

ARTICLE

Uncertain Ontologies

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ABSTRACT: This following essay explores the meaning and implications of philosophical critique and creativity within the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. The two philosophers' appeals to ontology, as an important site upon which their ethico-political commitments to critique and creativity simultaneously converge and diverge, frame this exploration. The first part of the essay shows how Deleuze's and Foucault's respective ontologies further critique and creativity. The second part of the essay focuses on a point of divergence in the two thinkers' appeals to ontology: the relationship between philosophy and history. From a Foucauldian perspective, the ahistorical character of Deleuze's ontology of difference threatens to undermine its transformative potential, whereas from a Deleuzian perspective, the historical character of Foucault's ontology of the present, while it may not undermine transformation, certainly does not facilitate it. In conclusion, I argue that it is precisely from within these tensions that important, productive, and transformative aspects of Deleuze's and Foucault's work emerge.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Ontology, Ethics, Politics

*The history of philosophy, rather than repeating what a philosopher says, has to say what he must have taken for granted, what he didn't say but is nonetheless present in what he did say.*¹ ~Gilles Deleuze

*There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it ... but [philosophy] is entitled to explore what might be changed, in its own thought, through a practice that is foreign to it.*² ~Michel Foucault

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¹ Gilles Deleuze, "On Philosophy," in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 135-155.

² Michel Foucault, Introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

Introduction

Beginning in the 1960s, according to Gary Gutting, French philosophy acquired a new and distinctive character. Young philosophers found humanistic narratives positing the inevitability of human progress to be fundamentally “inconsistent with the [post-War] world they saw as irredeemable.”³ These philosophers therefore began challenging such narratives and the normative values to which they had given rise, as well as endeavoring to articulate if not alternatives themselves, then at least conditions for their possibility.⁴ This philosophical project, which Gutting refers to as “thinking the impossible,” is not a mere thought experiment aimed at rejecting humanism. French philosophy has expressed a broad ethico-political commitment to articulating and furthering “some sort of guiding vision” – specifically, a “livable vision that neither eliminates the distinctively human nor makes human beings the center of the universe.”⁵ From the perspective of thinking the impossible, Gutting writes, “the ultimate point and test of philosophical thought is seen in its relevance to political goals.”⁶

Gutting shows that philosophers have developed multiple and sometimes conflicting approaches to thinking the impossible. Two such approaches are to be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, both of who figure prominently in Gutting’s analysis. Consistent with the aim of thinking the impossible, as Gutting conceives of it, Deleuze and Foucault critique prevailing norms, institutions, and practices, including the Western philosophical tradition. Through their respective critiques, both thinkers also aim to promote the creation and proliferation of (possibilities for) alternative ways of living in the world – for ways of living, that is, which do not reproduce and in fact counter those ways of living, which gave rise to the devastating crises of the twentieth century.

The following essay seeks to explore more precisely the meaning and implications of philosophical critique and creativity within the context of Deleuze’s and Foucault’s work. The two philosophers’ appeals to ontology frame this exploration, insofar as I see these appeals as a site upon which their ethico-political commitments to thinking the impossible simultaneously converge and diverge. In the first part of the essay, I show how Deleuze’s and Foucault’s respective ontologies can be seen as furthering their efforts to think the impossible. The critical and creative aspects of Deleuze’s ontology of difference and Foucault’s ontology of the present are apparent in large part through each thinker’s utilization of the work of Nietzsche—a thinker who employed critique specifically in order to pave the way for the creation of something new. The second part of the essay identifies one important point of divergence in Deleuze’s and Foucault’s respective appeals to ontology and then focuses on a second that in some ways emerges from the first: the relationship between philosophy and history or, more specifically, whether and to what extent appealing to history facilitates efforts to think the impossible. I show that from a Foucauldian perspective, the ahistorical character of

³ Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.

⁴ It is my view that Deleuze and Foucault seek to identify and foster conditions under which alternatives to prevailing modes of thought and existence may be created and experimented with, and that they themselves actually create alternatives. Throughout the essay I therefore refer to them as doing both.

⁵ Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

Deleuze's ontology of difference threatens to undermine its transformative potential. From a Deleuzian perspective, by contrast, the historical character of Foucault's ontology of the present, while it may not undermine transformation, certainly does not facilitate it. By way of conclusion, I argue that the tension produced by these divergences does not inhibit Deleuze's and Foucault's efforts to think the impossible. Rather, it is precisely within this tension that the most important, productive, and transformative aspects of thinking the impossible emerge.

I

Deleuze's ethico-political commitment to creating and cultivating possibilities for alternative modes of thought and existence—for “the remarkable, the new, and the important”⁷—is reflected in his engagement with the question of, as Todd May puts it, “how one might live.”⁸ While Deleuze engages this question perhaps most overtly in his collaborative work with Felix Guattari (especially in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*), it also can be seen as framing his analyses of thinkers such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and even Kant, all of whom he believed to be thinking differently, or whose work he saw opening onto the possibility of doing so. The question of how one might live also motivates Deleuze's work in *Difference and Repetition*. There he develops an ontology that is both characterized by and promotes the proliferation of difference and which, through doing so, generates conditions for the possibility of and thus facilitates not merely thinking, but also living, differently.

