

## ARTICLE

### **Modern Living and Vital Race: Foucault and the Science of Life**

Mary Beth Mader, University of Memphis

**ABSTRACT:** The paper examines the relation between Foucault's account of modern race and racism in the "*Society Must Be Defended*" lectures and his analysis of the emergence of the modern notion of life and its science in *The Order of Things*. In "*Society Must Be Defended*," Foucault uses the term 'life' both with respect to pre-modern and modern political regimes, arguing that in the pre-modern eras there was a particular relation of sovereign power to life and death that differs from the relation to life and death which prevails in the modern era. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault also discusses the concept of life and the historical emergence of the science of life, biology, in the nineteenth century. For Foucault, modern biological racism is a specifically scientific death sentence. The paper argues that the kind of death at issue in this modern racism must be understood in light of the new evolutionary accounts of life as a trans-organismic continuity that emerge in the life sciences.

**Keywords:** Foucault, race, racism, life, biopower, biology, modernity, Cuvier, continuity, evolution, filiation, genealogy, ontology.

By constituting the life sciences, while he constituted a certain sort of knowledge for himself, man modified himself as a living being because he became a rational subject, and through the fact that he could exercise an action upon himself, he could change both the conditions for his life, and his own life; man crafted a biology that was nothing other than the reciprocal consequence of including the life sciences in the general history of the human species.<sup>1</sup> —Michel Foucault

### **Introduction**

In "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the College de France*, Foucault argues that the modern discursive advent of the science of life, or biology, made possible a new kind of relation of human beings to each other through this new form of scientific knowledge. Foucault also contends that this advent of the sciences of life in the modern period amounted to a discursive transformation of significance for the questions of race and racisms. On this view, life, a new

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits*, t. II, 875: "Entretien avec Michel Foucault," "Conversazione con Michel Foucault" ("Entretien avec Michel Foucault"; entretien avec D. Trombadori, Paris, fin 1978), *Il Contributo*, 4e année, no. 1, janvier-mars 1980, 23-84.) (My translation)

object of modern scientific inquiry, is a discontinuous, supra- and trans-organismic reality said to characterize human beings as well as non-human animals. After the development of the science of life, modern understandings of human beings concern the human being as living, or as it is related to this supra- and trans-organismic reality called 'life.' Foucault's account of modern forms of race and racism, then, links these claims about the centrality of this new object of scientific inquiry to a correlative specifically new form of biological race and racism.

Foucault contrasts this modern discursive orientation to the notion of life with the classical epistemic configuration that was organized in the form of natural history on the basis of the observable differences of natural beings. The definition and classification of these natural beings, on Foucault's view, was, importantly, not carried out with the specific concept of life that emerged in modernity with the development of the science of biology. In general terms, the transition from the classical to the modern *episteme* was one that moved from a focus upon natural beings to one upon living forms. It is this change that Foucault tracks in his account of the emergence of biology from natural history in *The Order of Things*.

Since Foucault's account of modern race and racism is rooted in his analysis of the emergence of the notion of life and of its science, this paper seeks to examine the asserted relation between these two phenomena. It examines Foucault's thought on the development of the science of life in *The Order of Things* and his analysis of modern race and racism in the "Society Must Be Defended" lectures. From the standpoint of Foucault's account of the emergence of the science of biology out of natural history in *The Order of Things*, how should we understand his account in the "Society Must Be Defended" lectures of the nature of the biological continuum and its supposed rupture with the advent of modern biological race?

Foucault's treatment of race in the "Society Must Be Defended" lectures, it should be noted, is exclusively and explicitly an account of state power and the relation of race to it, rather than a genealogy, history or typology of race and racisms. That is, race is treated only as a part of a genealogy of state power and not as a focus of investigation in itself. Within this broader theoretical context, then, Foucault proposes that the advent of the modern discursive orientation to the notion of life both permits and requires new forms of race and racism as well as new justifications for the exercise of state power. One of the implications of that new, modern orientation to life is that state power enters into relation with the new positive science of biology. On Foucault's account, this new relation ushers in an era of what he terms 'bio-power,' in which the particular conjunction of power and knowledge then available operates by way of the various sciences of life, and the new institutional and administrative practices and bodies that employ them.

As a part of this new configuration of power and knowledge, a new form of race and racism comes about that depends on the new object of scientific inquiry, life. That is, the science of life permits and requires a specific new form of race and racism. It does so for the reason that the notion of life is first of all the discursive condition for the constitution of a theoretical homogeneity that Foucault terms a 'biological continuum.' This biological continuum is itself the condition for the emergence of a form of state power that establishes the legitimacy of its relation to life and death on the basis of a new biological conception of race. Foucault's central claim about this matter is that after the advent of the biological continuum, if the modern state wishes to kill any of its population with alleged legitimacy, it must resort

to a justification and comprehension of this action in relation to that biological continuum. That is, the modern state must understand its relation to the life and death of its citizens and its population against the background of the scientifically founded homogeneity of the human race or species that is the biological continuum.

