempted by his style to skim over what they think inessential. The question is: How did we come to take ourselves to be the sorts of things that can be studied and known and understood as subjects of broadly scientific or disciplinary investigation? Why did we not continue to see ourselves as known and understood only as friends or adversaries, cooperators or competitors, teachers or students, lovers or enemies? The question is about how we objectified ourselves as the subject matter of various disciplines, and it is perhaps Foucault's most perceptive impulse to wonder about "the objectivizing of the subject." [70](#)

In the next chapter I will situate genealogy both in relation to my intended readers' philosophical framework and to Foucault's own earlier work. With respect to the former, I try to say just enough to heighten the contrast with Foucault's most challenging ideas in order to avert misunderstandings. With respect to the latter, I try to say just enough about Foucault's mainly archaeological work to give the reader an idea of its character. Chapter 3 is devoted to a single article, the importance of which some think "cannot be exaggerated" with respect to "understanding Foucault's objectives." [71](#) In Chapters 4 and 5, I consider the two Foucauldian texts that embody the most thorough application of his genealogical analytics and that are, in my estimation, the most central to Foucault's thought. [72](#) These are *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault first explicitly addresses the matter of power and its role in the formation of subjects, and *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. In the latter Foucault considers how formation

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of subjects is effected in the area he deemed most central to the formation and development of identity. [73](#) In Chapter 6, I offer what I believe to be a novel way of

sorting out Foucault's views on truth. Chapter 7 is given over to the issue of irrationalism, which, I contend, is the real source of analytic philosophers' antipathy to Foucault's work. In Chapter 8, I consider the relation of genealogy to archaeology and Foucauldian ethics and the central question of the cogency of Foucault's philosophical claims. The latter is an instance of the larger issue of how historicist theses could be judged intellectually compelling.

Notes

- [1.](#) Miller 1993:13.
- [2.](#) Ryan 1993:12.
- [3.](#) Macey 1993:xi.
- [4.](#) Miller 1993:13.
- [5.](#) Arac 1991:vii.
- [6.](#) I expand a little on this distinction below.
- [7.](#) Eribon 1991. Specific reference is to visits by Foucault in the early 1980s to the University of California at Berkeley and at Los Angeles and to the University of Vermont.
- [8.](#) Eribon 1991:313.
- [9.](#) These began in 1975.
- [10.](#) Miller 1993.
- [11.](#) Rorty 1982:224. I have it on excellent authority that the philosopher in question was D. M. Armstrong.
- [12.](#) Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988:13; compare Allen 1993:181.
- [13.](#) Miller 1993:13.
- [14.](#) Nola 1994:3.
- [15.](#) I recall with regret that because I once shared this view, I failed to go and hear Foucault while I was a Visiting Scholar at Princeton in 1981. He was there while visiting a number of