According to Constantin Boundas, “[f]or Deleuze, philosophy is ontology.”⁹ While Boundas identifies Deleuze as one of the only philosophers of his generation who does not eschew ontology, he also makes note of the non-traditional nature of Deleuze's ontology of difference. As Boundas describes it, “Deleuze's ontology is a rigorous attempt to think of process and metamorphosis—becoming—not as a transition or transformation from one point to another, but rather as an attempt to think of the real as a process.”¹⁰ Understanding Deleuze's ontology of difference in this way helps make sense of the prominent role Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence plays in its articulation. Deleuze rejects the view that eternal recurrence entails perpetually re-experiencing the events of one's life exactly as one has already lived them. He argues that readings which posit the eternal return of the same, on the one hand, and particular events, on the other, are erroneous—at least in part because they rely upon a conventional understanding of the passage of time. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze argues that eternal recurrence calls into question and recasts the traditional relationship between past, present, and future. This critique and recasting in turn undermines the traditional relationship between being and becoming. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche shows that for the

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82. Cited in Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

⁸ May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction*, 1.

⁹ Constantin V. Boundas, “Ontology,” in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 191-192.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

passage of time to take place at all, and hence for “the past to be constituted in time,”¹¹ the present cannot be a static state of being.¹² “The passing moment,” Deleuze writes, “could never pass it if were not already past and yet to come—at the same time as being present. If the present did not pass of its own accord, if it had to wait for a new present in order to become the past, the past in general would never be constituted in time, and this particular present would not pass ... [t]he present be must coexist with itself as past and yet to come.”¹³

By revealing the present as movement, as “in passing,” eternal recurrence reconfigures past, present, and future as “co-existing cycles.”¹⁴ Deleuze argues that, for Nietzsche, it therefore cannot be the case that being—construed as “some one thing”—is what returns, for “being” is not a static state or fixed identity but itself a dynamic passing.¹⁵ If there is no other being than this passing, what returns is nothing more than what Deleuze refers to as the “being of becoming,” or recurrence itself. Moreover, given the dynamic nature of this being of becoming, what returns can be said to be “the same” only in terms of its difference—the difference between as well as within cycles.¹⁶ Through illustrating that becoming is all that there “is,” Deleuze thus sees eternal recurrence providing the ultimate affirmation of difference. Eternal recurrence, he argues, “must be thought of as a synthesis ... of time and its dimensions ... of diversity and its reproduction ... of becoming and the being which is affirmed in becoming ... a synthesis of double affirmation.”¹⁷ In turn, this affirmation illustrates that eternal recurrence itself must be thought of “as the expression of a principle which serves as an explanation of diversity and its reproduction, of difference and its repetition.”¹⁸

The principle in question is will to power, a principle whose articulation, Deleuze contends, Nietzsche saw as effectively undermining prevailing modes of thought and existence: will to power, according to Nietzsche, “cannot be thought out of the mechanistic order without thinking away this order itself.”¹⁹ To the extent that Deleuze’s own ontology of difference incorporates key aspects of eternal recurrence, it should not be surprising that its articulation produces similar effects. That is, Deleuze’s ontology reveals as contingent and thereby calls into question a modern Western meaning-making system that has endowed itself with the authority to provide a definitive account of the nature of reality.²⁰ As Deleuze describes it, this

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. High Tomlinson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 48.

¹² See Deleuze’s analysis in Chapter Two, “Repetition for Itself,” of *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 70-128.

¹³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 49.

²⁰ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari implicate the Western philosophical tradition in a system of thought that reduces difference to sameness. They also analyze the specifically political effects of this implication. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Chapter Twelve, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine,” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 351-422.

system—that of representation—relies upon and in turn invokes sameness, specifically in the form of identity. An object can be represented and therefore known only if it possesses a pre-existing, recognizable, and unchanging identity. With respect to both individual objects (finite representation) and being itself (infinite representation), the system is only capable of making sense of what it can render knowable by way of representational concepts; anything else, anything that cannot be subsumed under the existing meaning-making system—difference, in other words—is denied and negated. “On what condition,” Deleuze writes, “is difference traced or projected on to a flat space? Precisely when it has been forced into a previously established identity, when it has been placed on the slope of the identical which makes it reflect or desire identity, and necessarily takes it where identity wants to go—namely into the negative.”²¹

