Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Arnold I. Davidson, Frédéric Gros (eds.), *Foucault, Wittgenstein: de possibles rencontres* **(Éditions Kimé, 2011), ISBN: 2841745554**

Drawing a parallel between Foucault and Wittgenstein, two authors that belong to the different traditions of analytical and the continental philosophy, is most definitely a hard job. Even though we have textual proof that Foucault was aware of Wittgenstein's work, often there is a level of discontinuity between their approaches to the creation and formulation of different philosophical issues. In the body of his work Foucault only makes a few general references to Wittgenstein, whom he always mentions alongside other analytical authors. However, the convergence of ideas between these two authors is sometimes so strong that we cannot help to envision the possibility of an intellectual overlap.

A certain familiarity between Foucault and Wittgenstein was first observed by Ian Hacking and Arnold I. Davidson,[1] who drew elements and concepts from both authors for a practical analysis of certain historical and epistemological issues. A further challenge is to create and enable a conceptual space for this meeting of minds to take place. Such a task does not merely seek a solution to the historical-philosophical issue, but rather takes the shape of a conceptual and theoretical process. It is an attempt to find a synthesis between the positions of two philosophers who do not share a common background, but a common attitude toward traditional philosophy.

In pursuit of this challenge, an international group of researchers came together for a public lecture at the ENS in 2007. *Foucault, Wittgenstein: de possibles rencontres,* edited by Davidson and Gros, is the result of that meeting. The book collects seven essays, each presenting a different attempt at building a shared conceptual space, each approaching the same matter from a different point of view.

The essays can be roughly divided in three thematic areas. Firstly, most essays take into account how Foucault and Wittgenstein seem to share a common critical stance towards previous philosophical theories. The essays note how both Foucault and Wittgenstein are critical of traditional philosophy, and are particularly against the idea of a deduc-

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[1] Arnold I. Davidson, *The emergence of sexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Ian Hacking, *Why does language matters to philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

tive and causal paradigm. Foucault argues against the existence of an essential structure of history that provides a logical deduction of future events. Similarly, Wittgenstein claims that there are no logical rules that provide a logical deduction of our linguistic behaviors. ([Eustache] 13-20, and [Paltrinieri] 43-44) Both philosophers appear to share a polemic view towards representationalist language conceptions. Both are in opposition to the idea that language offers a complete representation of things. Thus, the representation should *not* be used as a criterion to assess the truth or falsehood of a proposition. ([Savoia] 158; [Bibla] 117)

A number of the essays, then, go on to look into how Foucault and Wittgenstein's critical outlook contributed to give birth to an immanent conception of philosophy. These articles consider how both Foucault and Wittgenstein stated that concepts and discourses cannot be referred to an eternal rational structure, but are the byproduct of practices within a particular communitarian space. ([Eustache, Paltrinieri, Tiisala] 79)

A second set of articles addresses Foucault and Wittgenstein's shared interest in the productivity of practice when referred to the subject. Both philosophers do not believe that the subject is an eternal substance: Wittgenstein identifies it as a product of the game of language and Foucault as the result of power relations within the social space. ([Bilba, Volbers, Savoia] 181)

We will be looking at the essays that compose *Foucault, Wittgenstein: de possibles rencontres* according to their division into seperate thematic areas.

The essays by Stéphane Eustache, Tuomo Tiisala and Luca Paltrinieri, focus on the relationship between Foucault's discursive practice and Wittgenstein's conception of language. According to Wittgenstein, language is an autonomous process that we practice from the inside and which takes the shape of an activity to the undetermined rules of linguistic game. ([Paltrinieri] 48) This idea is compared to Foucault's attempts to interrogate the condition of existence of the statements (in his archeological period) and to trace back the conditions of knowledge to a communitarian and historical context, composed by power's relations (in the genealogy). Wittgenstein's structure of language and Foucault's rationality can both be ascribed to practice.

Stéphane Eustache's essay is a philological attempt to look into how both philosophers share an analytical descriptive method, an immanent construction of the object, that do not address to the universal but the particular: everyday things. (24) Eustache identifies a shared method and attempts to verify whether this generates a continuity or an opposition between the two philosophers' thought.

According to Eustache, both Foucault's conception of the statement (énoncé) and his genealogical attempt to write a history of our concepts and our way of knowledge (connaissance) prevent a continuity with Wittgenstein's theories. (30-31) The methods of Foucault's archeology and genealogy are linked to a particular way of describing and researching the condition of existence, which is explicitly rejected by Wittgenstein in what Eustache calls his "conventionalist conception of language." (25)

Eustache claims that the two philosophers are not in direct opposition, but that there is a *divergence* in their analysis: Foucault's attempt to explain context is not eternal and universal, but particular and immanent, coherent with Canguilhem's influence on his work. (35) Although Foucault shares some elements of Wittgenstein's thought, particularly in his critical approach to traditional philosophy, he develops his ideas in a different direction, which is in a lateral opposition with Wittgenstein. (37)

However, Eustache's use of the category of conventionalism to explain Wittgenstein's conception of language is ambiguous. According to Wittgenstein, language is not generated through "an agreement in opinions, but in form of life,"[2] and should be accepted as such, without attempting to find any further justification for its existence.

Paltrinieri and Tiisala's essays start from the premise of this different definition of language in Wittgenstein. Their goal is to match up Foucault's archeology with Wittgenstein's epistemological discussion of *On Certainty*. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein argues against Moore's idea of truism and common sense as evident and eternal truths, remarking the primacy of action. ([Paltrinieri] 53) Statements are not eternal but historically contingent and dependent on their use inside a particular discursive practice.

