

RESPONSE

Historical Conditions or Transcendental Conditions: Response to Kevin Thompson's Response

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In his response to my essay "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages" Kevin Thompson ably mounts a number of important challenges to the exegetical and philosophical project I have proposed vis-à-vis the writings of Michel Foucault. I find Thompson's response illuminating on a number of points. The most important of these concerns the underlying philosophical issues which myself and others (including Thompson, Béatrice Han-Pile, and Andrew Cutrofello) have taken as valuable materials for reflection in relation to Foucault's important work.¹ In what follows, my response is partly directed at the textual and philosophical themes at play between Thompson and myself, but is also partly directed at certain metaphilosophical questions of how we ought to direct ourselves to the relevant textual and philosophical matters of concern to us both. From this second metaphilosophical perspective, my aim here is not to definitively resolve the philosophical issues placed under scrutiny by Thompson and myself. Rather, my aim is to feature the depth and difficulty of some of these issues as they appear throughout the history of modern philosophy, from Kant (and certain of his predecessors) to Foucault (and certain of his successors). I have chosen to take this approach insofar as I find Thompson's response to my essay generously productive in that it effectively works to open up a set of timely philosophical issues so as to

¹ Cf., Kevin Thompson, "Historicity and Transcendentality: Foucault, Cavallès, and the Phenomenology of the Concept," *History and Theory*, 47 (February 2008): 1-18. Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*. Translated by Edward Pile (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 2002). Andrew Cutrofello, *Discipline and Critique: Kant, Post-structuralism, and the Problem of Resistance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994). References throughout contain, in some instances, two dates: in such cases the first date refers to the original year of publication in the original language and the second date refers to the year of publication of the translation and edition to which the page number citation refers.

help make them available to those of us invested in the modern philosophical project of critique.

I. Textual Issues

A key family of textual issues continues to separate my “Foucault-as-nontranscendental-Kantian” interpretation from that charted by those who proffer the “Foucault-as-phenomenologist” interpretation. There are two moments at which these accounts diverge. One moment of divergence concerns how we are to read Foucault’s writings in the late 1960s in which he appears explicitly disapproving of phenomenology, for instance in his famous reference to “transcendental narcissism” near the end of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.² A second divergence concerns how we interpret Foucault’s methodological-metaphilosophical reorientations of the early 1970s involving an expansion (or, as Thompson nicely puts it, “intensification”) of his earlier archaeological approach into a more capacious methodological analytic that is most accurately, though perhaps clumsily, described as archaeology-plus-genealogy.

As to the first moment of divergence, Thompson in his response nicely distinguishes between “constitutive phenomenology” (later Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) and “realistic phenomenology” (earlier Husserl and Cavailles). Thompson’s view is that Foucault’s explicitly negative evaluations of phenomenology in the late 1960s are meant only to point to one of these branches of phenomenology, the more widely-influential branch of phenomenology, namely constitutive phenomenology. Now, I believe that I could make much of the fact that Foucault in this period nowhere qualifies his criticisms of phenomenology in the way that Thompson suggests and that we can find the distinction Thompson is insisting upon only by importing later remarks of Foucault’s back into these earlier writings. But I also accept that Thompson could by turns make much of the fact that these later remarks are crucial for understanding Foucault’s intellectual influences such that his interpretation of Foucault relies on honest intellectual importation rather than an anachronistic smuggling of ideas. One of the wonderful things about philosophers as creative as Foucault is that their writings are amenable to multiple interpretations. I doubt that either Thompson or myself could ever definitively show that our interpretation is the only one that the relevant texts withstand. But what we can do, and have both sought to do, is to develop an interpretation that is compelling and consistent.

This brings me to the importance of the second moment of divergence I have flagged. It is in connection with Foucault’s later methodological reorientation that

² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1969, 1972), 203.

his earlier criticisms of phenomenology ought to be understood. The core of the view I sought to elaborate in my essay is that Foucault departs from the transcendental project central to phenomenology and other philosophical traditions working in the wake of Kantianism. If Foucault is indebted to phenomenologists such as Cavailles, then my view is that his debt here does not extend to any of the transcendental aspects of the phenomenological project, be it grounded in transcendental subjectivity (as with constitutive phenomenology) or in subjectless historical-transcendental conditions (as with realistic phenomenology). When Foucault sniffed out remnant whiffs of transcendentalism in his archaeological methodology, he felt compelled to first quip about the “transcendental narcissism” in his phenomenological inheritance, and then to revise his methodology such that an analytic of archaeology-plus-genealogy could be employed in a way that would avoid the project of transcendental analysis essential to every version of phenomenology. Foucault was a historical thinker, not a transcendental thinker.³ One of Foucault’s most important and lasting contributions to the French philosophy of his period consisted in his ability to break free of the various invocations of transcendentalism (including Husserl-isms, Hegel-isms, Marx-isms, and Freud-isms) that dominated the philosophical milieu of post-war France. Foucault, like Deleuze, created new ways of doing philosophy.