Thus, while a system of representation is able to “mediate” what already exists, it is incapable of creating anything new.²² To the extent that this is the case, such a system cannot begin even to entertain the question of how one *might* live; all it can do is give an account of prevailing ways of living and rearticulate existing conditions for the possibility of more of the same. As I have shown, however, like Nietzsche before him Deleuze seeks to conceive of reality in ways that cannot be articulated by means of traditional concepts, categories, and principles, and which therefore unsettle these same meaning-making tools. Deleuze makes it impossible to uncritically accept formulations of being and becoming, sameness and difference, that are generated by way of a traditional system of representation that relies upon predetermined concepts in order to make sense of the world. “Every object, every thing,” Deleuze argues, “must see its own identity swallowed up in difference, each being no more than a difference between differences.”²³ Just as Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence recasts the present as a passing as opposed to a state of being, so for Deleuze “what is” is precisely a process of “differentiation,” where difference is “shown *differing*.”²⁴ Just as for Nietzsche all that returns is difference, so is it that within Deleuze’s ontology, being is univocal only in terms of what is “equivocal.”²⁵ What unifies being is difference, which simultaneously undoes any sense of being as static and hence denies any way of making sense by way of representation. In other words, all that can be relied upon within a Deleuzian ontology of difference is that which continually destabilizes and unsettles. “Opening is an essential feature of univocity,” Deleuze writes. “Only there does the cry resound, “Everything is equal!” and “Everything returns!”” Such assertions can be made only “on condition that each being ... has reached a state of excess” in which what is asserted is simultaneously called into question: the difference that “causes” assertions about the world “to return” simultaneously “displaces and disguises them.”²⁶

The question that guides Foucault’s ethico-political commitment to thinking the impossible is that of how and to what extent it might be possible “to think differently than one

²¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 51.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

thinks, and perceive differently than one sees."²⁷ Foucault does not simply want to see and think differently himself. Through his philosophy he also endeavors to foster widespread creation of and experimentation with new modes of thought and existence. In order to do this, he first illustrates the need for such articulation and experimentation by conducting genealogical analyses. Through inquiring into how prevailing norms, institutions, and practices have developed historically and taken hold, genealogies show that current conditions are not necessary conditions and, therefore, that they are open to critical analysis. Engaging critically with the present in turn facilitates identification and countering of norms, institutions, and practices that generate normalizing effects. Simply put, normalization as Foucault conceives of it refers to the modern Western phenomenon whereby human beings' critical and creative capacities are merely channeled back into the rearticulation of prevailing modes of thought and existence. This curtailment of critique and creativity in turn reinforces existing power relations and is therefore counter to freedom. For Foucault, freedom entails navigating existing power relations in ways that do not reinforce them in their current form but rather keep them "open and fluid."²⁸ Power relations are kept open and fluid when capacities are directed toward innovation, the outcome of which cannot be anticipated in advance, such that alternative, multiple, and potentially conflicting ways of living proliferate.

It is not difficult to see how the pressure toward obedience in the face of and conformity with prevailing modes of thought and existence that characterizes modern Western societies poses a major obstacle to the kind of ethico-political engagement Foucault aims to practice and encourage. Normalizing societies hone persons' ability to effectively, efficiently, and obediently reproduce what already exists. In doing so, they simultaneously (and just as effectively) inhibit thinking and perceiving differently; cultivation of critical and creative capacities; and identification and countering of, and development of alternatives to, normalizing norms, institutions, and practices. To the extent that they produce conformity and obedience, such societies risk deteriorating into states of domination—static conditions of inequality where the substance of persons' lives (especially those who do not for whatever reason to adhere to prevailing norms) is simply dictated to them.

As I have described it here, Foucauldian genealogy clearly reflects Nietzsche's influence. Even in his early work, Nietzsche endeavors to elucidate the historical nature and harmful effects (in the sense of promoting *ressentiment* or *decadence*) of concepts, categories, principles, and practices that are considered to be not only fundamental but also valuable and emancipatory (in the sense of promoting moral and intellectual progress) aspects of the modern West. In his essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," for example, Nietzsche illustrates that a preoccupation with the truth as well as, and more fundamentally, the concept of truth itself, emerges at a particular point in history—specifically, at the point where human beings undertake to live together in communities. "[F]rom boredom and necessity," Nietzsche

²⁷ Foucault, Introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II: *The Use of Pleasure*, 8.

²⁸ Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual." I am referring here to the version of this interview, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual. An Interview with Michel Foucault by Michael Bess, November 3, 1980," that is housed in the IMEC Archive (folder number FCL2. A02-06). The interview is also available in *History of the Present* 4 (Spring 1988) and online at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/michaelbess/Foucault%20Interview>.

writes, "man wishes to exist socially and with the herd."²⁹ This move toward organized sociality marks 'the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive ... what counts as "truth" from now on is established.'³⁰ Moreover, just as he does in *On the Genealogy of Morals* with the concept of morality, Nietzsche shows that the concept of truth, largely accepted as necessary for the purposes of both making sense of and improving the world, is not only grounded in but also produces detrimental effects. Truth and the desire for it stem from the negative emotion of fear (specifically fear of uncertainty), and in turn reduce a complex, uncertain, unpredictable reality to what we already know, even if that known reality is itself negative in the sense that it lacks value and meaning. Put differently, Nietzsche's work reveals that what persons in fact know and engage is not the world in which we live, but rather the meaning-making systems that we have imposed upon the world.³¹ Obviously, fear of uncertainty and attachment to what believe we already know greatly hinders persons' ability to critically analyze existing meaning-making systems and, therefore, to identify, analyze, and counter harmful practices.

