Foucault Studies

RESPONSE

Response to Colin Koopman's "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages"

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In "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages" [hereafter, HCTC], Colin Koopman offers an important contribution to the on-going discussion of Foucault's historical methodology. His account takes its point of departure from a strident critique of recent efforts that have, in varying ways, sought to establish that Foucault's work is rooted in the transcendental phenomenological tradition. Koopman argues that this interpretative strategy fails on textual as well as conceptual grounds. Moreover, consideration of these issues, Koopman contends, compels a reading of Foucault's turn to genealogy and proble-matization as the development of a unique form of non-transcendental (yet still Kantian) critique, what Koopman calls "pragmatic genealogy."

One of the versions of the phenomenological interpretation of Foucault against which Koopman argues is one that I have proposed and sought to defend.[1] In what follows, I offer a response to Koopman's critique. In particular, I seek to show that it is flawed in two ways: (1) the main thrust of the proposed criticism is textually misguided, and (2) the conceptual issue, which leads to Koopman's alter-native account of Foucault's method, is rendered more, rather than less, problematic precisely by his rejection of the phenomenological reading.

I. Transcendental Narcissism

Koopman surveys some of the relevant evidence that we have of Foucault's own situating of his project with respect to the phenomenological tradition and finds that, as he puts it, "[t]o the extent that Foucault saw his own work in this lineage, it may have been on the basis of its refusal of the transcendental." (HCTC, 8) Moreover, Koopman suggests, Foucault's stated desideratum, in the famous conclusion of *L'Ar-chéologie du savoir* [1969], to cleanse historical methodology of any taint of what he

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[1] Kevin Thompson, "Historicity and Transcendentality: Foucault, Cavaillès, and the Phenomeno-logy of the Concept," *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 1-18.

called "transcendental narcissism" amounts to an "unequivocal" rejection of any form of transcendental phenomenological inquiry. (HCTC, 9-10)

Koopman's reading of this material is, I believe, misguided. Foucault says, when setting himself within the lineage that begins with Cavaillès, that Husserlian phenomenology itself became in France the "contested object of two possible readings."[2] One reading, that pursued by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Foucault tells us, sought to radicalize this methodology in the direction of subjectivity, while the other, that of Cavaillès, Bachelard, Koyré, and Canguilhem, tried to return it to its own founding problematics: formalism and intuitionism.

The former trajectory here is, recognizably, a distinct strand within the broader phenomenological tradition: constitutive phenomenology. The hallmark of this method, which Husserl introduced with the act-oriented transcendental idealism of *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie I* [1913] and which can be seen at work in the early writings of both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, is that it seeks to trace all various kinds of objectivities (theoretical, practical, or axiological), as intentional objects, back to their origin in the performances of constituting subjectivity. This is the project of what Husserl eventually came to call regressive inquiry or questioning back (*Rückfrage*).

I contend that it is this form of phenomenological methodology that Foucault has as his target in the feigned dialogue with which he concludes *L'Archéologie du savoir*. When he writes there that, for him, the essential task was "to free the history of thought from its transcendental subjection,"[3] he is referring precisely to the method of tracing historical events and achievements back to their origins in the performances of constitutive subjectivity, whether this be of individuals or of communities. It is a view of history—premised on a definite teleology and temporality—that enables subjectivity, confidently and irresistibly, to see its founding acts, to see itself even, everywhere in the positivities of tradition. This is what Foucault calls "transcendental narcissism"[4] and it is this method that must, he says, be purged from the history of thought in order to allow it its true discontinuity, dispersion, anonymity, and non-linear temporality. Archaeology is not a search for the origin; it does not excavate the sediment of founding acts and thereby seek to restore and preserve the entitlements of "constituent consciousness."[5] Its aim, rather, is precisely "to liberate history from the grip of phenomenology."[6]

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[2] Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 430 ; Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 764.

[3] Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 264 [Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge (and the Discourse on Language)* (New York: Harper, 1972), 203] [translation modified].

[4] Ibid., 265 [203].

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

Koopman does not cite this last line, but it would clearly be read by him as one more "unequivocal" caution against the transcendental, the final nail in the coffin, so to speak, for the verdict that archaeological method fundamentally rejects all forms of phenomenological inquiry. But if the context that I have sought briefly to reconstruct above, and developed more in my essay, is correct, then Foucault's treatment of phenomenology in these passages, as well as in the earlier *Les Mots et les Choses* [1966] and elsewhere during this period, applies solely to a specific form of phenomenological method, the only kind guilty of transcendental narcissism: constitutive phenomenology.

But this simply confirms what Foucault says later, that his own research belongs in a different lineage than that of a philosophy of the subject. It does not affect his claim that his work operates within the heritage of another reading of the "contested object" that is phenomenology: that worked out and practiced by Cavaillès and the tradition of the phenomenology of scientific rationality that emerged from his research, what I have proposed to call a "phenomenology of the concept."

