

Seeing if his papers are in order:

On self-refutation and truth in the work of Michel Foucault



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Summary

Michel Foucault has often been criticised for being self-referentially inconsistent. His thought on discursive formations and how they form the way we have historically produced truth has been at the centre of such critiques. If what we call true at a given time is contingent on discursive formations and if that what we think is universal is instead historical, is it not also the case that Foucault's work itself is subject to these concerns? How can we come to call Foucault's work true? Is Foucault's conception of truth self-referentially inconsistent?

In this thesis I consider one of these critiques, that of Charles Taylor, and a response to it by Gary Gutting. Gutting tries to counter Taylor's argument but, I feel, ultimately falls short of giving a satisfying answer by relying too much on politics. Instead, I will argue that one needs not look at politics to ground Foucault's thought on truth. Building on Foucault's most methodological and philosophical book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, I will set out to interpret his philosophy of language and historical method as a project that is not sceptical but ultimately agnostic when it comes to issues of truth and validity.

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On self-refutation and truth in the work of Michel Foucault

Very few intellectuals have had as much of an impact on the humanities and philosophy as French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. He is the most cited author in these fields over the past fifty years¹ and his influence ranges from work done in sociology, literary criticism, cultural studies and many other academic disciplines, to practices in medical care and psychiatry. His analyses of the relation between power and knowledge, authorship, discursive structures and the relationship between the political and the subject have opened up new approaches in all of these fields.

However, such broad use of his work does not imply that he is uncontroversial. Many philosophers and historians are staunch critics of both the philosophical foundations of, and the historical evidence for, his work. Historians point out that Foucault's sketches of historical epochs are generalisations that ignore much of what goes against his argument. They also argue that he emphasises figures that are marginal and marginalises figures that ought to be emphasised.² While I think addressing these historical criticisms is important, it will not be the goal of this thesis.

Instead, I will be looking at criticisms of the philosophical foundations of Foucault's idiosyncratic method of historiography. He sees this method as best contrasted with the Kantian project of finding the universal and ahistorical structures of human reason. While Foucault does not reject this project outright, he takes another approach:

¹ "Most Cited Authors of Books in the Humanities, 2007," *timeshighereducation.com*, last modified March 26, 2009, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/most-cited-authors-of-books-in-the-humanities-2007/405956.article>.

² Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 75-79.

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 to be 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?³

Foucault's critique of reason is thus a project of suspicion. It looks at what was historically thought of as a priori knowledge, as common sense, or as the obvious results of empirical research and asks: 'how is it that you came to accept this?'

The answer to this question is found in what Foucault called discursive formations, a set of statements that are defined by their relation to other statements and are regulated by rules that are not manifest to their users. Discursive formations regulate what statements can and can not be meaningfully uttered at a given time. That is why we no longer speak of gravity in Aristotelian terms of natural places and why Aristotle did not speak gravity. The discursive formations of a given time allow only certain kinds of statements. They seem to determine the kinds of statements that count as knowledge and as reasonable.

Here we find the source of more philosophical minded criticisms of Foucault's work. If what can be known at a given time is contingent on discursive formations and if that what we think is universal is instead historical, is it not also the case that Foucault's work itself is subject to these concerns? In the words of J. G. Merquior, '[if Foucault's enterprise] tells the truth, then all knowledge is suspect in its pretence of objectivity; but if that is the case, how can the theory itself vouch for its truth?'⁴

³ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 52.

⁴ José Guilherme Merquior, *Foucault* (London: Fontana, 1985), 147, quoted in Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 272.

On self-refutation and truth in the work of Michel Foucault

In this thesis I want to take a closer look at the following question: is Foucault's conception of truth self-referentially inconsistent? To that end I will first look at one of the more nuanced critiques of Foucault, Charles Taylor's essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth" wherein both epistemological and political problems of Foucault's work are addressed.⁵ Secondly, I will focus on a response to this critique given by Gary Gutting in his book *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason*⁶. Gutting tries to counter Taylor's argument but, I feel, ultimately falls short of giving a satisfying answer by relying too much on politics. Disagreeing with both, I will present my own take on this problem by giving an alternative interpretation of Foucault's work. Building on Foucault's most methodological and philosophical book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, I will set out to interpret his philosophy of language and historical method as a project that is not sceptical but ultimately agnostic when it comes to issues of truth and validity. I will show that Foucault is at heart a philosophically minded historian, not a historically minded philosopher. He is interested in the effects produced by calling something true, not the truth.