Foucault argues that one consequence of the modern state's relation to life and death is the necessity of a racial interruption of the biological continuum that is the human race or species.<sup>2</sup> For in the modern era of biological science, the human race or species is conceived of as a vital sameness. On the new understandings of life devised in the life sciences, human beings, as living beings, share in the reality that is life. About the matter of race, here, Foucault's chief claim with respect to this new vital continuum is that biological racism is a justification required by a state that wishes to put citizens to death, if one of its operating presuppositions is that all of its citizens, as living beings, share in life. Biological race comes about, according to Foucault, as a necessary rationale for putting citizens to death, where state power takes life as that phenomenon in which it can intervene and whose forces it ought to maximize. It will be important, however, to grasp more clearly the specific sense of 'life' that Foucault identifies with its modern science. For the moment, we can note that biological race and racisms are essentially forms of race and racism that concern the notion of life and its attendant notions; they thus could be said to be a 'vital race' and 'vital racisms.' With respect to state killing, then, it will be a biological racism that allows a 'biological relation'—rather than a military one—to be instituted between citizens fit for death and citizens fit for life. Controversially, it is within the larger context of these specifically biological racisms, which are typological, genealogical and potentially pathological or non-pathological, that Foucault situates ethnic racisms.

Although the "*Society Must Be Defended*" lectures contain many stimulating insights, these are not sufficiently developed there to withstand great scrutiny. For this reason, it will be of little interest here to lend much importance to its internal inconsistencies, demonstrative lapses and unfinished theoretical constructions with specific respect to assessing the integrity, unity or coherence of Foucault's own thought, either in the lectures or in his overall body of work. To do so would be both intellectually unfair and hermeneutically unsound. But the theoretical incompleteness of the text and its seeming leaps in logic, suppressed premises and dropped inferences are not only puzzling, they are intriguing. Part of the aim of this paper, then, is to speculate, based on Foucault's suppositions, about the subjects he raises, to think further with his own propositions and concepts, and to try to expose some of their consequences.

The "*Society Must Be Defended*" lectures have rightly puzzled many readers, and not just for the reason that their sketched genealogy of race has struck many specialists in the history of race thinking as idiosyncratic, odd or false. There are at least two aspects of his account that are rather immediately odd and seemingly inconsistent or troubling. The first is well known; Foucault uses the terms 'race' and 'races' in multiple senses and in ways that are not always clear. The second source of confusion concerns the term 'life.' In "*Society Must Be Defended*," he uses the term 'life' with respect to both pre-modern and modern political regimes, holding

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société, Cours au Collège de France. 1975-1976* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1997), 227: "Ce qui a inscrit le racisme dans les mécanismes de l'Etat, c'est bien l'émergence de ce bio-pouvoir."

that in the pre-modern eras there was a particular relation of sovereign power to life and death, and that a different relation to life and death prevailed in the modern era. However, Foucault also discusses the concept of life in *The Order of Things* and historical emergence of the science of life, biology, in the nineteenth century. To achieve some clarity on these matters, it is necessary first to consider in further detail Foucault's thought on life and its science that we find in both *The Order of Things* and in the 1970 article, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie."<sup>3</sup>

### Modern Living

In the most general sense, the discursive historical progression that Foucault proposes is one that moves from a *natural continuum* in the Classical period to a *biological continuum* in the Modern epoch and finally to a *break* within that biological continuum in the case of the modern notion of what I have called here 'vital race.' To reconstruct this progression, I appeal to his work in *The Order of Things*, "Society Must Be Defended," and "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie."

Foucault argues that in the nineteenth century a whole set of positivities is made possible by the opening up of a transcendental dimension in thought. The view is that the new science of life, biology, was made possible—at least in the forms that it did in fact take—only on the basis of its object, life, and crucially, that this object is, properly speaking, a transcendental one. Life, a transcendental required for the establishment of its science, occupies "that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up towards our superficial knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Life is nowhere to be found in the positive objects of the science of life itself; it is strictly speaking unknowable and occupies "the unknowable depths" of this new nineteenth century *episteme* that broke with the representational *episteme* of the Classical Age. Due to the introduction of the concepts of physiological function and anatomic structures, a fundamental shift takes place; being begins radically to escape the grasp of our representative powers and to obtain a dimension that is permanently and in principle beyond representation.<sup>5</sup>

But how is life a transcendental object for its science? It is critical to note that Foucault conceives of the new, modern notion of function, which is central to the emergent science of life, to be conceptually integrally related to that new object of knowledge, life. Function in biology will be bound by definition to the concept of life. Functions—abstract, general, multiply realizable, conditioning other features, cross-cutting established species designations—are essentially life-functions or functions that pertain fundamentally and necessarily to this novel emergent object of knowledge. Foucault writes: "[i]t matters little, after all, that gills and lungs may have a few variables of form, magnitude, or number in common: they resemble one another because they are two varieties of that non-existent, abstract, unreal, unassignable

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," *Revue d'histoire des sciences et de leurs applications*, t. XXIII, no. 1, janvier-mars 1970, 63-92 (Journées Cuvier, Institut d'histoire des sciences, 30-31 mai 1969) in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits t. I, 1954-1988*, (eds.) Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2001), 898-934.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1970), 245.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," 923.

organ, absent from all describable species, yet present in the animal kingdom in its entirety, which serves for respiration in general.”<sup>6</sup> It is this generality of function and organ that allows for a taxonomic cross-cutting and a re-ordering of natural forms.