Foucault's remarks clearly show, I believe, that he saw Cavaillès as offering another appropriation of phenomenology, another possible reading, one that, to be sure, differed precisely with constitutive phenomenology on the question of the fundamentality of constituting subjectivity, but that, despite this, nonetheless remained phenomenological. In doing this, Cavaillès was actually, in some ways, turning phenomenology, once again, as Foucault himself notes, back to its roots in eidetic description freed from the demands of a transcendental ground in consciousness. What Cavaillès discovered or, we might better say, rediscovered was thus the path of realistic phenomenology, the object-oriented form of eidetic description that Husserl himself practiced in Göttingen, a form of phenomenology that found expression in his *Logische Untersuchungen* [1900-1901]. Hence, when Foucault set his own work within this tradition and refers to this vein as returning phenomenology to its roots, this is best read, I contend, as showing that he was consciously embracing the promise of phenomenology that Cavaillès had opened up and that he saw his own unique form of historical inquiry as critically furthering precisely this lineage.

But if this is correct, then the critique of "transcendental narcissism" that Koopman offers of the phenomenological interpretation that I have proposed is simply off target. Eidetic description need not trace the structures it discerns back to an origin in constituting consciousness. Through imaginative variation, it can open up a transcendental field that is not governed by the sovereignty of subjectivity, a domain that Jean Hyppolite once called a "subjectless transcendental field" and the early Sartre termed a "pre-subjective transcendental field." Transcendental narcissism is thus properly seen, at least at its core, then, as a version of the same basic critique that realistic phenomenology has continually offered against its constitutive cousin.

II. Problematization

Koopman's critique, however, ultimately appeals to what are surely much more fundamental issues, namely, the "philosophical shortcomings" or "defects" that, he contends, Foucault came to recognize in the archaeological method and that motivated his "expansion" of it into genealogy. (cf., HCTC, 13) On Koopman's reconstruction, archaeology isolates conditions immanent to a single vector of practice, while genealogy enables such conditions to be traced along the intersection of multiple vectors, a complexity that Koopman believes Foucault sought to capture with the term "problematization." (cf., HCTC, 11-16) Koopman infers from this account that it was the inability of the archaeological method to grasp this kind of complexity that led Foucault to reject those features of this mode of inquiry that made it appear to be a form of transcendental investigation: "Foucault may have stumbled his way for a time into something resembling historical-transcendental inquiry, but once he recognized that he was there he headed elsewhere almost immediately, indeed even before *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was finished." (HCTC, 15)

Koopman argues that the method that came to replace the transcendental delusions of the archaeological period was a form of genealogical inquiry that nonetheless remained critical in the Kantian sense in that it sought after what Koopman calls "limiting conditions of possibility," (HCTC, 19) rather than the transcendental conditions of discursive formations with which Foucault had earlier uneasily flirted. The shift to genealogy, in Koopman's view, is thus not only a move to a more complex object of investigation, but also a move decisively and irrevocably away from the framework of transcendental method.

However, in my judgment, the central tenets of this reconstruction fail both textually and philosophically. To see this, we can turn to the concept at the center of Koopman's account: problematization. In his fullest treatment of this methodological innovation in the Introduction to *L'Usage des plaisirs* [1984], Foucault writes that the central task of a "history of thought," as he now calls his project, which, in the end, would be a "history of truth," is "to define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live."[7]

We should note two things about this passage: (1) problematizations are said here to be the *objects* of the distinctive kind of historical inquiry that Foucault takes himself to be practicing, and (2) a history of thought is fundamentally concerned not with problematizations, but with the *conditions* from which they emerge and in which they operate. Let us briefly consider each of these points in turn.

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[7] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, Tome II: L'Usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 16 [Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality: Volume Two* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 10]; cf. Foucault, *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988*, vol. 4, 544.

Foucault carefully delineates the domain carved out by problematizations, as he had statements (*énoncés*) in *L'Archéologie du savoir*, from that of behaviors, ideas, societies, or ideologies. Problematizations, he writes, are that "through which being gives itself as able and as necessarily to be thought."[8] Problematizations thus denote the historically specific ways in which something—whether it be an object, a behavior, an experience, even the world itself—becomes a matter of concern, an issue to be interrogated and reflected upon, and the way in which something stands as material for subsequent work.[9]

Foucault holds that each kind of historical problematization is forged on the basis of equally distinct historical practices. The historical analytic that Foucault now proposes thus seeks to examine matrices comprised of problematizations and the techniques out of which they are formed. Accordingly, he lays out the relation between the archaeological and the genealogical in terms of this dual focus: "The archaeological dimension of the analysis made it possible to examine the forms of problematization themselves; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyze their formation out of the practices and their modifications."[10] But this means that the relationship between the archaeological and the genealogical is not, as Koopman would have it, a matter of complexity. Rather, archaeology and genealogy are simply different dimensions of a single method that pursues distinct objects of investigation and poses equally distinct fundamental questions.