⁵ Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 152-183.

⁶ Gutting, *Foucault's Archaeology*.

Foucault

Scope of thesis and an historical overview

Over the three decades of his career, Foucault's work changed considerably in both its subject matter and methodology. After some brief dabbling in the then fashionable combination of Marxism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis during the fifties, he began to develop his own truly 'Foucauldian' perspective from the early sixties and onwards.⁷ His work would, however, remain in constant struggle with these three schools, as well as the later structuralism. With the publication of the *History of Madness* in 1961 Foucault's archaeological phase began. It would be characterised by a search for the historical developments of the production of knowledge in fields like medicine, psychiatry and the social sciences. Rather than stressing continuous progressive development and refinement of knowledge and methods like a traditional historian in those fields would have done, Foucault would emphasise discontinuities and the ways in which discursive formation limit what may and may not be said.

The historical methodology he developed jettisons pre-established unities like scientific disciplines, historical epochs, oeuvres, books and even human subjects. His concern was only with statements and the relations between them: discursive formations.

Archaeology is an attempt to reconstruct the rules, regularities and transformations within particular discursive formations. To see, for example, how it came to be that the mad became the mentally ill, how the sick became patients or how natural history became biology. As I mentioned in the introduction, the rules governing such formations constrict what can be said. They produce the kinds of statements that can count as knowledge, as reasonable and as true. Conversely, they also limit what cannot be predicated by these terms. It seems, therefore, that

⁷ Mark Kelly, "Foucault," *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucault/>.

truth is internal to such formations and that statements do not point to something ‘out there’ but only to themselves.

The nature of Foucault’s work changed in the late sixties. Amidst the political upheaval in Paris after the student protests in 1968, Foucault returned to Paris after having spent several years abroad. Under the influence of these protests and the analogous political turn in French academia, Foucault’s work became more political. He became concerned with non-discursive relations like power, institutions, law and practices and how they influenced discursive formations. His analyses now studied the way discursive formations both shaped and limited the way people self-identify, live their lives and perceive others. Power and knowledge became inseparable; to say what someone or something is, is to claim dominion over it, to speak a truth about it that it cannot speak for itself. His historical writing became a writing for the present, one that shows how we became what we are: a genealogy. An ugly self-portrait of the Western world and the knowledge produced there.

Although his scope and focus changed from his archaeological to his genealogical phases, he still relied heavily on the methods set out at the end of his archaeological period in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Concerns about discursive formations were still central but became supplemented by a new attention for distinct but related institutional and political formations. For present purposes I will consider archaeology and genealogy as similar enough to be relevant to the question posed in this thesis as they seem to have the same relation to truth. They also cover those writings of Foucault’s that have had the biggest influence. Archaeology proved fertile grounds for literary theory and criticism, for example in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*⁸. Additionally, genealogy became influential through the development of concepts like biopower, power/knowledge and discipline and its coupling of sexuality and politics.

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

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Finally, in the early eighties, in the years leading up to his death, Foucault's work took an ethical turn and began to focus on ancient history. These new subjects were far removed from the political histories for the present he attempted to write in the years before. His relation to truth also changed, becoming linked with a care for the self. As such this period of writing is outside of the scope of this essay. Having established a brief overview of Foucault's work, I now turn to his critics, specifically the criticism of American philosopher Charles Taylor.

Taylor's attack

'Foucault disconcerts,' Taylor writes. His analyses 'seem to offer an insight into what has happened and into what we have become, yet at the same time offer a critique, and hence some notion of a good unrealised or repressed in history, which we therefore understand better how to rescue.'⁹ According to Taylor, Foucault's analyses show us a modern system of power/domination that is not seen as such but rather as truth, science or even liberation. Foucault's work is thus an 'unmasking' and should be, according to Taylor, a rescuing of two goods: freedom and truth. It is not.

It seems that for Foucault, there is nothing behind the mask. Rather, there can only be a constant succession of masks, each bringing us only another system of power.