Having employed genealogy in order to critique prevailing modes of thought and existence, and thus also to illustrate the need for development of and experimentation with new such modes, Foucault engages in precisely this kind of development and experimentation in his later work: he formulates a philosophical mode of existence—a way of living or conducting ourselves in the world. In a move that appears at first paradoxical, Foucault initiates his formulation not through analysis of Nietzsche's work, but of Kant's. This apparent paradox resolves itself, however, when Foucault identifies two philosophical traditions stemming from Kant's work. The first and more readily recognizable, which is concerned with articulating "the conditions under which true knowledge is possible," Foucault refers to as the Kantian critical tradition.³² It is within the second Kantian tradition that Foucault situates both Nietzsche and himself. This tradition stems from Kant's conceptualization of enlightenment, is concerned with the question of the present—the question of "our actuality" and "the present field of possible experiences,"³³ and opens onto (and to some extent engages)³⁴ questions that both Nietzsche and Foucault take up and develop. These questions include, "How have prevailing modes of thought and existence come to be established?," "To what extent are prevailing modes (norms) accepted as necessary?," "What are the effects of both power of prevailing norms and their uncritical acceptance?"

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979), 81.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Nietzsche writes, "If we are forced to comprehend all things only under these forms, then it ceases to be amazing that in all things we actually comprehend nothing but these forms." See "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," 87.

³² Foucault, "What is Revolution?," in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, (New York: Semiotexte, 1997), 99.

³³ Ibid, 100.

³⁴ Foucault and Deleuze both seem to see Kant's work opening onto important philosophical questions and possibilities that Kant does not necessarily explore himself.

Foucault refers to a mode of existence characterized by such critical questioning alternatively as an “ethos,” an “attitude,” an “ontology of ourselves,” and an “ontology of the present.” That the ontology of which Foucault conceives extends beyond a method of philosophical inquiry is apparent in his description of an attitude as a “mode of relating to contemporary reality ... a way of thinking and feeling ... of acting and behaving.”³⁵ Foucault also makes clear that this attitude entails not simply engaging, but more specifically engaging critically, with the present. Insofar as an ontology of the present entails adopting a critical attitude toward contemporary reality, it is implicated in the practice of freedom. This implication is apparent in Foucault’s characterization of an ontology of the present in terms of a “critique of what we are [that] is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us, and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”³⁶ An ontology of the present is a mode of conduct concerned with identifying, analyzing, and challenging the constraints persons face within normalizing societies relative to both their self-relation and their broader relations within the world. It entails questioning prevailing norms and practices, critically engaging the present in ways that yield insight into the workings of existing power relations, and endeavoring to navigate those relations so that new ways of living can be created and explored. It is thus a way of living in the world that resists and in turn facilitates resistance against pressure toward normalization, while also facilitating alternatives to normalizing modes of existence.

II

Several points of intersection may be identified between Deleuze’s and Foucault’s respective appeals to ontology as these appeals express an ethico-political commitment to critiquing prevailing modes of thought and existence and creating (possibilities for) alternatives to those modes. First, Deleuze and Foucault both see pressure toward conformity with prevailing ways of thinking and acting inhibiting the kind of critical and creative capacities that foster innovation and, therefore, possibilities for thinking and living otherwise. This view is apparent in Deleuze’s critique of systems of representation and Foucault’s concern with normalization. Second, even as they critique the tradition of Western philosophy, both thinkers nonetheless identify philosophical resources for countering this pressure toward conformity. Deleuze posits an ontology of difference that undermines the self-ascribed authority of systems of representation to settle questions about the nature of reality and thereby provide certainty about the world in which we live. Foucault conceives of an ontology of the present that facilitates identification and critical analysis of, as well as creation of alternatives to, normalizing modes of thought and existence. Finally, Deleuze’s ontology of difference and Foucault’s ontology of the present are informed by the work of Nietzsche.³⁷ Deleuze draws upon Nie-

³⁵ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 39.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

³⁷ I am not suggesting that in developing their respective ontologies Deleuze and Foucault are influenced merely by Nietzsche – only that he is an important influence. As the Index to *Difference and Repetition* makes clear, Deleuze draws upon the work of a variety of thinkers, including Kant, whose work in fact figures prominently in Foucault’s articulation of an ontology of the present.

tzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence, whereas Foucault is influenced by Nietzschean genealogy.

Despite these similarities, substantive points of departure exist between Deleuze's and Foucault's respective efforts to think the impossible which in turn affect how their respective appeals to ontology function relative to such a philosophical project. Divergent views are apparent, first, in how each philosopher engages the guiding question I have identified. As May points out, Deleuze conceives of the question of how one might live in very broad terms, where even notions of what it means to "live" and the "one" doing this living are intentionally left open.³⁸ As presented in the first section of this essay, Deleuze's work focuses more on giving an account of the conditions from which living and the ones doing it might emerge than on enumerating how living might actually occur or what it might look like within any particular context. Deleuze presents a reality that is less in flux than simply flux itself: all that "exists" is the repetition of difference, which in turn generates a proliferation of dynamic differences that stem from but do not replicate the reality from which they spring. Multiple manifestations of living and who or what is doing it perpetually fold and unfold. Hence, therefore, May's observation that in Deleuze's hands ontology is not about discovering what is already "out there" waiting to be found, it is about creating something new.³⁹

Foucault's engagement with the question of thinking and seeing differently, and his articulation of an ontology of the present this engagement facilitates, make clear that he is concerned with how human freedom can be maximized within the context of human existence. He perceives human beings as the ones who are actively challenging what is presented to us as natural and necessary and striving to create alternatives. "[O]ne of the meanings of human existence—the source of human freedom," Foucault asserts, "is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile. No aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us."⁴⁰ It is also clear, insofar as normalization and, therefore, efforts to counter it, are specifically modern phenomena, that Foucault's ontology of the present is concerned with maximizing human freedom within a particular socio-historical context.

