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Foucault's Hegel Thesis: The "Tragic Destiny" of Life and the "Being-There" of Consciousness

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I offer an intellectual-historical reading of Foucault's unpublished master's thesis. In contrast with other recent scholarship on the pre-1961 period of Foucault's career, the purpose of this paper is to grapple with the philosophical content of this thesis on its own terms, distinguishing it as far as possible from his mature work. This allows forgotten concepts to re-emerge in the course of reading the text and for a novel engagement with such neglected facets of Foucault's oeuvre. Indeed, the key concept which I argue emerges from Foucault's early thesis is that of language as the être-la of thought. By closely following Foucault's Husserlian reading of Hegel, and his response to Eugen Fink's paradoxes of phenomenology, it is possible to see how Foucault briefly lands upon a novel kind of scepticism about the reality of history and minds. In the same way, I will also show why Foucault was unable to fully develop or commit to these sceptical positions during this part of his career. The article concludes by briefly suggesting contrasts between my reading of this early text and the way Foucault's oeuvre is more generally understood.

Keywords: French Hegelianism, Jean Hyppolite, early Foucault, Husserl, Eugen Fink

INTRODUCTION[1]

Foucault completed his *diplôme d'études supérieures* under the supervision of the Hegel scholar Jean Hyppolite in 1949, writing a thesis entitled *La Constitution d'un transcendantal dans la Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel.*[2] Until recently, the text of Foucault's thesis was thought lost; however, in 2013 a box containing Foucault's papers, including early

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[1] This paper is adapted from the first chapter of my PhD thesis. See Oliver Roberts-Garratt, "The Philosophy of the Early Foucault (1949-1954)," PhD thesis, Exeter University, 2022.

[2] Michel Foucault, *La Constitution d'un transcendantal dans la Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel* [1949], unpublished text accessed at *Bibliothèque National de France* (BnF, NAF 28803, box 1), hereafter "*LC*" in page citations (my translation).

material from the 1940s and 1950s, was obtained by the *Bibliothèque National de France*.[3] This material includes some versions of the thesis mentioned above, several incomplete drafts, plans, and appendices along with an abstract and an extended bibliography. These papers, which I have recently been able to consult, will form the basis of this paper.[4]

Foucault's thesis puts forward an interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the narrative in which the transcendental conditions of experience come to be imposed by the historical movement of dialectic. As implied by its title, Foucault's thesis implies a reading of Hegel akin to the ones Robert Pippin and others would put forward later.[5] Like Pippin, Foucault reads the *Phenomenology* not as a straightforward repudiation of the Kantian system but as a kind of historization of it. However, Foucault's interests diverge from Pippin's since he is not only concerned with explanations for the possibility of knowledge (*à la* Kant) but also with explanations for the possibility of experience as-such. Thus, the main feature of Foucault's thesis is its use of the Husserlian concept of a genetic phenomenology as an explanation of how the transcendental ego both constitutes experience as a whole at the same time as being constituted by the multiplicity of its experiences. In this essay, I will describe some contextual detail that may illuminate the real-world stakes of this highly-abstract thesis, as well as detailing the steps that Foucault takes in formulating his interpretations of Hegel and Husserl.

However, I am not interested in reconstructing the trajectory of Foucault's intellectual development, a topic that lies outside of the remit of this paper. I do not wish to recapitulate intellectual-historical scholarship that has already been done by Stuart Elden, Elisabetta Basso, Arianna Sforzini, and others.[6] Nor will my approach exactly resemble that of Pierre Macherey or Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod, both of whom have devoted more space to detailed, philosophical readings of Foucault's thesis, viewing it through the lens of Foucault's later ambivalence towards Hegelianism.[7] Although the first part of my paper describes the French Hegelian, post-WWII milieu in which Foucault wrote this text, I hope to direct attention away from a purely contextual or intellectual-historical understanding of Foucault's early work in terms of its continuity. One limitation of focusing on the continuity of Foucault's oeuvre is that it tends to reduce early works to mere historical curiosities. That is, the overemphasis on Foucault's intellectual trajectory risks diminishing unfamiliar aspects of his early work in favour of those parts that resemble more familiar, later writings. This can prevent an appreciation of the novel – or even mutually opposing

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[3] Stuart Elden, "Do We Need a New Biography of Michel Foucault?," *American Book Review* 39:2 (2018): 12.

[4] I have limited myself to the typed version of the thesis, referring to the other papers where they offered clarification. The typed version is labelled incomplete, though from reading it through, it simply seems to have been paginated inconsistently.