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹⁰

Truth is regime-relative and as a result there can be no 'true' unmasking, no getting to a discourse that actually approaches universal truths. Taylor argues that the revelation of a truth behind the regime and the liberation it should bring are impossible for Foucault. It would only be the substitution of one system of power for the other because it is within that system that something we might call truth arises. There is no point outside these systems from which we can come to another truth.

Taylor also sees Foucault's understanding of regimes of truth as too monolithic. Foucault only points out certain aspects of modern regimes of power, dares not point out progress and continuity and tidies up history too much. Taylor argues that this monolithism is

⁹ Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 152.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

necessary for Foucault's relativism; incomparability between regimes can only be sustained if the regimes are hermetically sealed.

Finally, Foucault's monolithic relativism also seems to come from an Archimedean point. Taylor writes that 'Foucault *sounds* as though he believed that, as an historian, he could stand nowhere, identifying with none of the "epistemai" or structures of power whose coming and going he impartially surveys.'¹¹ This should strike us as odd, even problematic. If all production of knowledge and truth is internal to these regimes and structures and that these structures are the product of a power that is not manifest to us *than how is it that Foucault can escape them?*

Here we come to the central problem in Foucault's work. He seems to argue that truth is always internal to a given society, determined by its history, institutions, practices and, most importantly, power relations. That would mean that truth is not some privileged description of a state of affairs in the world, but a thoroughly political thing, contingent on the specific society we happen to be living in. Following this line of thought, how can Foucault's work get outside of these restrictions? According to his own work, he cannot come to an Archimedean point outside of regimes yet his analyses seem to suggest that is exactly what he does. Alternatively, he could argue that truth is internal to regimes and that he himself is also locked into one and thoroughly determined by it. But that would mean that the truth he professes is built on the same shaky foundations as the disciplines he critiques. Then why should we believe him? Either Foucault contradicts himself or his project is self-refuting. In my analysis of Foucault below I will show that Taylor makes a number of errors in interpreting Foucault's thought on truth, but I will return to this later on. Either way, Foucault and his supporters have some explaining to do. Luckily for us, they do.

¹¹ Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 180.

Gutting's counter

At the conclusion of his book *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, American philosopher and Foucault interpreter Gary Gutting sees himself confronted with a similar question as was raised by Taylor, 'is Foucault's critique of reason self-refuting?'¹²

A large part of this chapter is spent on the question of whether Foucault is a total relativist with regards to truth. Gutting specifically mentions Taylor as one of many who claim that Foucault is a global relativist or sceptic about truth. He argues that these criticisms are unfounded; Foucault's work is highly regional, looking at disciplines like biology, natural history and grammar, at conceptions of sexuality, punishment and discipline describing their history and development. Foucault gives no indication that his analyses of such domains can be used to generalise about societies as a whole. Besides, these are all 'dubious disciplines'¹³ dealing with humans and human nature.

With regards to the natural sciences Foucault seems to be of the same mind as his predecessors, Bachelard and Canguilhem, two French historians of ideas and science. Their work formed the foundation of Foucault's thought on history.¹⁴ Both Bachelard and Canguilhem held reasonably favourable views of the natural sciences. Although they were sceptical of grand narratives of teleological progressive scientific development and stressed discontinuities (a theme that became very strongly developed in Foucault) they nonetheless stressed that natural sciences had come a long way. They, and by extension Foucault, thought that by moving past different thresholds of systematisation and formalisation, disciplines

¹² Gutting, *Foucault's Archaeology*, 272.

¹³ A term used by Gutting to describe the human sciences studied by Foucault.

¹⁴ Canguilhem was the supervisor for Foucault's doctoral thesis as well as a mentor for many a French philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century including influential philosophers as Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida.

could move beyond their social and political constraints into a domain of objectivity.¹⁵ Moreover, even though Foucault thought that the dubious disciplines ‘do not meet “the formal criteria of a scientific form of knowledge,” they nonetheless do belong “to the positive domain of knowledge”(OT, 365)¹⁶.¹⁷ This means that, although they are still suspect, objective knowledge is in reach of these disciplines as well.