According to Tiisala, this concept is close to the Foucauldian idea, in *L'archéologie du savoir*, that the identity of a statement (énoncé) is linked to his function within a particular discursive practice. ([Tiisala] 91)

Paltrinieri comes to a similar conclusion, having highlighted Wittgenstein's anti-essentialist stance, against the application, outside the scientific field, of the causal paradigm. Wittgenstein's 'form of life' can be related, in Foucault, to the archeological task of analyzing the space of discursive regularity—"le savoir"—that precedes scientific knowledge. (63) The knowledge (savoir) occupies the same function of Wittgenstein's common sense, creating a field that enables the communication between scientific statements and the whole of beliefs and certainties.

Wittgenstein and Foucault's work is characterized by the pursuit of the same issue: making the implicit level of this field explicit, without adopting a causal paradigm. (64) Their rejection of the causal paradigm takes the form of an immanent morphological description. Paltrinieri links Foucault's idea of 'fictional history'—showing a different order of possible truths—to Wittgenstein's conception of imagination—that provides new perspectives in the functional dimension of the form of life. A space of interaction between Foucault and Wittgenstein comes to life as both philosophers assume the impossibilty of a rational foundation for human knowledge. They believe that knowledge is an act without foundation: philosophy becomes an immanent description of knowledge that assumes its opacity in order to show what Musil have called "the sense of possibility" in reality. (68)

Among the pieces collected in the book Corneliu Bilba's essay stands on its own. Bilba's argument is based on the hypothetical proximity of Ferdinand De Saussure's structuralism to both Wittgenstein and Foucault's thought. According to Bilba, Saussure and

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[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen,* § 241.

Wittgenstein (in *Philosophical Investigation*) have a similar conception of language, since they both claim that the class of meanings of a sign is the result of its use. (121) In order to relate this conception with Foucault, Bilba suggests a substantial reassessment of Foucault's Archeology, seeing it as an attempt to add the sciences to structuralist analysis of discourse. (122) Finally, he connects Wittgenstein's form of life and Foucault's genealogy through the concept of potency, which he views as a common character in Wittgenstein's linguistic agreement and Foucault's relations of power. (143-144)

However, the perspective offered by Bilba overcomplicates the issue leading to potentially misguiding conclusions. Bilba seems to misunderstand what the meaning of Foucault's focus on the "immature sciences"[3] is in the Archeology: the idea of a structuralist version of epistemology does not take into account the theory of thresholds[4] which makes a distinction between Foucault's point of view and epistemological research in general. Also, there are no tangible advantages in offering a structuralist interpretation of both Wittgenstein and Foucault, which makes it questionable whether such a radical reading is necessary at all.

Paolo Savoia, Orazio Irrera and Jorg Volbers' essays are all concerned with the issue of subject. Wittgenstein and Foucault share a conception of philosophy as a practice, as a self-technique, capable of a transformative action on the subject himself. ([Tiisala] 79)

Symmetrically to Paltrinieri, Tiisala and Eustache, this second group of essays takes Wittgenstein and Foucault's critique on the representation of language as a starting point. Savoia, Irrera and Volbers focus their efforts on the role of subject instead, linking the concept of immanent philosophy to the process of subjectification of the disciplinary power, in Foucault, and to the idea of training (*Abrichtung*) in Wittgenstein. ([Savoia] 174 and [Irrera] 200)

Both in the power and language fields, the subject is not seen as an external and eternal substance that preexists its actions, but as existing *within* the norms of language and power. The essays thus look into Wittgenstein and Foucault's shared conception of philosophy as an immanent description with a particular focus on the role of subject.

Volbers explores the points of convergence between Wittgenstein and Foucault in order to solve the problem of continuity and discontinuity between Foucault's ethical subject and genealogical subject. Wittgenstein's idea of an existing internal relationship between the subject and its practice, helps to understand Foucault's self-critical shift from the passive and power-determined genealogical subject to the active, ethical subject. (111)

Savoia's essay addresses the issue of the supposed conservative quality of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Savoia's attempts to deny this controversial point and to bring the de-

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[3] Ian Hacking, "Michel Foucault's Immature science" in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[4] Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Michel Foucault, "(Discussion) n° 75" in *Dits et Écrits vol.1* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

bate on a further level by highlighting the complex link between Wittgenstein's anti-essentialist attitude—shared by Foucault—and his political thought. (181)

This shared immanent conception of the subject demonstrates how both Foucault and Wittgenstein's saw philosophy as a descriptive method, to show the possibility for change in a particular communitarian space. The discussion of the issue of subject and the analysis of discursive practice lead to essentially the same conclusions: the philosophical task undertaken is that of making what is implicit explicit, assuming the subject's opacity without seeking an external foundation. ([Savoia] 180-181)

On the whole, the essays included in *Foucault, Wittgenstein: de possibles rencontres*, attempt to track the critical attitude towards traditional philosophy shared by Wittgenstein and Foucault, and to rework their proximity in order to show a positive point of convergence between them. Though the focus of analysis varies in each article, the book has the merit of showing clearly the common philosophical stance of the two authors, who both strive to show the implicit level in a determinate field, without adopting a foundationalist attitude. The result is a shared will to accept the opacity of the subject and of the knowledge act.

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