Even if we take into account both of these moments of divergence, I am still not entirely convinced that the sort of exegetical disagreement I have been discussing can be resolved to the satisfaction of all involved. However, I am also not at all convinced that overcoming such disagreements should be our aim. Philosophical texts, like all valuable texts, do not and cannot carry the rules for their own interpretation. This point, to my mind as Foucaultian as it is Wittgensteinian, helps explain why philosophical works are importantly amenable to historical transformation. Taking this point seriously also helps us see that our primary aim as philosophical interpreters should not be to nail down the views of our predecessors, but should instead be to feature the richness of the history of thought in a way that allows us to productively appropriate philosophical concepts, ideas, and strategies for our own purposes in the present. My sense is that Thompson agrees with me about this—and this perhaps explains why I have found his version of the Foucault-as-phenomenologist interpretation a productive view to engage in the context of my

³ I quote again Georges Canguilhem, one of those philosophers who influenced Foucault and whom Thompson would place in the vein of realistic phenomenology: “Foucault disparaged questions with transcendental implications, preferring those with historical implications.” “Introduction,” in T.J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, 1992), xvi. That quotation, in so many words, is my very simple point.

putting forward an alternative interpretation. But at this point I am already speaking from the point of view of the philosopher, rather than the scholar, who lives within me. So allow me to now turn to the philosophical issues for which Foucault's thought provides a rich field upon which to work out these ideas.

II. Philosophical Issues

When Foucault undertook the methodological shift that led him from archaeology to archaeology-plus-genealogy, he must have done so in part because he began to realize that archaeology could not explain something which Foucault was eager to explain, namely how conditions can condition our practices in such a way as to both constrain these practices and be consistent with their historical transformability. Phenomenology ably showed how our practices are conditioned. Yet it failed to show how conditioned practices are amenable to transformation. This is because it theorized conditions as Kant had done, namely as transcendental. But since transcendental conditions are universal in scope and necessary in modality (even if only with respect to a given historical *a priori*, as historical-transcendental phenomenologists would have it) they purchase their explanatory power only by divesting themselves of the idea of historical transformability.⁴

Foucault aimed to show how our practices are simultaneously conditioned and historical. This is a very fine line to toe—from the perspective of the history of philosophy it involves nothing less than appropriating crucial strategies from both Kant and Hegel without making use of any of the transcendental trappings implicit in their analytic and dialectic methods. Foucault's earlier archaeologies can be seen as a first stalled attempt at such a project—the archaeological writings richly featured conditioning (as phenomenological inquiries had) but in the end they remained rather barren with respect to processes of historical transformation (which are of course only implicit in an archaeological view and indeed not even theorizable in that view). Foucault's later genealogies took him much further toward his philosophical desideratum of a methodology that could engage conditional constraint and historical contingency at once.

This brings me to the central concept for the interpretation of Foucaultian genealogy I am putting forward. This is the concept of problematization. My interpretation of the role of "problematization" in Foucault's work differs from Thomp-

⁴ For example, a good will for Kant always is and must involve acting out of duty to the moral law, and so the idea of a good will is not the kind of thing that can have a history. That explains a lot, but it decidedly fails (indeed in Kant it positively refuses!) to explain the historical locations and shapes in which the idea of the good will emerges, stabilizes, and may perhaps come to disappear. At this point, of course, I am aping (a certain interpretation of) Hegel's criticisms of Kant. And this, of course, makes good sense in the context of a philosophical consideration of the relation between transcendentalism and historicity.

son's in a few ways. Some of these ways are incidental to the present discussion.⁵ Others bear directly on interpretive issues concerning how we should read Foucault's relationship to Kant, Husserl, Cavailles, and others. Allow me to discuss what I take to be the most decisive point concerning problematization.

What is the conditioning role played by problematizations if these are understood as conditions of possibility for historically contingent practices? Thompson helpfully captures the central philosophical issue that divides our respective interpretive and philosophical views when he asks "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." Thompson then goes on to explain that he finds my view misguided because it would force us "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."