Life is the object in relation to which the functions of an organism are not only identified, but are used as a principle of classification. Functions that assume a particular importance are respiration, digestion, movement, sensation, circulation and reproduction.<sup>7</sup> Even if the functions of natural beings could be identified in previous periods, the key point is that they were not identified in specific relation to life as a transcategorical finality and they were not identified on a non-visible basis. Foucault writes:

From Cuvier onwards, function, defined according to its non-perceptible form as an effect to be attained, is to serve as a constant middle term and to make it possible to relate together totalities of elements without the slightest visible identity. What to Classical eyes were merely differences juxtaposed with identities must now be ordered and conceived on the basis of a functional homogeneity which is their hidden foundation.<sup>8</sup>

Further, these abstract functions were considered to be identical across organisms and morphological types; classifications based on abstract functions and their functional correlations became possible. Organisms could be grouped on the basis of their purely functional resemblances rather than by morphological type or, a later solution, according to a genealogical criterion of shared ancestry or descent. By functional correlations, Foucault intends the idea that for Cuvier and some later biologists certain instantiations of a function required a given other sort of functional solution; functions are interrelated and concomitant. Functional necessities arise in which, for example, a certain solution to the functional need for digestion dictates a particular solution to the functional need for locomotion, and the latter, again, a particular sort of correlative reproductive function.

Since functions are essentially invisible realities, living beings come to be understood in the modern era on the basis of shared invisible resemblances. Foucault writes:

In order to discover the fundamental groups into which natural beings can be divided, it has become necessary to explore in depth the space that lies between their superficial organs and their most concealed ones, and between these latter and the broad functions that they perform.<sup>9</sup>

Abstract functions and abstract organs, then, are the foundation upon which life as a novel transcendental object becomes the guiding point for the new science of biology.

How, then, are natural beings related to each other without and prior to the concept of life? What does the concept of life bring to the relations of natural beings to each other? Notably, natural beings are not *living* forms. Natural beings are linked in an ontological relation of possibility while living forms are related by conditions for life. A sheer continuity of *being*,

---

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 264–5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 264; Foucault, “La situation de Cuvier dans l’histoire de la biologie,” 910.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 265.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

Foucault holds, and not of life, undergirds the differentiation of natural beings in the Classical Age. The spatial juxtaposition of natural beings on the table of the Classical Age represents the fact that their external relation to each other crosses no heterogeneous gap; further, natural beings are not beings whose being depends on a relation to external milieus, to abstract vital functions, or to competing natural threats. The fact that they are disposed in one single space displays the ontological homogeneity, and its continuity—its intrinsic scaling possibilities—that presume that natural beings are of a piece. This ontological homogeneity meant that on the chain of beings there were no gaps or leaps between levels of natural being; there was no nominalism about higher taxonomic categories.

The spatial continuity of the one-dimensional table of natural beings in the Classical Age represents the continuity of nature, the fact that these external relations of natural beings to each other all take place within one dimension—that of the visible. Visible features are related to visible features and animal forms are related by continuously differentiating, gradating divergence from each other as visible, and *not*, notably, from some invisible, insensible, abstract and functional template in relation to which a set of living forms would vary.<sup>10</sup> In the Classical period, then, there was no limit in principle to the capacity of one visible natural being to represent, as a scaled version of other natural beings, or as a representative *type* of classified natural being, as an instance of a class of beings, others of its type.

#### *Cuvier's critique of natural continuity*

The sort of natural continuity that obtained in the Classical period is exposed in Foucault's analysis of Cuvier's critique of the thought of his contemporary natural historians. On Foucault's view, Cuvier objects to the commonly held position of the continuity of beings according to which a natural continuity exists between individual, species, genera and higher categories. Foucault analyses Cuvier's critique in terms of the notions of passage, gradation and series unity. Cuvier rejects the idea that every being is essentially a passage between beings, that each being can be juxtaposed between two unmediated and symmetrical neighboring beings. He further disputes the view that beings are related on a scale of progressive gradation, and that there is ultimately only a single series of natural beings related by degree on this

---

<sup>10</sup> By contrast, visibility in the Modern epoch will change, since it is no longer chiefly autologically related to itself, but is put into communication with aspects that are not visible and hence not representable to sight or visibly. The important factor here is that the biological function is an entirely abstract and general notion that can find itself instantiated in any number of different types of organisms. Individual organisms and species of organism are instantiations of general problematic templates; they are solutions to species' or organisms' problems with survival. But since the function is abstract and applies to the conditions of existence of many differing organisms and types of organism, there can in principle be no visible representation of it or of all of its instantiations. For example, the function of *respiration in general* cannot be represented by a representation of any given breathing organism or indeed by a representation of all breathing organisms. It cannot be represented by a representation of any given breathing animal because such a representation would not show the other instantiated versions of respiration in general. These versions differ from each other precisely because biological functions by definition in this instance are integrally interrelated or correlative, and because organic structure itself follows from achieved functional solutions to the problems of individual organisms and species in relation to their milieus and to other living forms.

single scale. These three features characterize the kind of natural continuity rejected by the emergent science of biology.