[5] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* [1989], (1999), 6.

[6] For example, see Stuart Elden, *The Early Foucault* (2021); Elisabetta Basso "Foucault's Critique of the Human Sciences in the 1950s: Between Psychology and Philosophy," *Theory Culture & Society* 40:1-2 (2020), 71-90; Elisabetta Basso, *Young Foucault. The Lille Manuscripts on Psychopathology, Phenomenology, and Anthropology, 1952–1955* (2022); and Arianna Sforzini, "Foucault and the History of Anthropology: Man, before the 'Death of Man'," *Theory, Culture & Society* 40:1-2 (2020), 37-56.

[7] Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod, *La naissance de l'anti-hégélianisme. Louis Althusser et Michel Foucault, lecteurs de Hegel* (2022); Pierre Macherey, "Did Foucault Find a 'Way Out' of Hegel?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 40:1–2 (2023), 19–36.

– positions that Foucault entertained during his career. Thus, I eschew the notion that Foucault's thought is best conceived of in a linear trajectory from early to mature works, so I will avoid engaging in questions of continuity here in order to let the text speak for itself, as far as possible.

My approach to this text therefore permits a further step, that is, to analyse and to work with ideas that Foucault only partially developed himself. To that end, my paper's middle sections deal with the themes of the ineffable and the foundations of philosophy, as Foucault conceives them in this text, so as to elaborate upon what is only half-developed in the text itself. *La Constitution* could be summarily described as attempting to reconcile the fact that there exists something called "philosophy" with the idea that it is pre-conditioned by some other, as-yet-undetermined, state of affairs which is not itself philosophical. What is noteworthy in this text is its sustained engagement with German idealism and phenomenology, particularly Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink – something which is largely absent in other, better known, texts. Here, Foucault's concern with the question of philosophy's outside, or its conditions of possibility, involves an amalgamation of Kantian and Hegelian concepts and terminology, which are also supplemented with ideas borrowed from Husserlian phenomenology. The middle sections of this paper are therefore given over to describing Foucault's use of these.

What I draw out of this text is Foucault's early conception of language as the 'being there' (*être-là*) of consciousness.[8] Briefly, this phrase denotes the idea that consciousness is real only because it is concretised in language (or speech, '*parole*').[9] According to Foucault's thesis, because consciousness is only manifested in particular instances of language, it cannot be defined as an abstract, disembodied collection of cognitions, meanings or norms. In turn, I will try to outline some of the unsaid implications of this position, particularly the questions it raises about the kind of things history and minds are. However, we will also see that Foucault does not follow this position through to its fullest consequences, choosing instead to gloss over the sceptical problems it raises. Rather, in this Hegelian phase, he remained wedded to the concepts of dialectic and historical progress, which prevented him from posing such questions at this point in his intellectual career.

Indeed, within Foucault's formulations on the being-there of language and consciousness, there is a kind of hyper-empiricist scepticism. Such a scepticism reverses the typical post-Kantian procedure of seeking normative foundations for truth claims or otherwise. If, as Foucault claims, consciousness is nothing but the empirically-given being-there of language, then a question poses itself, one which Foucault only superficially recognises in this text. The sceptic is 'he who is doubtful not of what consciousness thinks, but of what consciousness is, the scepticism which fears not the failure to recognise things, but the failure to recognise consciousness everywhere that it expresses itself'.[10] In other words, the question posed is: what possible basis can there be to assert the reality of abstract norms of reasoning that are usually taken to govern consciousness within post-Kantian

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[8] *LC*, 99.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *LC*, 98.

thought? What kind of things are relations (of identity, modality, conditionality, *etcetera*)? If consciousness is real only to the extent that it is manifested concretely in particular instances of language (marks, sounds, gestures, *etcetera*), one might question whether identity, modality, conditionality, quality, *etcetera* are meaningful (transcendentally ideal) categories that reach out to tangible (empirically real) states-of-affairs; or (to speak in Hegelese) whether they are Ideas whose fully-realised content is latent in our immediate experience; or, indeed, whether this is all empty verbiage. As we will show, Foucault inadvertently asks this question without satisfactorily explaining how Kant's categories or Hegel's Ideas are anything more than the sounds and signs that are supposed to mark out their existence. The broader consequence of this scepticism might be to ask what basis our political world-views have in concrete reality: what validity do our interpretive categories of world-history have, such as cause and effect, the notion of influence or progress, the grouping together of discrete phenomena into coherent events such as the French revolution, the Cold war, *etcetera*? If we follow Foucault's reasoning in this text to its undeveloped conclusion, one might critique the reification of such events and ask to what extent history, in its practice and in its material traces, is anything other than words, noises, stuff, the mere being-there of language.