But I am not sure that causation is the right register on which to locate the issue. I do not see Foucault as directing our attention toward merely causal conditioning. I see Foucault as directing our attention to empirical conditions not as causes that *make real* but as constraints that *make possible*. Conditions enable or disable, but they do not bring anything into being in a way that a billiard ball forces another off in the direction of the pocket. Conditions of possibility are more like the entire ensemble of ball, cue, stick, felt-topped table, and spirits of friendship and competition in which a certain practice is made possible. On my reading the entire ensemble itself is indeed the product of "antecedent states of affairs" but only so long as we understand "states of affairs" capaciously to involve all things at play in a practice rather than narrowly as referring to structures of causality describable in the language of a perfect physics. These complex states of affairs, call them *conditioning ensembles* or more simply *problematizations*, enable and disable present practices and are themselves conditioned in turn by historical practices. This marks the difference, as Thompson states, between a conditioning that is historical all the way down and a conditioning that refers in the last instance to a historical-transcendental structure. Just as a billiard ball cannot roll off toward the pocket if not pushed by another (or perhaps by a cheating hand), so a gang of gamers cannot get together to

⁵ One incidental point deserves parenthetical mention. Thompson describes "problematizations" as *objects* of inquiry for Foucault. This they are, but not just this. I take "problematization" in Foucault to refer to both an *object* of inquiry, namely a historical set of conditions of possibility for practices, and a modality of an *act* of inquiry, namely a philosophical investigation and intensification of problematizations taken as objects. Problematization, accordingly, functions as both a noun and a verb. A problematization is something we inquire into and it is also a methodology for inquiry.

shoot pool if a vast many things had not happened in the past whereby that practice emerged into being as something that it is possible for you and me to do. Those vast many things do not *cause* you and me to play pool, but they do *enable* our cuesports and many other things besides.

With this distinction between critical-empirical and causal-empirical conditions in place allow me to now restate the impasse that Thompson has located in a slightly different vocabulary. The impasse that Thompson locates in my view refers, as I see it, to the difficult question of how our practices can be at one and the same time *constrained* by conditions of possibility and also *contingent* in being amenable to historical transformation. Do not *constraint* and *contingency* pull in opposite directions? Do not *conditions* work to stop the flowing time of change whereas *history* is precisely the dynamic flight of change itself? Thompson is right that there is indeed an enormous tension here. But I cannot bring myself to regard it as a philosophical contradiction or a theoretical impasse.

Indeed, one of the deepest tensions at the heart of contemporary living which Foucault so patiently sought to elaborate in nearly all of his work concerns the possibility of our being simultaneously constrained and free. This is a key problematization, both philosophically and practically, for those of us living in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and other books, including Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, offer some of its most compelling expressions.⁶ It is at the heart of what motivates many of us to attempt to elaborate the practices we are engaged in as a response to the dangers of the debilitating dissection between power and freedom that is *our historical condition*.⁷ Many of his most severe critics have worried that Foucault cannot definitively resolve the pressing philosophical issue of how conditions of possibility can be constraining at the same time that they lend themselves to the contingencies of historical change. But I find this a misplaced worry, at least with respect to Foucault. The most important point of a book like *Discipline and Punish* is to feature certain problems of ours in a way that practically forces us to stop pretending that we can let ourselves off the hooks we are hanging on by forging supposed solutions to the problematizations that are so central to who we are. Foucault made this aspect of his work quite explicit in many of his interviews, including one conducted in 1978: "The problems I try to pose—those tangled things that crime, madness, and sex are, and

⁶ Cf., Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1975, 1995), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and in a somewhat different vein (and one that I find enormously instructive) Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999).

⁷ I address this contemporary problematization in greater detail in Colin Koopman, "Revising Foucault: The History and Critique of Modernity" *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 36, 5 (May 2010).

that concern every life—cannot easily be resolved.”⁸ Foucault here states a central intent of his work as I read it: to draw our attention to the way in which we fashion ourselves as subjects in terms of the tensions set up by our many-faceted divisions between *freedom* and *power*, *contingency* and *constraint*, *history* and *condition*. We are on both sides of these divisions and as such are problematically divided against ourselves. There is no easy resolution of this “impasse” at the heart of our historical present. Hence the importance of patience with respect to that which we are most impatient about: the transformation of the way in which we give freedom to our selves.⁹

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⁸ Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault” (conducted by Duccio Trombadori), in Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3: Power*. Edited by Paul Rabinow and James Faubion (New York: New Press, 1980, 2000), 288.

⁹ Cf. Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Michel Foucault, *Essential Writings of Michel Foucault, Volume One: Ethics*. Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1984, 1997), 319.