Deleuze's and Foucault's different ways of engaging these guiding questions point to divergent attitudes concerning whether and to what extent history might figure within a philosophical project of thinking the impossible. Neither the critical aspects of Deleuze's work nor the ontology of difference he develops are historically specific. In contrast, Foucault critiques modern norms, practices, and institutions that gave rise to and in turn reproduce the specifically modern forms of power within which we currently find ourselves embedded, the normalizing effects of which Foucault aims to counter. Moreover, for Deleuze, history simply

³⁸ See May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction*.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴⁰ Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual." While it illustrates that Foucault is specifically concerned with countering normalization and promoting freedom within the context of human existence, this statement also shows that he does not situate ideas about what it means to be human outside of the realm of critical interrogation. Indeed, Foucault's critique of the human sciences as well as his genealogy of the modern Western subject indicate the degree to which he sees traditional notions of humanness being implicated in the proliferation of normalizing power relations.

provides a context for making sense of, but itself neither facilitates nor delimits, transformation. Foucault, however, associates ahistorical claims with normalization; for him, historical analysis facilitates identification of possibilities for transformation. In what follows, I shall examine this second point of divergence concerning the question of whether appeals to history inhibit or enhance efforts to think the impossible in more detail. In doing so I hope to show that although Deleuze and Foucault part company on this issue, the tension between their two viewpoints is a productive one that ultimately facilitates the critical and creative philosophical practice that characterizes thinking the impossible.

III

From a Foucauldian perspective, the extent to which the ahistorical nature of Deleuze's ontology of difference inhibits thinking the impossible hinges in part on whether Deleuze deploys or invokes ontology—whether, that is, he uses the concept strategically in order to “[open up] new avenues for living” or actually aims to offer an account of what is.⁴¹ As I read *Difference and Repetition*, it is not completely clear whether Deleuze simply deploys or in fact invokes ontology. As noted earlier, part of what Deleuze finds objectionable about the philosophy of representation is its unbridled confidence in its own ability to provide a definitive account of the nature of reality, as well as in the account it provides. Positing and promoting adherence to a single way of making sense of the world and the insight it affords clearly settles fundamental philosophical questions. In doing so, such a philosophical approach provides a sense of certainty about the world that inhibits creation and cultivation of new and unexpected modes of living. Given his critique, it is possible to see Deleuze appealing to ontology solely for the purpose of unsettling ways of perceiving and hence navigating the world that have been uncritically accepted and thereby facilitating the proliferation of difference. On this reading, Deleuze is not concerned with giving an account of what is, as any such account would be called into question along with everything else by way of the continual repetition of difference. His appeal to ontology would then function simply as one more line of flight.

At the same time, Deleuze does appear to give an account of the nature of reality. This account is ahistorical: Deleuze does not assert that “difference is behind everything, but behind difference there is nothing” specifically within the context of, for example, modern Western societies.⁴² He simply describes the nature of reality in this way. Even if it is impossible to know whether difference will in fact be cultivated, what that cultivation will look like, and what its effects will be, Deleuze's appeal to ontology presents the conditions under which difference *may be* cultivated as an aspect of “what is.”⁴³ In other words, and this is the crucial point, whether difference is in fact cultivated or not within any particular socio-historical context, it is always the case that it could have been, can be, or will be able to be. In articulating

⁴¹ May, personal communication, July 2012.

⁴² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 57.

⁴³ In presenting difference as an ahistorical ground and thereby securing the conditions for the possibility of differences, Deleuze might appear to be invoking *difference* as some kind of transcendental realm. Paul Patton argues, however, that this is not the case. Deleuze, he contends, posits a “transcendental empiricism” wherein “differential conditions . . . must be understood as transcendental but entirely immanent to real experience.” See Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40

his ontology of difference, Deleuze thus appears to understand the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental, differences and difference, as being analogous to the relationship he posits between the actual and the virtual.⁴⁴ Insofar as the actualization of difference as differences is never fully captured or realized in those differences, difference can be seen to function, as Patton puts it, as a “pure reserve” that provides “the *guarantee* of an open future.”⁴⁵ On this reading, to the extent that Deleuze’s ontology of difference settles questions regarding possibilities for the proliferation of differences—to the extent that, as May puts it, ontology is for Deleuze “the very route one *must* take” in order to “adequately” pose the question of how one might live—it is an ontology that provides a level of certainty about the nature of reality which inhibits to at least some degree precisely that proliferation itself.⁴⁶