But even though the claims that Foucault is a total sceptic or relativist are easily dismissed, his project still seems to undermine the idea that ‘dubious disciplines’ approach something we might call ‘true’. Time and time again his work shows that pretensions to objective knowledge in medicine, psychology or the social sciences have oppressive consequences and have ultimately proven to be false. To just claim that these disciplines might approach objective truth is not good enough.

What is more, Foucault’s own work belongs precisely in the domain of these disciplines. His project is, after all, aimed at how we came to be the way we are. Gutting argues that Foucault’s ‘accounts suggest an overall picture of what human reality is like: radically historical, formed by structures beyond the control of subjectivity, subject to sharp epistemic breaks.’¹⁸ It seems Foucault still thinks that the truth these disciplines profess is still one that is internal to their discursive formations. Objectivity and truth might be within reach here but they have not yet been reached. So the question still stands: can Foucault escape his own critiques?

For his project to work, Foucault must claim some sort of privileged grounds above

¹⁵ Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 9-54

¹⁶ OT, 365 refers to page 365 in the 1970 Random House edition of *The Order of Things*.

¹⁷ Gutting, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 273.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

the disciplines he is criticising. Gutting first thinks he might find this in some appeal to liberation. If Foucault's analyses can lessen oppression and suffering that would prove its privileged position over those bodies of knowledge he critiques. Foucault's historical analyses should lift the masks of history from the true face of human freedom, like Taylor argued he could and would not. But how could he defend this claim? His own work shows how appeals to liberation and to greater truth have led to new forms of domination and power. What reason have we to suspect that this time it will be better? Moreover, his own work can be reformulated to the historical studies of the development of norms that limit human liberation. An appeal to liberation would entail two separate judgements: 1) that constraints on liberation are wrong and 2) that any constraints our attempts at liberation might put into place are better than the ones in place now. So Foucault's project not only criticises norms but also introduces his own. But on what grounds should we accept those?

Gutting ultimately argues that these norms could be grounded in the concrete experiences of domination in our everyday lives:

We do not need a philosophical theory to establish that the oppression and exploitation of factory workers, prisoners, or the mad are wrong or that the situation would be genuinely improved if specific changes could be made in the regimes governing them.¹⁹

But even if the 'truths' produced by Foucault's analyses would have this effect, even if they would improve lives and liberate people, does that make his work *true*? And the question still stands, on what grounds would we decide what kinds of liberation would be good or bad? I was looking for an epistemological grounding for his work and all Gutting managed to produce was a political grounding, and a shaky one at that.

¹⁹ Ibid., 282.

Remarks on Taylor and Gutting

At this point my initial question remains without a satisfying answer. Is Foucault's conception of truth self-referentially inconsistent? According to Taylor, it is. But as Gutting showed, his characterisation of Foucault as a total relativist who believes that truths are internal to specific regimes of truth was too simplistic. As Gutting argues, Foucault leaves room for objective natural sciences and maybe even human sciences. If we are to believe Foucault's own work however, we have yet to arrive at the point where human sciences might call themselves objective. More problematically, he himself is part of these precise fields, how can he hope to escape the limitations that hinder his colleagues? Gutting fails to answer these concerns. We are also left with the concept of 'regimes of truth', because while Gutting stresses the local nature of Foucault's analyses Foucault himself seems to say that the concept covers entire societies. Leaving us to wonder if Taylor might have been right. Here we have come on to a central tension in Foucault's work. An appeal to locality and specificity on the one hand, and sweeping generalisations and bold statements about the nature of power and society on the other.

To reconcile these two sides of Foucault another approach is necessary. I will argue for an approach that focusses not on the political as a foundation but on the methodological. That is why I now turn to Foucault himself and his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and the philosophy of history and language set out within.

The Archaeology

After several years of concrete historical research, from 1961's *Madness and Civilisation* to 1966's *The Order of Things*, Foucault set out to formalise his archaeological methodology in *The Archaeology*. Although it is an attempt to explain the process behind earlier works, formulating the Foucauldian project that binds them together, it also introduces some new insights and tries to iron out the differences between the them.