Thus, the first section of this paper will reconstruct the French Hegelian context required to make sense of Foucault's interests during this period. The second will describe how and why Foucault uses Husserlian phenomenology as a supplement to Hegel's philosophy of history. In the following sections, I will show how this Husserlian-Hegelian theoretical marriage generates the scepticism we described above, how Foucault's attempt at resolving it fails, and how this reveals a kind of cosmic arrogance at play within French Hegelianism more generally. Finally, I will reflect on the value of these sceptical problems and suggest some further directions for research regarding their significance for modern political theory and philosophy.

FRENCH HEGELIANISM: IDEOLOGY AND THE INEFFABLE

Foucault's thesis may be understood in the context of French Hegelianism; in particular, the writing of Jean Hyppolite. His comments much later suggest that even if he eventually moved away from Hegelianism, he still regarded Hyppolite's insights as holding a great deal of importance for his own research. After succeeding Hyppolite at the *Collège de France* in 1969, Foucault states:

> to make a real escape from Hegel presupposes an exact appreciation of what it costs to detach ourselves from him. It presupposes a knowledge of how close Hegel has come to us, perhaps insidiously. It presupposes a knowledge of what is still Hegelian in that which allows us to think against Hegel; and an ability to gauge how much our resources

against him are perhaps still a ruse which he is using against us, and at the end of which he is waiting for us, immobile and elsewhere[11]

It is to Jean Hyppolite that Foucault credits these questions and something like an answer to them: 'he tirelessly explored for us and ahead of us, this path by which one gets away from Hegel'.[12] More pertinently, Foucault explains how Hyppolite's reading of Hegel gave rise to a series of impasses which he considered 'the most fundamental problems of our epoch'.[13] These aporias, as Foucault understood them, arise through philosophy's attempts to describe its own limits or even to say what it cannot say:

> it had to take up the singularity of history, the regional rationalities of science, the depth of memory within consciousness – not in order to reduce them but in order to think them […] If philosophy is in this repeated contact with non-philosophy, what is the beginning of philosophy?[14]

Here, one may ask in what sense did Foucault consider these bloodless questions to be 'fundamental' and what answers, if any, was he able to give? If we are to judge the solutions Foucault gave in their fullest light, it would be well to have a grasp of how – or even *if* – he came to grasp these questions in the late 1940s. Others have shown the parallels between the themes which preoccupied Jean Hyppolite and the kinds of analysis of historical structures familiar from Foucault's archaeological period.[15] However, where his later texts offer brief allusions to Hegel, *La Constitution* offers us the most direct insight into how Foucault understood these topics. One would imagine that *La Constitution* says some of what was left unsaid in Foucault's inaugural lecture and elsewhere. In his study, Macherey argues that Foucault's comments reveal a fundamental continuity between the masters' thesis and the question of experience as it appears in Foucault's *History of Madness* and later archaeological works. The masters' thesis and the mature works are both seen to pose the question of the reciprocal relationship between how words and things are connected in experience and the historical-conditions of the experiences which license this connection.[16] Yet, it might be more profitable to ask what significance these questions have outside of the endeavour of grasping Foucault's thought for its own sake. That is, what is the political import of these 'fundamental problems'; what does the problem of the ineffable have to do with contemporary politics? One might reasonably have asked this of Foucault in 1969 – but perhaps today also.

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[11] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" [1970], in *Uniting the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader,* ed. Robert Young (1981), 74.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 76.

[14] Ibid., 75.

[15] Giuseppe Bianco, "La Dialectique Bavarde et le Cercle Anthropologique," in *Jean Hyppolite : Entre Structure et Existence,* ed. Guiseppe Bianco (2013), 119, 122-125.

[16] Macherey, 25.