From a Foucauldian perspective, ahistorical assurances of an “open future”—assurances, that is, not of transformation itself but of the conditions for its actualization—undermine the very ethico-political commitment to critique and creativity they aim to secure. (The same can be said about the desire for such assurances). For this reason, Foucault provides no guarantees, and his sustained philosophical perspective is critical of the desire for them. While some of his readers have suggested that he cannot provide guarantees because his work lacks the necessary normative foundations, on my view Foucault intentionally refuses to articulate what he refers to as “blueprints for change.” From his perspective, any enterprise that presumes to tell others what to do, and which in doing so exacerbates the existing desire in the modern West to be directed in one’s actions—which, in other words, exacerbates existing tendencies toward conformity and obedience—reinforces normalization and is thus counter to the practice of freedom. “There’s a terrible game here,” Foucault asserts, ‘a game which conceals a trap, in which the intellectuals tend to say what is good, and people ask nothing better than to be told what is good—and it would be better if they started yelling, “How bad it is!”’⁴⁷ Foucault does not perceive mere rejection in such vehement criticism. Rather, it constitutes *refusal*—specifically, refusal to uncritically accept prevailing modes of thought and existence—the first of three practices that together I see characterizing the “work” of freedom as Foucault conceives of it. Along with curiosity (“the need to analyze and to know”) and innovation (“seek[ing] out in our reflection those things that have never been thought or imagined,”) refusal (re)creates conditions for the possibility of openness, which are always socio-historically specific and therefore can never be definitively defined or secured.⁴⁸ Foucault’s genealogies, the insight he draws from them, and reality as he perceives it, are radically historical; analyzing the past elucidates how we have come to be where we presently are and, therefore, the fact that things can be different within the context of a dynamic present that opens onto an uncertain future. Claims to have identified (or to be able to identify) as well as the desire for ahistorical guarantees of settledness and certainty within such a framework are

⁴⁴ See for example Deleuze’s account of the relationship between the virtual and the actual in Part IV of *Difference and Repetition*.

⁴⁵ Patton, *Deleuze and the Political*, 27; my emphasis. Patton is referring here not to difference and differences, but rather to the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental.

⁴⁶ May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction*, 15; my emphasis.

⁴⁷ Foucault, “Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

therefore empty at best. At worst they are normalizing, insofar as they mask the need for and thereby inhibit cultivation of critical and creative capacities that both facilitate and characterize the work of freedom.

Given that its ahistorical character inhibits critique and creativity, invoking a Deleuzian ontology of difference is, from a Foucauldian perspective, incompatible with a philosophical project of thinking the impossible. Likewise, Foucault seems to suggest, or at least he worries, that simply deploying ontology does not get around the problems created by ahistoricity. Foucault expresses this concern, interestingly enough, in a comment about Deleuze and Guattari's reconceptualization of the notion of desire. "Deleuze and Guattari obviously use the notion [of desire] in a completely different way," Foucault observes. "But the problem I have is that I'm not sure if, through this very word, despite its different meaning, we don't run the risk, despite Deleuze and Guattari's intention, of allowing some of the medico-psychological presuppositions ... that were built into desire, in its traditional sense, to be reintroduced."⁴⁹ Foucault seems to see Deleuze and Guattari attempting to deploy but not invoke the concept of desire, as well as to suggest that this deployment runs the risk of inadvertently rearticulating the very normalizing aspects of the concept it is intended to counter. As I see it, his concern relative to deploying an ontology of difference is the same: that doing so retains and thus rearticulates the normalizing ahistoricity, "built into ontology in its traditional sense," that undermines the transformation that deployment is intended to promote. In sum, from a Foucauldian perspective, to the extent that in either invoking or deploying his ontology, Deleuze preserves difference as the ahistorical condition of existence that can guarantee the proliferation of differences and therefore transformation, both approaches rearticulate a will to and promise of certainty that undermines such proliferation. As May observes, for Foucault, "any [ahistorical] approach to the question of being that goes by means of an account of an unchanging, pure nature or essence" is not merely "misguided" but also harmful, precisely because such an account "constrain[s] human behavior to a narrow conformity."⁵⁰

In light of his concerns about the potentially normalizing effects of even an ontology of difference, one might ask why Foucault characterizes his own work in terms of ontology at all. My view is that he uses the term in order to, as suggested earlier, mark a distinction between genealogy as a purely philosophical method of engaging the present critically and creatively, and a broader mode of living that reflects such engagement. Through articulating an ontology of the present, he aims to explore how the critical and creative aspects of genealogy might be actualized as an ethos or philosophical way of life characterized by the proliferation of new ways of thinking and seeing. Foucault is interested in possibilities for cultivating anti-normalizing modes of existence within the context of contemporary reality; he is not interested, in other words, in describing the nature of reality or making claims about "what is." The limited scope of the ontology of the present Foucault articulates is apparent in his essay, "What is Enlightenment?," where he describes it as "partial and local," critical and creative, and pertaining specifically to human existence:

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Gay Science," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011), 385-403.

⁵⁰ May, 15.