Foucault starts the book by voicing the concern that preconceived notions of unity and discontinuity, such as divisions into epochs or eras and the almost teleological processes that underlie the 'natural' development from one to the next, are problematic. He finds unities like the enlightenment, the political, natural history or even books and oeuvres to be too vague. How is it for example that the relatively recent concept of literature can be applied to medieval writing? When did the renaissance begin or end? Is a book a book by virtue of its materiality?

Is it the same case for an anthology of poems, a collection of posthumous fragments, Desargues' *Traité des Coniques*, or a volume of Michelet's *Histoire de France*? [...] The frontiers of a book are never clear cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other text, other sentences: it is a node within a network.²⁰

Foucault rejects the unities that have become commonplace. Not indefinitely, if his research shows them to be a value they might see the light of day again, but first he needs to see them for himself.

With this rejection of all pre-established unities, Foucault needs to find some new ground from where he can start his own research. Left with nothing to hold on to but the

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 25-26.

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immense mass of text, he starts with a ‘pure description of discursive events’²¹. This description contains the raw data for Foucault’s history: statements. That which has been written and nothing else. While this description might be vast, it is a rather small subset of the utterances allowed by both grammar and logic. This implies that there must be an additional set of rules governing their appearance. One that limits what kinds of statements can and cannot be meaningfully uttered. Here we must be careful to not go too far in our analysis. Foucault does not ‘seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse.’²² He takes the documents at face value, seeking neither authorial intention nor necessary laws governing them. He is interested in the specific, contingent relations that exist between statements.

The pure descriptions collected by Foucault do not cover an entire society at a specific time. Not only would this be practically impossible, it would also reintroduce unities we wanted to dispense with: societies and eras. Research must start somewhere though. This is why Foucault thinks it necessary to allow for some provisional divisions: ‘an initial region that analysis will demolish and, if necessary, reorganise.’²³ During his archaeological phase these divisions were placed around areas of statements that seemed to refer to common objects, each other and themselves, i.e. sciences.

Discursive Formations

In trying to re-establish some sense of unity in all these discursive events in order to say something about them, other than that they exist, Foucault runs into a host of problems. He

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ Ibid., 32.

set out to reject unities, to leave no discontinuity unaddressed and to form new unities on the basis of statements and the relations between them.

But in trying to form new unities, the previously mentioned discursive formations, he lacks a foundation from where he could call them that. Does their unity lie in them referring to the same objects of knowledge? Not really, Foucault thinks objects are too unstable. What is understood by some name *x* in a particular discursive formation can also be called *x* in another and may denote a completely different object: 'each of these discourses in turn constitutes its objects and [work] it to the point of transforming it all together.'²⁴ The madness we encounter in seventeenth-century literature is not at all the same as the madness we find in the medical writings of the nineteenth century. Nor can he point to the stability of the relations between statements, as a structuralist would. If that were the case, a discursive formation would break at the moment of its creation. The changes and discontinuities are too numerous. Or maybe unity might be found in different themes in sciences? For example, evolutionism in natural history. But Foucault argues that this theme emerges in different discursive formations with different objects, relations, types of analysis, etc. The evolutionism found in Buffon is radically different from that of Darwin.

After formulating and testing several other hypotheses, Foucault comes to see the unity of discursive formations as constituted by a 'system of dispersion'²⁵. For within a formation there exists a multitude of possible statements, competing theories, transformations, disappearances and reappearances. In short, a whole range of heterogeneous possibilities wherein regularities may still be described. It is in the specific arrangement of internal differences that the unity of a discursive formation is given. Moreover, Foucault

²⁴ Ibid., 36.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

argues that he can describe the ‘rules of formation’ of a given discursive formation: the ‘surfaces of emergence’ of objects, the ‘authorities of delimitation’ and the ‘grids of specification’ that allow for their formalisation.²⁶

Admittedly, this all sounds rather, well, French. Some illustration might be necessary. Let me take the emergence of homosexuality as an object of scientific knowledge within the discursive formation around nineteenth-century medicine and psychiatry as an example. Up until this point the same set of behaviours, sexual and/or romantic relations between members of the same gender, belonged to a religio-judicial discourse based on notions of sin and sodomy and was understood as an act. Starting with Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s book *Psychopathia Sexualis* homosexuality came to be seen as a pathology and an identity; ‘the homosexual’ was born.²⁷

While this moment of appearance was certainly oppressive, it was also the moment at which the newly created homosexuals gained self-awareness *as* homosexuals and the ability to speak back. The new discourse on homosexuality:

made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.²⁸

How does this all relate to discursive formations? What are the ‘rules of formation’ at work here? The surface of emergence here is the nineteenth-century institution of the family. It is

²⁶ Ibid., 44-54.