The answer given by various intellectual historians seems to be that for the French Hegelians (and by extension Foucault) in 1949, the theme of immediate experience was connected in some way to the recent world-wars and to the rise of communism. That is, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* offered the conceptual tools to understand the process, or dialectic, which leads from immediate experience to ideological/political tyranny. For Jean Hyppolite in particular, Hegel's text describes the fundamental instability of an individual's pre-linguistic experience; its tendency to morph into oppressive thought-forms in the course of its linguistic mediation. Thus, according to Michael C. Roth, Hyppolite's earlier thought (of the 1930s and 40s) foregrounds the concreteness of what seems purely formal in Hegel's writing: progress and freedom are shown as the products of conflict, war, and death, in other words.[17] Similarly, Vincent Descombes claims this period in French intellectual history is centred around a concrete understanding of the Hegelian concept of negativity. For example, Alexandre Kojève's 'terrorist conception of history' is centred around the risk inherent to philosophy: that of conjuring the universality of an idea (or ideology) at the expense of the immediacy of individual human consciousness, a process correlated with political tyranny.[18] John Heckman also points out that for the generation of scholars who preceded Foucault, the interpretation of Hegel was paramount for understanding the rise of communism as a political force in the world. Hyppolite's 'phenomenological analysis of the negativity of actual conditions' led to an ambivalence towards Marxism and to a rejection of the 'strongly fatalistic, and therefore theological overtones' that were expressed in certain interpretations of Marx and Hegel (e.g., those of Brice Parain and Georges Bataille) but also in the real-world behaviour of the *Parti Communiste Français* and events in Stalinist Russia.[19] Put otherwise, the French Hegelians before WWII seem to have understood ineffable experience as part of a historical dialectic in which the immediacy of individual experience is pitted against its own mediation in collective morality, political ideology, and resultant forms of tyranny. For the young Foucault, the constitution of a transcendental in Hegel's philosophy might therefore be related to the same topics. Yet, as we will see, Foucault's way of articulating these concerns (death, negativity, and ideology) in his masters' thesis is completely abstracted from any obvious political context.

The end of the second world war precipitated a new question of how to make sense of the horror of the war and the state bureaucracies that enabled it. Here, Martin Heidegger's "Letter on 'Humanism'" is taken by many to account for the nascent antihumanism of the late 1940s among the French Hegelians.[20] Roth summarises what was at stake both for philosophy and for humanity according to the French Hegelians: 'What counts as history for the Hegelian will be all actions that *do* connect historicity and history, the individual

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[17] Michael C. Roth, *Knowing and History* (1988), 24.

[18] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (1998), 14.

[19] John Heckman, "Introduction," in Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* [1949] (2000), xxx.

[20] Leonard Lawlor, "Translator's Preface" in Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence* [1953] (1997), ix; Roth, *Knowing and History,* 58-60.

and the whole. Establishing the connection *for us* however, will be a task laden with great moral and political risks for the philosopher writing in the 1940's'.[21] Reading *Genesis and Structure,* Roth understands Hyppolite as presenting the theoretical aspect of political terror and as de-emphasising the role of human agency: 'if we are able to understand our past by virtue of a logic (some structure that this past necessarily fits into) our major philosophical problems will be concerned not with the content of the historical but with the form and power of this structure.'[22] In other words, history begins to appear inhuman and absolute. The driving force of history is no longer human agency but an impersonal logic that works through the human. For the atheistic humanism of the '30s and early '40s, the question is how to make sense of human autonomy if history is no more than a function of inhuman processes.[23]

Likewise, Stephanos Geroulanos notes that Heidegger's replacement of 'man' with 'Dasein' prompted Hyppolite to reject an anthropological reading of Hegel in favour of an 'ontology of the human subject'.[24] According to this new perspective in the late 1940s, 'man is assaulted both from within and without – […] reconstructed both as the prey of history's interplay with a self-effacing individuality and as the space of play of the Absolute'.[25] Leonard Lawlor, Gary Gutting and Giuseppe Bianco all draw parallels between Hyppolite's antihumanism in the 1950s and Foucault's mature work. According to all three, the mature Foucault inherited the idea that language displaces human agency but rejected Hyppolite's notion of history as fully-determined in advance by an inhuman, mechanistic 'logic'.[26] For these commentators, the Foucault-Hyppolite link is made by drawing comparisons between Hyppolite's work of the 1950s (especially *Logic and Existence* published in 1953) and Foucault's archaeological period of the 1960s.

Here, however, it is best to limit our reading to Hyppolite's pre-1949 work which Foucault used whilst writing his diploma thesis. Foucault's bibliography mentions Hyppolite's *Genesis and Structure* from 1946, as well as two papers on Hegel's Jena period from the mid-1930s.[27] Of particular interest is Foucault's frequent reference to the 'tragic destiny'[28] of human consciousness, a theme echoed from *Genesis and Structure.* Geroulanos summarises that, in contrast to later work, Hyppolite's philosophy of the forties is tragic in the sense that history pays no heed to the particularity of individual human experiences; the tragedy being that their individuality is condemned from the outset to be

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[21] Roth, *Knowing and History,* 45.