According to Foucault, the natural continuity that marks the Classical conception of the relation of natural beings to each other is replaced by another sort of continuity in the modern age of biology. Biological continuity, instead of natural continuity, comes about as a biological monism, for Foucault, and it does so in terms of the evolutionary biology that develops in the nineteenth century. The sort of biological continuity—and I take Foucault's references to 'biological monism' and to the 'homogenization' of biological taxonomic categories in the nineteenth century to be synonymous with this term—is the result of the homogenization that the notion of life permits, as well as a new focus on both individual difference and temporal, especially genealogical, continuity. *Thus, although the Modern advent of the notion of life famously introduces a particular kind of discontinuity into the Classical natural order of things, by carving out a new abstract and invisible depth and a visible surface, this very discontinuity is the basis for the creation of new forms of continuity and sameness in the Modern era.* Most importantly, the new and developing evolutionary accounts of life introduce a new kind of biological continuity, the continuity of life itself, as a distinctly supra- and trans-organismic reality that ontologically prevails over living beings taken as individuals, populations, species or any other supra-individual biological category.<sup>11</sup> The Darwinian emphasis on the role of individual organismic difference in the evolution of species and varieties amounts to a particularly modern skepticism about the reality of all supra-individual taxonomic categories, and tends towards a theoretical nominalism with respect to those categories.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the historically influential account of hereditary transmission offered by August Weismann in the nineteenth century, the individual organism is a temporary dependent of/upon the continuity of the germ-plasm, as Weismann termed the allegedly eternally persisting material basis for the reproduction of organisms.<sup>13</sup> It is the germ-plasm which perdures throughout and across the growth and development of individual organisms, which are contingent upon it and are temporally outlived by it.

This new temporal continuity of the age of biology is alluded to in *The Order of Things* and discussed explicitly in "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie." It should be noted that when Foucault claims that a sort of history emerges in the nineteenth century that is no longer linked to continuity, but tied instead to discontinuity and to struggle, he means to distinguish modern historicity from classical, but not to deny that a temporal continuity operates in the modern *episteme*.<sup>14</sup> His point is that in the Classical period historical time itself—without any rooting in life or in a perduring line of vital material—constituted a permanent background of continuity for natural beings that themselves were *not* essentially genealogical forms—and were not forms that could transform into other forms or types of forms, unlike, obviously, in evolutionary theory. By contrast, the modern period of biological and specifically evolutionary science locates history directly in the continuity of life, such that

---

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," 931-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 910.

<sup>13</sup> August Weismann, *Essays upon Heredity*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889).

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," 932.

change over time is starkly discernable in the modifications of *living forms as essentially genealogical entities*. In the modern *episteme*, the temporal continuity is embedded in the dependence of individual organisms upon each other's existence, and more importantly, for Foucault, in the transcendental object of inquiry called 'life.' About continuity in modern biological discourse, Foucault writes: "[l]ife is what continues and is continued."<sup>15</sup> We can also identify this modern form of temporal continuity in Foucault's speculation about the future of biology in *The Order of Things*. There, he wonders whether biology "will have a 'philosophy' that suits it," namely, a 'philosophy' "of a life marked by the continuity that forms beings only in order to dissolve them again..."<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that for Foucault this conception of the biological continuity that is life, as distinct from the natural continuity of the Classical Age, leads to an emphasis on the temporal continuity of genealogy. Darwin is the name Foucault most associates with the new centrality of genealogy as a continuous frame for the analysis of evolutionary change. About Darwin, Foucault writes: "he will show how, starting from the individual, what one will be able to establish as its species, as its order or its class, will be *the reality of its genealogy, that is, the succession of individuals*."<sup>17</sup> This means that a profound genealogical temporalization takes place in the conceptualization of the relations of living forms to each other, as distinct from the understanding of the relation of natural beings to each other in the Classical age. With evolutionary thought, the linkage of living forms to each other becomes their genealogical temporal relation via the transcategorical and continuous reality that is life. This continuous reality of life also implies that it is not so much that life is ultimately understood as the life of an organism, as that the organism is understood as an organism of life. *Most importantly for the question of race, however, death is embedded in life or is a necessary element of life on this conception of life. This is because the supra-categorical ontological status of life means that life itself always outlives, we might say, any of its subsidiary and dependent entities—whether living individual organisms, species or higher grades of taxonomic classificatory items.* If life outlives living beings by conceptual necessity, the death of living beings is conceptually required.