²⁷ Harry Oosterhuis, “Richard van Krafft-Ebing’s ‘Stepchildren of nature’: Psychiatry and the Making of the Homosexual Identity,” in *Sexualities in History. A Reader*, ed. K. M. Philips and B. Reay (New York: Routledge, 2002), 271-292.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1998), 101.

no coincidence that the *Psychopathia Sexualis* was also the book wherein the term heterosexuality was coined. Against the background of the heterosexual 'normal' that was central to the working of the family, homosexuality was able to appear as a difference. The authorities of delimitation here are mostly psychiatry and medicine, both becoming the main authorities of normalcy and difference over the course of the nineteenth century. It also included law, which specified its now archaic category of sodomy, and literature and philosophy, who set about to illustrate and justify the newly produced object of knowledge. Finally, there are the grids of specification, the common styles of categorising, delimiting, and hierarchising that were particular to that era according to which the types of sexualities are differentiated and derived from one another as objects of knowledge.

It is these rules around objects, groups of statements, concepts and theories that Foucault studies. The unities of discursive formations are then found in the regularities that underlie the wide range of different statement. Homosexuality, whether seen as a pathological or a positive identity, is still seen as an identity because it has appeared as such an object in that specific discursive formation amidst certain other objects that relate to it. Us moderns have not strayed too far from Krafft-Ebing's original work. Here we can also see, as Gutting pointed out, that Taylor's interpretation of Foucault as someone who thinks history is separated up in monolithic truth-containers was mistaken. Discursive formations allow for a wide but limited number of possible positions within them. Foucault's analyses show the internal struggles and developments of discursive formation in the complexity that is proper to them.

Statements

Now that we know what discursive formations are and what role they play in forming the objects of our knowledge we can ask how truth comes into play. To see the relation between

truth and discursive formations we need to look at the atoms of discursive formations, statements, and what they are exactly.

Foucault considers if statements might coincide with other linguistic units like the sentences of grammar, the speech acts of J.L. Austin or the propositions of logic. All three do not fit the bill but for present purposes, the search for his conception of truth, it will be illuminating to consider his reasons for rejecting the proposition: the bearer of truth values.

Foucault uses a couple of examples to show that there is an imperfect match between statements and propositions. First example, take two statements belonging to two different discursive formations: 'no one heard' and 'it is true that no one heard'. The first is the opening sentence of a novel, the second part of an internal monologue, a thought. Here we have 'two perfectly distinct statements referring to quite different discursive groupings, when one finds only one proposition, possessing only one value, obeying only one group of laws for its construction, and involving the same possibilities of use.'²⁹ Other examples are "The present king of France is bald"[...] (it can be analysed from a logical point of view only if one accepts, in the form of a single statement, two distinct propositions, each of which may be true or false on its own account), Or again there is a proposition like "I am lying" which can be true only in relation to an assertion on a lower level.'³⁰ The analysis of the propositions, its rules, the way we can distinguish them beneath the surface of sentences is thus not analogous to the analysis of the statement.

So the statement does not operate on the level of the proposition, which is the level of truth. But were discursive formations not caught up in regimes of truth? Did they not constrain our thoughts, form the objects of our knowledge and mask a 'truer' truth? Why do

²⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology*, 91.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology*, 91-92.

we now find that their elemental units have so little to do with truth? *Where does truth enter into Foucault's work?*

This will become clear if we set out to define the statement further. It is worth quoting Foucault at length here:

We must not seek in the statement a unit that is either long or short, strongly or weakly structured, but one that is caught up, like the others [sentences, propositions, speech acts], in a logical, grammatical, locutory nexus. It is not so much one element amongst others, a division that can be located at a certain level of analysis, as a function that operates vertically in relation to these various units, and which enables one to say of a series of signs whether or not they are present in it. [...] It is a function of existence that belongs to signs on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they 'make sense', according to what rule they follow one another or are juxtaposed, of what they are the sign, and what sort of act is carried out by their formulation.³¹

Because the statement is not a structure but a function in a discursive formation we can see further why it is not a proposition and thus holds no truth value. If we are to look for a 'correlate' of a statement, that of which we would say that it points to (I am trying to avoid the term 'refer' here as it is the mode of correlation that is proper to the proposition) we would come up empty handed. As it is not at the enunciative level, the level of the statement, that such correlations exist.