[22] *Ibid.,* 57.

[23] There are good reasons to suspend judgement about the connection Roth and Heckman make between the war, global communism, and the details of Hyppolite's theory of history, though I shall not go into those here.

[24] Stephanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (2010), 300.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Bianco, "La Dialectique Bavarde," 112-113; Lawlor, "Translator's Preface," xiii-xiv; Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible* (2013), 34.

[27] "Bibliography," in *LC.*

[28] *LC,* 57.

forgotten or covered over by recorded history.[29] Only in the later, properly-antihumanist phase of Hyppolite's thinking does an 'ontology of the human subject' explain away the individuality of human experience as the mere product of an inhuman logic of history.[30]

In *Genesis and Structure*, which Foucault's thesis cites, Hyppolite still retains his tragic, rather than antihumanist conception of history. The tragedy unfolding in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the individual's alienation from their own experience in the course of humanity's dialogue with itself, about itself. As Hyppolite writes, 'self-consciousness as reflection signifies the break with life, a break the full tragedy of which will be experienced by unhappy consciousness'.[31] The key characteristic of self-consciousness, according to this reading of Hegel, is that it makes the knower into a mere object of knowledge. Knowledge, as a kind of disembodied thing, takes on cosmic dimensions as it is divorced from any particular human knower and begins to direct human affairs as if from outside. In the same book, Hyppolite applies this interpretation to one of Hegel's examples, the phase of Spirit exemplified historically in Romantic individualism:

> In this visible world where the heart's desire is separated from order, I am incessantly in conflict with myself. *Either* I resign myself to obeying an alien order and live deprived of self-enjoyment, absent from my acts, *or* I violate that order and find myself deprived of the consciousness of my own excellence.[32]

Through this dilemma, the Romantic individual comes to understand the religious notion of a divine law as 'an illusory order' and to replace it with their own, human law; 'the individual must replace it with the order of his heart: the law of the heart must be realised in the world'.[33] However, the liberation of the self through the 'law of the heart' is doomed to fail: 'No sooner is it realised than it escapes the particular heart that gave it life'.[34] The 'tragedy of human action' is that as soon as it becomes self-aware, formalised as law, and thus universalised, it exceeds the agency of any individual human being. This loss of individual agency is what constitutes Hyppolite's tragic philosophy of history. The tragic impetus animating history is the pathos of humanity's self-awareness of its limitations and its hubristic attempts to transcend those limitations and to become free and self-determining.

THE *PROBLÉMTIQUE* OF GERMAN IDEALISM

Here we turn to Foucault's thesis itself. With these readings of the French Hegelians freshly in-mind, one might expect to find Foucault covering the same kinds of topics, i.e., the importance of understanding the second world-war, or the rise of Soviet communism

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[29] Geroulanos, *Atheism*, 300.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure,* 162.

[32] *Ibid.*, 286.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

in terms of the Hegelian dialectic of immediate experience, or similar. What one finds instead is a highly abstract text, little concerned with the lived-significance of recent historical events, focused instead on the paradoxes of a total, systematic history of thought. One finds no references to historical sources or texts apart from figures from the history of philosophy, i.e., Spinoza, Leibniz, Herder, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, *etcetera*; no reference to prisons, hospitals, or asylums; no mention of Stalinist terror, nationalism, or Nazi concentration camps; that is, no contact with philosophy's outside, except in abstraction. Initially, the thesis is oblique to the perspective of political thought, focused as it is only on the reality that there exists philosophy, to phrase it awkwardly. Of course, it may seem curious to make such a comparison between a piece of writing intended for an audience of examiners and other French-Hegelians' writings that were addressed to a wider public. It is natural that Foucault would avoid making this kind of explicit political commentary in an exam designed solely to assess his scholarly abilities. Nevertheless, once we have reached the end of this paper, it will be clearer how Foucault's thesis appears to respond to his elders' concerns. Effectively, it provides an argument for how philosophy – and Hegelianism in particular – can avoid being accused of a spurious neutrality; of pretending to stand both inside and outside of the world it comments upon. Without explicitly saying so, perhaps without even meaning to do so, Foucault will furnish a justification for his elder colleagues' political declarations on the basis of their material embodiment within the real (i.e., pre-philosophical) world. However, we will also see how Foucault's characterisation of the Hegelian dialectic undercuts this justification.