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as a attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.⁵¹

IV

Insofar as he sees the critique and creativity which characterize thinking the impossible (whether in terms of genealogy or a mode of living) as historical, it is clear that Foucault locates possibilities for social transformation within history as well. This view, taken at face value, directly opposes Deleuze's. Just as Foucault sees Deleuze's ahistoricity undermining his effort to think the impossible, for Deleuze it is history itself that produces such an effect. Deleuze is quite adamant in his view that history is not a source of transformation. According to Patton, "Deleuze subscribes to a violent anti-historicism," an attitude that becomes clear when one considers the distinction Deleuze draws between history and becoming.⁵²

Deleuze locates the potential for change, and thus for transformation, not within history but within becoming, and he argues that becoming transcends historical limits: history simply accounts for the context of becoming's possibility. "What history grasps in an event," Deleuze asserts, "is the way it's actualized in particular circumstances; the event's becoming is beyond the scope of history. History isn't experimental, it's just the set of more or less negative preconditions that make it possible to experiment with something beyond history."⁵³ As Daniel W. Smith explains, events as Deleuze conceives of them are not reducible to the historical contexts from which they spring; rather, they are unpredictable "eruption[s] of pure becoming" that occur not due to and perhaps precisely in spite of concrete historical conditions.⁵⁴ Deleuze refers to the student protests that took place in May of 1968 as just such an historically transcendent event. The emergence and unfolding of the protests, Deleuze writes, cannot be viewed as part of a "causal chain," the origins and trajectory of which can be traced linearly through time. Rather, May '68 was a "bifurcation, a deviation with respect to laws, an unstable condition which open[ed] onto a new field of the possible."⁵⁵

Insofar as Deleuze conceives of a philosophical project of thinking the impossible in terms of ontology and in opposition to history, how does he view the work of Foucault? Does Deleuze believe, as Gutting does, that Foucault simply and "deliberately eschews philosophy

⁵¹ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 50.

⁵² Paul Patton, "Deleuze's Political Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 199.

⁵³ Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 170.

⁵⁴ Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze and the History of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.

⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "May '68 did not take place," in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina, (New York: Semiotexte, 2007), 233.

for history”?⁵⁶ Does Deleuze believe that Foucault undermines his own efforts to think the impossible by drawing a connection between history and transformation? In addressing these questions it is important to first acknowledge that despite his radical historicism, something akin to a Deleuzian event seems to have held some appeal for Foucault, and that it did so precisely as a source of transformation. One example of this appeal may be found in Foucault’s treatment of the Iranian Revolution.⁵⁷ In his writings on Iran, Foucault marks a distinction similar to that which he sees Kant marking in his analysis of the French Revolution: between the revolution itself, on the one hand, and its effects, on the other. On Foucault’s reading, Kant locates the transformative potential of the revolution not in its own success or failure, but instead in the “revolutionary spirit” (“a wishful participation that borders on enthusiasm”) the revolution inspires in those who witness it.⁵⁸ This revolutionary spirit is a product of, but not reducible to, concrete historical conditions: “it can have no other cause,” Kant writes, “than a moral predisposition in the human race.”⁵⁹ Because the conditions for its actualization are located within humanity and not in fleeting moments within history, Kant sees this revolutionary spirit signifying and thereby offering hope for human advancement—for, in other words, intellectual and moral progress and, therefore, positive social transformation.⁶⁰

Despite readily apparent differences,⁶¹ Foucault’s (initial) interpretation of the Iranian Revolution reflects a key aspect of Kant’s interpretation of its French counterpart.⁶² Foucault sees the Iranian Revolution expressing a “collective will” that, like Kant’s revolutionary spirit, is actualized by but not reducible to concrete historical occurrences.⁶³ Foucault argues that the idea of a collective will has been theorized but never actually observed in the West. He says that he himself always considered the collective will to be “like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter.”⁶⁴ And yet, he contends, the Iranian Revolution in fact “brought out ... an absolutely collective will” —this collective will, according to Foucault, “has ... erupt-

⁵⁶ Gutting, 202.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Chloë Taylor for encouraging me to think about instances in which Foucault appears to identify sources of transformation and therefore freedom essentially or partially outside of power relations (and therefore of history). She points to his analyses of Herculine Barbin and Pierre Rivere as two additional examples of such identification.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, “The Philosophy Faculty versus the Faculty of Law,” in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary Gregor (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 153.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Such differences include the fact that Foucault situates the Iranian Revolution within its particular socio-historical context, contrasting it to other revolutions (including the French), and marking distinctions between Western and Islamic religion, culture, and politics. Also, Foucault sees the collective will as a manifestation of the Iranian people and Revolution in general, not merely of the Revolution’s spectators.

⁶² Foucault’s initial, optimistic interpretation of events in Iran was obviously in error and he later revised his views. For an informative and concise analysis of Foucault’s writings on Iran see Richard Lynch, “Review of Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*,” *Foucault Studies* 4 (February 2007): 169-176 .