A statement is not confronted (face to face, as it were) by a *correlate* – or the absence of a *correlate* – as a proposition has (or has not) a referent [...] It is linked rather to a 'referential' that is made up not of 'things', 'facts', 'realities', or 'beings', but of laws of possibilities, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it. The referential of the statement forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals or objects, states of thing and relations that are brought into play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation of that which gives meaning to a sentence, a value of truth to the proposition. It is this group that characterizes the enunciative level of the formulation[.]³²

³¹ Ibid., 97.

³² Ibid., 103.

Statements are anterior to matters of truth. Discursive formations are the locations in which propositions can be formulated but are not themselves made up of them.

While discursive formations may limit the possible candidates for truth values, they do not pose limitations on the actual assignment of those values as such. Discursive formations allow for a range of possible, sometimes mutually exclusive, positions in a certain debate. Therefore ‘something else’ must be responsible for the settling of those debates.

Truth

Foucault gives no attempt to point to what that something else may be. On madness he writes,

‘we are not trying to reconstitute what madness itself might be, in the form in which it first presented itself to some primitive, fundamental, deaf, scarcely articulated experience [...]. Such a history of the referent is no doubt possible; and I have no wish at the outset to exclude any effort to uncover and free these ‘prediscursive’ experiences from the tyranny of the text.’³³

He rather seeks to ‘define these *objects* without the reference to the *ground*, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.’³⁴

Foucault’s historical project is therefore not concerned with the classical debate on truth in analytical philosophy. Rather he looks at what Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking calls ‘styles of reasoning’ and ‘truth-and-falsehood’.³⁵ He argues that the way humans go

³³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴ Ibid., 53.

³⁵ Ian Hacking, “Language, Truth and Reason,” in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 322-336.

about reasoning about the world has a history, similar to Foucault. We can see that in difference between Aristotle and Newton for example. One argues that a rock falls to the earth because that is its natural place, the other explains the same event with an appeal to gravity. The styles of reasoning we find here are different because Aristotelian science is concerned with the telos of the natural world. It looks for the ends of things; their final cause that sets every change in motion. Newton's science is instead concerned with mechanics, or efficient causes in Aristotle's terminology. Both are made true by the empirical data of the observer but it will not show what style is true.³⁶

Or take a more Foucauldian example: populations³⁷. Populations as a possible object of knowledge appeared around the turn of the eighteenth century. Now, is it *true* that populations exist or not? Or is the analysis of populations a certain style of reasoning about large groups of people that might have been necessitated by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation at that time? A Foucauldian analysis could take this specific emergence as its subject.

Although populations as an analytical category might be contingent on specific historical events and discursive formations, propositions about them are not. Is it true that population *x* has 300.000 members? Does it show certain patterns and developments? What are the effects of specific policies on the relevant characteristics of the population? These are all questions that can be answered by empirical data. We can find if they are true by whatever method philosophers and scientists decide is the appropriate way to such truths. But is it necessary to think of large groups of people as populations? Certainly not. Hacking points out that whichever propositions are true ultimately depend on the data or on logical relations, but

³⁶ We have of course seen that Newton's style is ultimately more productive than Aristotle's. The point here is to illustrate different styles of reasoning in history.

³⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 25.

Seeing if his papers are in order

the very fact that they are candidates for being true or false is a consequence of an historical event; the emergence of a specific style of reasoning.

Understood in Hackings terminology the Foucauldian project is the analysis of these styles and how they came to be. The description of discursive formations and their developments are an illustration of how styles come and go throughout history and how they shape the way we see the world and ourselves. We can now see that regimes of truth are not concerned with truth as such but with truth-and-falsehood. A regime of truth within a society might best be described as the totality of discursive formations and the specific truth-and-falsehoods they allow for, not as determining what specifically counts as true in a given society.