More positively, I hope to draw out some of the unintended consequences of Foucault's argumentation, particularly its scepticism. In particular, Foucault's thesis unwittingly asks us to consider: how can disparate, minor occurrences (or immediate experiences) be gathered together in language, that is, under a name (the French revolution, the third Reich, the cold war), without that name being a falsification of those occurrences, or without distorting our understanding of the processes that bought them about? If the movement from immediate experience to tyranny is a function of language, what is the ontological status of that function in-itself?

La Constitution opens by gesturing towards familiar problems of circularity in the philosophical systems of Kant and his idealist forebears. Namely: how philosophers are to account for the appearance of philosophy in the world, if the world is encompassed, in its entirety, by a philosophical system; what conditions must be met for this endeavour to yield anything meaningful? Foucault's first move is to suggest that philosophical systems do not manifest in abstraction but rather in some given place and time, 'The essential condition of a problematic would therefore be the definition of a transcendental which makes possible a world of historical experiences not effectively realised, but always realisable.'[35] To give a concrete example of our own, even if it had never 'effectively' appeared, a book like Kant's first *Critique* must nonetheless have had an ostensible, 'historical' time in which it could have appeared. Foucault's reference to the possibility of a world makes the phenomenological point that all experiences, philosophical or otherwise, must be an

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[35] *LC*, 3.

experience of something. Thus, using the same example again, the first *Critique* must have had a given 'world' of which it could be the 'historical experience'.

Further, Foucault states that dialogue (such as that between Kant and Schelling, Schelling and Hegel, *etcetera*) is the historical *sine qua non* of the existence of philosophy as-such. Foucault expresses this idea in the form of a task:

> A general problematic [*problématique*] that will determine the conditions by which is possible a history of philosophy – not systematic, but systematising -, depends, thus, on the constitution of a historical transcendental where the real question [*la question effective*] takes the universal and necessary form of a philosophical problem.[36]

To put it otherwise, the German idealists' very acknowledgement of the problem of philosophy's history can only have been possible under certain conditions that they were unable to describe for themselves. The description of these conditions constitutes the *problématique* that Foucault aims to delimit. Here, Foucault describes the *problématique* of German idealism as a set of unstated premises which articulate, at the most basic level, the preconditions for the philosophical problem of German idealism's circularity:

> To show that a problem is possible, one must bring out the necessary foundation of its possibility; in this case it is a matter of showing how the possibility of a circle between a problem and its *problématique* found themselves upon the necessities even of philosophical thought.[37]

Here, then, to define a *problématique* is to question the terms of a philosophical question and its expected answers. The *problématique* of German idealism is articulated in the presumption that history and philosophy can each fully explain how the other is possible. Philosophy tries to ground the possibility of history in the 'universal and necessary form of a philosophical problem'.[38] Conversely, the history of thought tries to ground philosophy in terms of the reality ('*la question effective*') of particular occurrences, such as the datable publication of an author's work or other context. Both perspectives presume that their answers can, in principle, be exhaustive and internally-consistent. German idealism's conjunction of philosophy and history is self-undermining: each term cancels out the other by trying to go one level deeper, as it were.

Once this *problématique* has been mapped out, Foucault proposes a first step towards resolving its central paradox. As he puts it, one unjustly 'prejudges' what philosophy ought to be able to tell us by expecting an answer that will once-and-for-all settle the question of a choice between historical and philosophical modes of human self-awareness.[39] The choice offered is that of between the 'immobility' of a solution and the 'mobility' of a position which acknowledges the circularity of German idealism but does not simply abandon it on that account.[40] Even if the *problématique* of German idealism is a chicken-

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[36] *LC*, 4.
[37] *LC*, 6-7.
[38] *LC*, 4.
[39] *LC*, 6
[40] *LC*, 6

and-egg quandary, it is still a worthwhile exercise to go one level deeper and to 'bring out the necessary foundation of its possibility;' so long as one does not make the error of presuming to have dissolved the relevant problems.[41] To this end, Foucault will try to develop a (Husserlian) phenomenological approach which aims to ground the paradox of German idealism in the solidity of phenomenal experience. Foucault's abstraction from any particular historical occurrences seems to be justified, then, in the idea that one cannot talk about the particularities of history without understanding what one is doing when talking about history in general. Thus, Foucault's phenomenology of language will show how lived-experience is something quite separate from thought or political agency, for only in the concrete traces of language is thought's being-there manifested. But what Foucault will fail to realise is that if thought and experience are divorced, one cannot maintain the Romantic faith in the power of language. The word is no longer a window to the soul, nor a key to the past, nor a vehicle of communion with God; it is simply another inert thing.