By contrast, in the Classical Age, the Great Chain of Beings, or the ladder or scale of beings, is still operative, and the "place" for all natural beings is already set out for any realizable variant.<sup>18</sup> In the Classical Age, homogeneous being and its permanent and entire availability to the sense of sight are what ground the relation of differing animal beings to each other. They differ by modulation, extension or morphological deformation and reformation of each other rather than by the modern transcendentially mediated variation that must be attributed to the relation of living forms to life. In the Modern Age, however, life supplants being as the founding ontological principle. Both being and non-being are derivative from and dependent on life. This is the advent of the age of biology; life prevails over being. We

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 931-2.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 279.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," 901. (My translation)

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of the chain of beings in Michel Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," *Revue d'histoire des sciences et de leurs applications*, t. XXIII, no. 1, janvier-mars 1970, 63-92 (Journées Cuvier, Institut d'histoire des sciences, 30-31 mai 1969) in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits t. I, 1954-1988*, (eds.) Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2001), 915-922.



may now address the implications of this alleged new era of the dominance of life over being for Foucault's account of modern race and racism.

### **Vital Race**

As is well known, in "*Society Must Be Defended*," Foucault sketches a rough narrative of the changing uses of the notions of race and racism within a European context. Here, I rehearse only the rudiments of his pre-history of race in order to focus instead upon his account of modern race and racism which is specifically biological, normalizing or medicalizing. He argues that race was first used in a historico-political discourse of Roman sovereignty and that a discourse of race war developed to counter this first discourse. This counter-discourse was then transformed into a revolutionary discourse and is followed by an inversion of this revolutionary discourse into a properly modern racist discourse. This properly modern racist discourse is no longer about plural races in confrontation, but about race in the singular, namely, the human race or human species. This last form of racism is chiefly a state racism that is deployed against the revolutionary form of race discourse. State racism operates primarily through "medical-normalizing techniques" and stresses racial purity rather than race war. It appears in two forms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Nazi version, which aims to protect the biological health of the human race, and redeploys earlier race war mythology, and a Soviet form that construes class enemies as biological threats.

The biological emphasis of Foucault's understanding of modern racism is central to his distinctive and controversial account. He specifies that he is concerned with "races in the biological and medical sense of that term."<sup>19</sup> What is particularly biological about this modern form of race and racism, for Foucault? He writes:

What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat the population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower.<sup>20</sup>

The targets of modern state biologizing racism are said to be biological threats to the human race or species; they are groups held to threaten the life and health of the human race. These are people designated as members of hierarchically ordered subraces of the human species, biologically degenerate, criminal, mad, or abnormal, and the power the state deems legitimate

---

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*"; *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, translated by David Macey (New York, NY: Picador, 2003), 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-5.

is the power to kill in the interest of the health and life of the human race. Foucault further specifies that the killing at issue can be done by exclusion, and not simply by direct killing.

Foucault's analysis here is offered explicitly in terms of his notion of biopower. Biopower is a modern conjunction of state and administrative power with scientific and medical knowledge, the development of which Foucault dates to the "end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the nineteenth century."<sup>21</sup> It is importantly characterized by the central new phenomenon of normalization. This is the deployment of the statistical norm and the regularization or standardization of the object of this new power's control: life. Biopower seeks to control, manage and optimize life, and to master its random aspects. The emphasis of this power is thus on birth rates, death rates, rates of illness and suicide, and then on the features of urban life that are susceptible to control and which bear upon those vital statistics. A key feature of this new bio-political technology of the norm is its massifying property. It necessarily operates on the aggregate, collective and general level of a state, and not on the individual level (as did the technology of control that precedes it, and which Foucault calls "discipline"). It seeks not simply to track these mass phenomena, but to influence and to establish regularities and averages in the rates registered. The aggregations that the collection of statistics by state power permits are, Foucault suggests, "populations" identified and designated on biological grounds. Here, we should thus think of these birth and death rates, for instance, as fundamentally biological, as pertaining to the management of living beings as living, and not, say, as citizens as rights holders. This critical advent of the massifying technology of the statistical norm ushers in an entirely new reality of relation between human beings, a statistically crafted biological relation. On the basis of gathered vital statistics, states can link each inhabitant to all inhabitants via the average of the population with respect to a particular statistical phenomenon (say, birth rate, infant mortality rate, delinquency rate, teen pregnancy rate), and then seek to change or allegedly improve the rates as they wish. The important point is that populations will be targeted for change on a particular scale and where the normal value comes to represent the ideal to be achieved. This standardization then is insensibly integrated into policies that target citizens as populations of essentially living beings. This is a kind of overall state medicine, which includes what is called "public health," that takes populations as therapeutic objects of administrative intervention, then. One upshot of this concerns the sort of relations people are capable of under normalization. To be related to one another through the implementation of state policies for the regularization of life is to be related to one another via insensible, but deliberate and directed, technologies of homogenization and standardization.<sup>22</sup> By now, this conjunction of biological knowledge and state power, biopower, is ubiquitous.