Conclusion

So is Foucault's conception of truth self-referentially inconsistent? In short: no. Foucault's work is not concerned with truth but with the formation of candidates for truth-and-falsehood. As we have seen Charles Taylor was mistaken in assuming that Foucault was a total relativist on truth who thought discursive formations were monolithic and sealed. As Gutting pointed out, it is hard to defend the idea that Foucault rejects objectivity in all fields of science. Additionally, as I have shown, discursive formations allow for more diverse and complex relations to exist within them. Both the total relativist claim made by Taylor as well as his conception of discursive formations are wrong.

However, Gary Gutting, in allowing politics to be the foundation for the Foucauldian project, missed the solution that was right under his nose. He did not have to appeal to the political but should have pointed out that Foucault is not concerned with truth. Instead, Foucault's work, in the words of Ian Hacking, looks at the conditions wherein candidates for truth-and-falsehood can arise.

To ask after Foucault's conception of truth is to misunderstand the point of his project, for he has none.

'Among the reasons it is truly difficult to have a dialogue with the Americans and the English is that for them the critical question for the philosopher is, 'Is it true?' whereas the German-French tradition consists basically of posing the question, "Why do we think as we do? What effect does it have?" I consider the problems that I pose to be those of modern man.'³⁸

Foucault's work is a reminder of the contingency of the categories of our understanding. While not a wholesale rejection of our knowledge and of truth, it appeals to our modesty in bringing our categories to bear on our fellow humans.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, interview by Otto Friedrich, *Time*, November 16, 1981, 147-148.

What remains outside of the scope of this thesis is how his thought on truth transformed and became linked with a more ethical project. It also blushes over some internal differences that existed over the twenty-year period I have chosen to study and leaves the question of whether we should accept his project untouched. However, I hope to have show that in this period his project and the conception of truth, or rather the lack thereof, that underlies it are at least consistent with themselves, hopefully discouraging those philosophers that think of him as a relativist of pushing him aside.

Foucault himself would probably not be concerned with the question raised in this thesis. He was notoriously hard to pin down due to the ever changing nature of his thought and his disregard for philosophical traditions. ‘Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to that are papers are in order.’³⁹ I guess that means I am the bureaucrat, and his papers seem just fine.

³⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology*, 19.

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Appendix

VERKLARING KENNISNEMING REGELS M.B.T. PLAGIAAT

Fraude en plagiaat

Wetenschappelijke integriteit vormt de basis van het academisch bedrijf. De Universiteit Utrecht vat iedere vorm van wetenschappelijke misleiding daarom op als een zeer ernstig vergrijp. De Universiteit Utrecht verwacht dat elke student de normen en waarden inzake wetenschappelijke integriteit kent en in acht neemt.

De belangrijkste vormen van misleiding die deze integriteit aantasten zijn fraude en plagiaat. Plagiaat is het overnemen van andermans werk zonder behoorlijke verwijzing en is een vorm van fraude. Hieronder volgt nadere uitleg wat er onder fraude en plagiaat wordt verstaan en een aantal concrete voorbeelden daarvan. Let wel: dit is geen uitputtende lijst!

Bij constatering van fraude of plagiaat kan de examencommissie van de opleiding sancties opleggen. De sterkste sanctie die de examencommissie kan opleggen is het indienen van een verzoek aan het College van Bestuur om een student van de opleiding te laten verwijderen.

Plagiaat

Plagiaat is het overnemen van stukken, gedachten, redeneringen van anderen en deze laten doorgaan voor eigen werk. Je moet altijd nauwkeurig aangeven aan wie ideeën en inzichten zijn ontleend, en voortdurend bedacht zijn op het verschil tussen citeren, parafraseren en plagiëren. Niet alleen bij het gebruik van gedrukte bronnen, maar zeker ook bij het gebruik van informatie die van het internet wordt gehaald, dien je zorgvuldig te werk te gaan bij het vermelden van de informatiebronnen.

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On self-refutation and truth in the work of Michel Foucault

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