Foucault's restatement of the problem (i.e., the philosophy of history vs. the history of philosophy) in phenomenological terms de-emphasises the human experience of history in favour of a description of the structure out of which it *originates*. Concluding his preliminary remarks, Foucault asks three questions which his essay will set out to answer:

1. What are the limits of the field of phenomenological exploration, and to which criteria must experience answer, that would serve as the point of departure for reflection?

2. At which arrival point does this regressive exploration end, and where is the summit of the transcendental realm in which experience is constituted?

3. What are the relationships of this transcendental world with the actuality of the world of experience beginning from which reflection is deployed, and for which it must account?[42]

Contained here is the assumption which Foucault sets out to justify in his introduction, namely, that philosophy has an origin or 'point of departure' that it must start from. The third question here suggests that his approach will not be concerned with conditions of possibility of scientific knowledge *à la* Kant's first *Critique* but with the 'world of experience'. That is, Foucault will give a phenomenological description of the givenness of the world in experience, emphasising this above the search for normative conditions of knowledge claims. Thus, we might anticipate that Foucault's essay will try to locate the original impetus of philosophical thought in the pre-reflective experience of 'the actuality of the world' he mentions in question three. Yet, I will show that in retaining a formalistic/idealist philosophical viewpoint on this question, *La Constitution* is not able to grapple with this 'actuality' in any satisfactory way.

La Constitution superimposes the Husserlian sense of the term 'phenomenology' onto the Hegelian one. Thus, Foucault's 'phenomenology' will not only ground history in phenomenal experience but also in a linear narrative of philosophy's historical emergence *à*

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[41] *LC,* 6-7
[42] *LC,* 13.

la Hegel. Foucault therefore identifies the problem of establishing the critical distance necessary for such an endeavour:

> This first knowledge is the Phenomenology, which is not therefore a pure and simple propaedeutic clarifying the system; it integrates itself with the system because it follows necessarily from the idea of a system; more than a supplementary explication, it is a preliminary difficulty which rears up immediately from the idea of a system.[43]

If phenomenology is to resolve the problem of philosophy's self-consciousness, it cannot be understood as something separate from philosophy but as philosophy's attempt to describe its own historical conditions or zero-degree. The reconciliation of the two perspectives cannot be achieved solely through Hegelian means, since in trying to resolve 'the resistance of the idea of system to experience', the *Phenomenology of Spirit* simply displaces this opposition in such a way as 'to give birth to a perpetual confusion, where [historical] experience is ceaselessly returned to its knowledge, and vice versa'.[44] To put it otherwise, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Science of Logic* are supposed to present two aspects of the same thing: the coming into being of a philosophical self-consciousness. Yet, according to Foucault's argument, an all-encompassing history of philosophical thought cannot at the same time be an exhaustive philosophy of history. Foucault therefore proposes to describe 'the constitution of a transcendental as the milieu of knowledge and mediation of non-knowledge with knowledge'.[45] If Hegel's phenomenology is of any value, it will need to be supplemented by another phenomenology which accounts for the historical genesis of philosophy in different terms again. This other theory poses the existence of an impersonal background, a 'milieu' within which philosophy, but also pre-philosophical experience, can appear as historical events.

Foucault shifts from the Hegelian to the Husserlian lexicon in order to describe this, referring to the distinction between a constituting and a constituted ego. In *Cartesian Meditations*, which Foucault cites in his bibliography, Husserl describes the foundation of phenomenal experience of the ego as originating in a 'cogito': a gathering-together of plural experiences 'manifold cogitata' into a single *"I think"*.[46] The constituted ego manifests itself through, and is thus identical with, each and every phenomenon of which it is conscious. Similarly, in Foucault's thesis, the constituting ego refers to an impersonal and chaotic flux of intuitions that are not initially joined together in any way; this ego 'loses itself in the multiplicity of its experiences'.[47] Conversely, the constituted ego recognises itself as passively 'constituted' in this plurality of experiences. This process is characterised as 'the act of the transcendental ego [*du moi transcendantal*]'.[48] The constituted ego is conditional upon the existence of a world capable of being experienced rather than the

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[43] *LC,* 41.

[44] *LC,* 53.

[45] *LC,* 53.

[46] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* [1931] (1960), 43 (Husserl's emphasis).

[47] *LC,*100.