⁶³ Michel Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,” in Appendix to Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 252.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 253.

ed into history.”⁶⁵ It is not clear, at least not to me, from whence Foucault sees the collective will erupting. Since it has appeared in history, the collective will clearly differs from God and the soul. Moreover, the distinction Foucault draws between Kant’s critical and enlightenment projects, his identification of his own work with the latter, as well as his critique of modern Western subjectivity, make clear that Foucault would not locate the collective will in some inherent human predisposition. The fact that the collective will *erupts into* history, however, suggests that, like a Deleuzian event, it is a phenomenon for which history cannot (at least not fully) account. Moreover, like May ’68 for Deleuze and the French Revolution for Kant, the Iranian Revolution for Foucault is a hopeful sign of positive social transformation. Specific manifestations of this transformation include the Shah’s overthrow and the potential for an Islamic government; a more general manifestation takes the form of a movement that “would allow the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life”—a movement, in other words, that facilitates the emergence of what Foucault refers to as “political spirituality.”⁶⁶ Foucault’s view of the Iranian Revolution thus parallels in important ways Deleuze’s view of May ’68 as an eruption of pure becoming that is not reducible to historical conditions.

A second source of insight into whether Deleuze believes that the relationship Foucault posits between transformation and history undermines his efforts to think the impossible are Deleuze’s own comments on Foucault’s relationship to history. Deleuze overtly states that Foucault’s appeal to history is not at odds with the aims and objectives not only of philosophy, but of a philosophy concerned with thinking the impossible. While he acknowledges that history was “certainly part of [Foucault’s] method,” Deleuze nonetheless believes that “Foucault never became a historian”:

Foucault’s a philosopher who invents a completely different relation to history than what you find in philosophers of history. History, according to Foucault, circumscribes us and sets limits, it doesn’t determine what we are, but what we’re in the process of differing from; it doesn’t fix our identity, but disperses it into our essential otherness ... History, in short, is what separates us from ourselves and what we have to go through and beyond in order to think what we are.⁶⁷

Deleuze describes history for Foucault functioning in a manner that is very similar to the way in which the event functions within the context of his own work. He sees Foucault reconceptualizing history in such a way that it does not, as Deleuze believes traditional history does, merely provide a context out of or despite which transformation may occur. For Foucault, Deleuze contends, history itself performs this transformative function; it does so by providing the grounds for its own transgression, where transgression is understood in the specifically

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, “What are the Iranians Dreaming About?,” in Appendix to *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 207.

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “Life as a Work of Art,” in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 94-95.

Foucauldian sense of clarifying limits, but doing so precisely so as not to be determined by them.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that both Deleuze and Foucault appeal to the notion of ontology in their respective efforts to think the impossible. I have also shown that Deleuze's ontology of difference and Foucault's ontology of the present differ in significant ways. Indeed, each thinker views a key aspect of the other's ontology (ahistoricity in Foucault's case, historicity in Deleuze's) as undermining or at least failing to facilitate its own critical and creative potential and, therefore, as countering rather than facilitating efforts to think the impossible. At the same time, however, we have also seen that Foucault's and Deleuze's positions in this regard are not absolute. Foucault appears to locate transformative potential within the notion of a collective will which, while it may not be totally ahistorical, is at least not reducible to concrete historical events; Deleuze believes that Foucault reconceptualizes history in transformative ways.

Pointing to tensions within and between Deleuze's and Foucault's respective efforts to think the impossible is neither to portray their work as merely contradictory nor to suggest that either of them fails in his efforts. Rather, as noted at the outset of this essay, it is precisely these tensions that illustrate the extent to which both Deleuze and Foucault succeed not only in engaging in critical and creative thinking, but also, therefore, in cultivating conditions within which critical and creative modes of living in the world might be fostered. Gutting suggests that Deleuze and Foucault appeal to ontology because, despite their respective critiques of the Western philosophical tradition, both thinkers aim to continue doing philosophy. I concur on this point, with one important caveat: we need to see Deleuze and Foucault not as uncritically reproducing the tradition of Western philosophy but, rather, as rethinking it.

Deleuze and Foucault are committed to precisely the kind of critical and creative work that does not hesitate to turn its own critique back onto itself. So, as I see it, these two thinkers are doing philosophy, but they are also, and perhaps more importantly—for themselves as well as for us today—doing something *with* philosophy. This doing with as opposed to simply doing is reflected in the two epigraphs that begin this essay. In those passages from their work, Deleuze and Foucault express the view that approaching the tradition and history of philosophy differently opens onto the possibility of philosophy itself becoming different—becoming other to itself. As I have shown in this essay, they believe that doing something different with philosophy in turn opens onto possibilities for broader social transformation, the nature of which we cannot predict, but which we can try to shape into something livable.

This commitment to putting philosophy “to the test of contemporary reality”⁶⁸ is perhaps what Deleuze and Foucault hold most in common with Nietzsche, who wanted not merely to reconfigure but to undermine and therefore no longer be bound by prevailing ways of making sense of and living in the world. In ‘How the “Real World” at Last Became a Myth,’ Nietzsche does not merely argue that all of what philosophers have called reality is in fact appearance. Rather, in revealing the emptiness of the concept of reality, Nietzsche shows that

⁶⁸ Ibid, 46.

the concept of appearance lacks meaning as well. He shows that the real/apparent dualism does not help us make sense of the world but rather distances us from the only world we have (the “actual” world), and that we therefore need to devote our critical and creative capacities to developing new ways of making sense. That Deleuze and Foucault share Nietzsche’s commitment and take up his challenge frames the tensions within and between their efforts to think the impossible precisely as evidence that both thinkers still have something important to say to us, provided that we, too, are willing to risk thinking, living, and seeing in new ways.

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