But it was specifically evolutionism, according to Foucault, that was responsible for the quick linkage of biological and political discourse in the nineteenth century. Social and political clashes became readily biologized by means of evolutionary discourses of natural selection, a common evolutionary tree of life and the survival of the fittest. Foucault claims that

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault does not provide extensive discussion of the relation between the notions of population in statistics, on the one hand, and in the biological sciences, on the other.

“[w]henever, in other words, there was a confrontation, a killing or the risk of death, the nineteenth century was quite *literally obliged* to think about them in the form of evolutionism.”<sup>23</sup> He holds, further, that

racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a *unitary* living plurality.<sup>24</sup>

Or, again: “The idea of the purity of the race, with all that it includes that is *monist*, statist and biological, this is what is substituted for the idea of the war of the races.”<sup>25</sup> It is clear that Foucault conceives of this purportedly new state biological racism as containing an intrinsic discursive justification for, and compulsion to the use of, state power for the extermination of some of the populations over which it has control. What exactly is the source of the alleged theoretical and conceptual necessity that Foucault proposes is embedded in the new conjunction of biological and political discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Whence the alleged necessity for state killing in the modern form?

As we can see, the biological monism at issue means that the modern period conceives of the human society in species terms as unitary and as sharing in life. This implies that the fact that a human being is living cannot itself be used as a mark of being destined for death; being alive cannot of itself indicate that there is an internal reason for a human being’s death to be hastened. Were that the case, all living human beings, as mortal, would be eligible to be hurried to their deaths. If a state power wishes to target some portion of its citizenry or other population and relegate them to death, it would then need a principle of limitation other than the identification of a human as living.<sup>26</sup> If human beings in the age of biopower are always chiefly intelligible as *living* human beings, then a state’s targeting them for death must take place in terms of this essential feature of being alive, and thus in relation to the continuous supra-categorical reality that is life. No longer, on Foucault’s view, would a state find its most compelling rationale for murder in terms of political or historical enmity. Rather, given the conception of the human being as necessarily and fundamentally related to life itself, a state must justify its killing in terms of the human being’s own relation to life. The rationale for killing is thus introduced into life itself. It is introduced into life itself because to kill a human being in the era of the domination of life is to realize a necessary condition of living beings, namely, to activate their intrinsically temporary nature, that is, relative to the continuous and everlasting nature of the continuous reality that is life itself.

Foucault deftly identifies a point in the history of thought about life that is presently difficult to discern and to retrieve, one at which the conjoined status of life and death occurs. About the “conditions of existence” that interested biological thinkers in the nineteenth century, he writes: “this idea that the living being is linked to the possibility of dying refers to two

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 257. (My emphasis)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 258. (My emphasis)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault indicates that this project of state murder has a tendency to expansion and generalization, however, citing the case of the nationally suicidal Nazi injunction to destroy the German people so as to save it.

possible systems of conditions of existence."<sup>27</sup> Here, it is clear that the concept of life includes the possibility of the living organism's death. Thus, to introduce the justification for killing into life itself means to attribute to life a reason for killing, and, since life includes the death of organisms who share in it, this in effect would amount to a reason for killing prematurely. The reason for hastening the inevitable death of a being that shares equally in life with other living beings will thus come in terms of the living being's threat to the continuity of life itself, but in the form of a subcategory of life—a species, namely the human species, or *the race*, in this case—so, as a threat to *the life of the species*. And, crucially, the threat will frequently be construed as a threat to the future of the species, that is, as a genealogical danger. This is directly tied to the evolutionist construal of life, to its spare ontology of individual difference, its nominalism with respect to higher taxonomic classifications, and above all to its emphasis on filiation and descent as principles of taxonomic classification. Since life is a transorganismic reality, living organisms can threaten more than their contemporaries; they can pose a threat to the supra-organismic realities of species, genera, order and class. This new great reach of living beings provides the opportunity for state power to sound a political alarm of equal carry. Henceforth, the justifications for state killing phrased in the terms of threats to future lives may ignite unacknowledged existential concerns for the unthought longevity—and brevity—of human genealogical relations.

This rationale is, crucially, expressed in terms of the notion of the normal, and here the centrality of normalization to the exercise of biopower is critical. It is a "racism of the abnormal," as Foucault terms it in the lecture course entitled *Abnormal*, which is the heart of this "biological racism," in Foucault's schema. It is this emphasis on abnormality as the fundamental characteristic of modern biological racism that has struck so many readers as entirely implausible with respect to the analysis of what Foucault terms "ethnic racism." To the extent that he wishes to classify modern ethnic racisms as biological racism, we at least need an account of how these racisms appear to predate the advent of the modern sciences of life, as others have taught us.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most one could grant Foucault would be that *if* a phenomenon reposes on the technologies of modern biopower, *then* it could be classified as a form of modern biological racism and its resemblances to other such biopolitical phenomena be studied. But the degree of a phenomenon's resting upon the contributions of the biological sciences becomes rather attenuated and thin at times in his thought. One rather thin connection to the biological sciences is the link between the abnormal and the pathological. When races classified as subdivisions of the human species are construed as pathological—and indeed, therefore further, as pathogens relative to the human species as a whole—we could say that the notion of abnormality under which Foucault seeks to classify ethnic racisms would be opera-

---

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, "La situation de Cuvier dans l'histoire de la biologie," 923. (My translation.)