It would thus seem better to say that what Foucault achieved with the introduction of genealogy was an intensification of the kind of exploration of practices that he had already begun in archaeology. But does this intensification lead to a rejection of the transcendental framework of the early period as Koopman contends?

To address this question we come to the second point, the conditions of problematizations. Foucault holds that the task of archaeology, even in what would turn out to be this last phase of his work, is to discern the "forms" of problematization. From the examples he gives, based upon a rereading of his own corpus, this means setting out the historically specific structures in and through which various kinds of matters have been put at issue: in the case of the problematizations of madness and illness, "a certain pattern of normalization", for those of life, language, and labor, "certain 'epistemic rules'", and for the prolematizations of crime and criminal behavior, "a 'disciplinary' model."[11]

Earlier in the same text Foucault refers to these historical structures as "games of truth," which he defines as "the games of truth and error through which

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[8] Ibid., 17 [11] [translation modified]; cf., 545.

[9] Ibid., 30 [23-24]; cf., 554-555.

[10] Ibid., 17-18 [11-12]; cf. 545.

[11] Ibid., 18 [12]; cf. 546.

being is historically constituted."[12] Foucault's central methodological thesis, then, is that it is by virtue of these conditions that the entire domain of givenness itself—being—is forged in such a way that the differences between one problematization and another can mark out the border delineating specific historical periods. The decisive issue then is whether or not these conditions ought to be viewed, as Koopman proposes, as contingently forged antecedent states of affairs or processes or as historical eidetic structures as I have claimed.

The textual evidence is, I believe, clear. A pattern of normalization, epistemic rules, and a disciplinary model cannot be treated as preexisting states of affairs nor as past empirical processes. Rather, these all denote historically specific, yet still formal templates that govern how objects, statements, practices, and ideas exist and interact. They thus necessarily stand anterior to the empirical processes and relations to which Koopman appeals.

More importantly, I think, if we did treat these conditions as prior historical complexes conditioning what follows from them, as Koopman proposes, this would force Foucault into an impasse where the question of the causal efficacy of such conditions, here in the form of historical causation, would, of necessity, be opened but would be impossible to resolve.

Taken together, these concerns suggest that the root problem in Koopman's pragmatist approach is that it borders on being exactly the kind of historical positivism from which Foucault continually sought to differentiate his own project. Throughout his career, Foucault said that his histories, whatever else they may be, were not histories of ideas nor of behaviors because they did not take the positivities, the empirical givens, of knowledge and practice as their ultimate objects and domain of investigation. They sought instead the historical, yet a priori conditions that make thought and practice possible and that, as such, are properly said to govern them both. Accordingly, the "conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" are thus best read, I believe, as Foucault's last attempt to articulate the stratum that he had earlier called the "general system of the formation and transformation of statements,"[13] the historical a priori, the archive.

But not only is this reading more faithful to Foucault's own usage and methodological reflections, it has the added advantage of pointing to a way out of the very impasse that the pragmatist interpretation raises, namely how the conditions the history of thought seeks are able to be efficacious.

Phenomenology's fundamental methodological commitment is to describe the essential structures of matters as they are given. This entails, for Foucault, among other things, refusing to trace these conditions back to an originating source when the matters under examination do not themselves warrant such a move. As

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[12] Ibid., 12-13 [6-7]; cf. 542.

[13] Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir,* 171 [Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* 130].

we saw above, this is one of the central tenets of realistic phenomenology and Foucault supported this approach by showing, in *Les Mots et les Choses*, but elsewhere as well, that to tether the structures of history to constituting subjectivity was to fall back under the anthropological slumber of the "enslaved sovereign, observed spectator,"[14] the place of man, and the "great quadrilateral"[15] of the positive and the fundamental that had defined the modern episteme. Accordingly, to declare that the historical conditions that eidetic inquiry unearths owe their efficacy to any kind of source, be it historical or non-historical, would thus be to betray the phenomena themselves by submitting them to the very rules of formation that this methodology enables us to isolate.

We must thus conclude, I believe, that Foucault did not, as Koopman would have it, stumble into "something resembling historical-transcendental inquiry." (HCTC, 15) On the contrary, his method, despite its variations, remained through-out, at once, transcendental and historical and, as such, remained within the lineage of what I proposed to call the "phenomenology of the concept."

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[14] Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 323 [Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 312].

[15] Ibid., 346 [335].