<sup>28</sup> See especially, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), Ladelles McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), Robert Bernasconi, "The Policing of Race Mixing: The Place of Biopower within the History of Racism," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 7 (2010), 205-216.

ting, and this would count as a biopolitical form of racism. (For, despite their differences, the notions of the abnormal and the pathological belong to the same discursive formation.)

But for Foucault, modern racism, this state form of racism is *any* alleged biological incision or division in the biological continuity of the human species that indicates who in that former or alleged continuity is to live and who is to die. It may capture some form of “ethnic racism,” as he terms it, but since it concerns techniques that break the biological continuum most generally, it cannot uniquely and completely describe any of its supposed instances, let alone ethnic racism, were we to grant it a place in that category. The biological relation is a relation of the logic of life in which the death of the other allegedly secures one’s life. On Foucault’s construal of the modern notion of life, *if* something is a biological threat, *then* it can become the object of power in the modern age, the object of bio-power. That is, the living continuity, or the continuum of life, by being threatened with interruption, allegedly destines to death any threats to it. But life includes lives destined to die; all lives are mortal. So, state murder is of course a matter of deliberately hastening the death of human beings. Whatever else modern racism is for Foucault, it is certainly a specifically scientific death sentence. One of the most important claims in this account is that the allegedly scientific or medical grounds offered by states for their acts of killing are covers or alibis for starkly and purely political actions. His point is that the political no longer presents itself as such, in terms of purely political aims, enmities and alliances, but is vested in the supposedly reasonable wear of scientific and medical discourse.

### **Ontology of genealogy: Scholastic vestiges in the Classical Age**

As noted, Foucault claims that evolutionism ushered in a new emphasis on genealogy. He holds that the notion of species in the Classical Age was not a genealogical one, and that the genealogical notion of species came about with the advent of evolutionism.<sup>29</sup> This could be described as a transition from a concept of species that is synchronic (with the above *provisos* on page 7 about the minimal conceptions of history and change which obtained in that era) to a concept that is deeply diachronic, in which the identity of a species at any given time must be sought in its ancestral past, in its common ancestry. We could say, then, that some sort of *filiation* is plainly integral to the evolutionist conception of species; lines of descent are what matter for the identification and differentiation of species.

And although genealogy cannot be wholly identified with filiation, we can consider that Foucault includes filiation in what is new in the evolutionary thought of Darwin. But here we can ask whether there really was *no filiation* in the Classical notion of species, as Foucault seems to think was the case. For there certainly was a notion of filiation in the conception of creation, and in particular in the creation of creatures, as issuing from divine paternity. We find this notion clearly espoused by many important Medieval thinkers, including Aquinas. Gilles Emery, in *The Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, makes this plain:

So the idea of participation and analogy discourages us from limiting the appellation ‘sons of God’ to the life of grace alone, and invites us to appreciate that it is realized in a diver-

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 901.

sified way in the thorough-going participation of creatures in God's being. Creation and the exercise of providence already give us a universal notion of paternity.<sup>30</sup>

If the Great Chain of Being was the matrix of the ontological continuity of natural beings, as distinct from the discontinuity of abstract function and structure in the modern age of life, then we can say that there was indeed a form of filiation in the Classical Age, nonetheless. This filiation is that of the Christian divinity with the creation. It is not an unorthodox position in Medieval thought and thereafter that God's paternity is responsible for the reality of creation. The created world as a whole is to count as offspring of either the Trinity or of God the Father. If this is so, we should include a form of filiation in the Classical Age, since the origin of species then is taken to be some version of divine paternity or triune creation.<sup>31</sup> This implies that the notion of species that dominates the Classical Age, according to Foucault, would not be *quite* as synchronic a concept as Foucault considered it to be. For adding divine paternity and its theological form of filiation to the picture means that a *kind* of filiation, even of the relatively fixed created species, was to be the source of those species.

If this is so, how should we understand the sort of filiation introduced with evolutionism? I suggest that this introduction could be conceived of as a naturalization of the divine filiation that marked the Medieval period, and more obscurely, the Classical Age. In other words, perhaps Foucault would do better to have identified a continuity of a sort here, namely, that in the evolutionism of the modern era a kind of filiation is retained from the Classical period. It is of a markedly different sort, however. In the case of divine filiation, the forms of created beings are fixed such that new forms certainly do not develop or stem from existing forms. They derive instead from divine creation, which could supplant any gaps in the taxonomic table. Natural beings themselves would be powerless to generate new kinds of natural beings. Entirely otherwise is the modern evolutionary picture of the source of new natural beings, or in this case, living forms. For here the filiation is internal to the domain of natural beings themselves, who are endowed with the generative power to produce not just individual or sexual replications of themselves (we could say, today, using terms anachronistically), but new living forms. We could say, in a Nietzschean vein, that evolutionism naturalizes divine filiation. No longer is divine generative power at all necessary for the explanation of organismic diversity, resemblance, or variation in living forms. Living forms themselves (or, later, their genetic components)—or amongst themselves and in their milieus—are responsible for their own variation and diversity. Evolved multiplicity is its own source, (recalling the Medieval conception of God as innascible, or ungenerated). If this suggestion is correct, it implies that the filiation we find in evolutionism is not introduced into a conceptual field of fixed natural forms that are considered to be *produced* from an origin, rather than *descended* from one; on the contrary, the continuity of the chain of being itself has a divine genealogy, and not an agenealogical source in, say, the artisanship of God—at least if we follow Aquinas's view on the matter.

---

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, the filiation here is theologically precarious and troublesome; how can the creation be good, when it is also somehow incomplete, since new kinds of natural beings are discovered or seem to be arising.

The point is that if we include divine filiation in the picture, filiation does not just emerge with evolutionism, but was *already present*, although in mitigated and muted ways, admittedly, long prior to the emergence of the Darwinian notion of species with its emphasis on genealogy and ancestry. This implies that a divine genealogy supported a *kind* of diachronous conception of species prior to the development of the non-divine diachronous conception of species that Foucault links to evolutionism.<sup>32</sup>

### **Endpoints**

A crucial blind spot in contemporary academic philosophy exists on the topic of human generative relations, and of what could be termed “genealogical being.” In the field of philosophy, there is no substantial, central, and current discussion of the existential sense and import of the realities of generating and continuing humankind, of being generated, or of the multiple contributions to the continuation of humankind that people indeed make. With the exception of some important work in philosophical ethics, being existentially dependent upon others—of all sorts—for one’s origin and for one’s cultivation seems for philosophers today to contain no material worth philosophical reflection—no pressing issues of temporality or ontology, and no tough problems of understanding cultural forms and symbolization.

By the phrase “human generative relations,” I do *not* mean reproductive, genetic or nominal kin relations *per se*, although these may be elements of human generative relations. In fact, the matter of what we might want to count as human generative relations should itself be a philosophical question. This is far from an easy or simple question to answer, and replies to it would concomitantly map the range of positions that have been set out in contemporary response to the recurrent instances of reductive, failed and distorting evolutionary accounts of a particularly narrow vision of human generative relations. For such reductionist and misguided attempts at a global explanation of generative relations between human beings recur today, in much of evolutionary psychology, Darwinian psychiatry and other research programs, repeating the errors of past eugenicist and social Darwinist thought. They supply a vision of human generative relations as essentially biological that fails entirely to address the existential reality of our thought and unthought generation and cultivation of other human beings.

Although excellent and powerful critiques of reductionist evolutionary thought exist, there are very few current *positive* philosophical accounts of human generative relations and of genealogical being. Work on these topics has largely been the province of anthropology, medicine, biology, religion and perhaps art and narrative. And certainly there exist religious, legal and aesthetic representations or expressions of human generative relations. But many of these are hugely distorted, falsifying, exclusionary and otherwise—especially and predictably classist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, and multiply imperialist—terrifically flawed symbolizations and cultural forms.

---

<sup>32</sup> I say this leaving aside the complex theological debates about the temporality of divine creation. One important Medieval position on this matter is that divine creation should be characterized as either atemporal or simultaneous, and that although the language of filiation used is drawn from human example, divine paternity should not be understood as unfolding over time.

A specifically positive philosophical approach to these topics that might avoid these flaws requires the comprehensive reworking of most, if not all, of the prevailing philosophical concepts employed for the understanding of human generative relations. Accounts of human generative relations that are reductionist and essentially theological, although putatively objective, must be overcome, and philosophy is late to this project.

This essay is an initial effort to approach the task of a philosophical ontology of genealogy that might contribute to a philosophy of human generative relations. Here, that task was approached through the work of Michel Foucault on the subject of the modern science of life, and via his sketched speculations on the topic of race in modernity. Both of these topics bear centrally upon the matter of human generative relations. The essay sought to demonstrate Foucault's positions on the various kinds of discursive continuities that he identifies. His view is that these have grounded our conceptions of the being of natural beings, the lives of living forms, as well as the modern state's supposed rationale for deploying racial classification of populations as subspecies of the human species. The task of devising a positive philosophy of human generative relations is one for which Foucault's sensitivities can be useful, even if his speculations have their limits. Thinking about the ontology of genealogy requires an engagement with the existential import of evolutionary, as well as theological, thinking in the contemporary scene of philosophy and culture. Prior to that, it requires thorough conceptual re-invention in response to the ontological and temporal puzzles that continue to present themselves to us as ourselves—as ourselves being genealogical.

Mary Beth Mader  
Department of Philosophy  
327 Clement Hall  
University of Memphis  
Memphis, TN 38152  
USA