[48] *LC,* 100.

other way around. For Foucault, then, the history of philosophy is put-together out of a multiplicity of heterogeneous experiences.

On this basis, one can understand Foucault's interest in both Hegel and Husserl. The existence of an impersonal, multifarious world of experiences is what Foucault understands as the necessary condition for the (Hegelian) history of philosophy: it is

> the constituting ego who lose themselves [sic] in the multiplicity of experiences only to find each of themselves, fundamentally, as the totality of experiences. This recognition of the constituting in the constituted is the act of the transcendental ego, and its expression is the Phenomenology of Spirit;49

A grammatical mistake in this sentence seems to indicate (whether by accident or not) the ideas we have already touched upon. The subject of Foucault's sentence is singular ('*le moi constituant*') but the verb is conjugated as plural, 'they […] themselves' ('*se perdent eux-mêmes*'). This error expresses a similar idea to Husserl, namely, that the history of consciousness does not originate in a single experience but in a multiplicity of them. Husserl supplements Hegel, according to *La Constitution*, by showing that the history of (philosophical) consciousness does not have a simple origin. In other words, the history of consciousness cannot appear as the unfolding of a singular event except retrospectively.

THE 'TRAGIC DESTINY' OF LIFE

It is useful to note that Foucault's position is a hodgepodge of Husserl's and Hegel's vocabulary and not quite faithful to the details of either theory. As I will show in this section, the melding of two different phenomenologies generates a tension in Foucault's thesis between the scepticism we sketched above and the more traditional idealism one associates with Hegel.

For Hegel, the history of thought is governed by principles which are immanent to those historical processes and which appear only in them. The history of the mind is the process through which brute-reality comes to be self-aware, and to have some more-or less complete understanding of itself, as 'the True, not only as Substance, but equally as subject'.[50] For Hegel, the world and its history are rational without anything external that causes them to be so. Contrastingly, Husserl's account of the origin of consciousness assumes an ontological separation between the objects and the internal structure of experience. Husserl writes that 'Any "Objective" object, *any object whatever* (even an immanent one), points to a *structure, within the transcendental ego, that is governed by a rule*'.[51] The normative aspect of thought is prior to its givenness in any particular experience: 'the systematic *unfolding of the all-embracing Apriori*' is 'innate in the essence of a transcendental subjectivity'.[52] If the objects of experience imply the rule-governed activity of a knowing subjectivity, that is because they are distinct from the activity of knowing; they point to it,

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[49] *LC,* 100.

[50] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] trans A.V. Miller (1977) Section 17, 10.

[51] Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 53, (<90>).

[52] *Ibid.*, 155, (<181>).

but they are not identical with it. In insisting on this separation of knowledge from known, Husserl inserts a distinction into his version of phenomenology that Hegel was intent upon dissolving. By conflating the positions of Husserl and Hegel, Foucault's thesis opens up the possibility of philosophical scepticism about the reality of minds, consciousness, and history as a continuous process – and closes it down at the same time. In Husserl's vacillation there is room for scepticism, one which would differentiate our truth (experience as rule-governed) from the truth, inaccessible as it may be. For Hegel, however, this separation is unacceptable. *La Constitution* puts forward its own position, therefore, that is not exactly faithful to Hegel nor to Husserl.

La Constitution puts this hodgepodge concept of the transcendental milieu to work by arguing that a persistent theme of Hegel's writing is the conflict between 'life' and 'destiny'.[53] The Frankfurt writings introduce the idea that life, and conscious reflection upon life, are at once distinct from one another but also necessarily united, 'a spirit [*esprit*] that opposes itself to the abstract multiplicity of living things.'[54] This produces an antagonism between minds and bodies, a 'separation that opposes me to myself, even unto war against myself'.[55] The vital thing to observe here is the mutual dependence of opposing terms that should cancel each other out: thought is materially dependent on non-thought; conscious beings must have some form of engagement with their own reality as living organisms. This gives rise to the theme of a 'tragic destiny' in which the simultaneous disjunction and conjunction of thought with life condemns human consciousness to perpetual inner conflict.[56]

According to Foucault, this theme carries over into the *Phenomenology of Spirit:* 'How, in moving from empirical experiences as the reflection on myself where one becomes conscious of a destiny, to reach a transcendental subject that renders these experiences possible'.[57] In other words, Foucault asks how the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is able to describe the development from the most basic to the most complete forms of consciousness without assuming one perspective over another. The difficulty is not solely a matter of Hegel's mode of exposition but a more concrete problem of how living organisms come to experience themselves as such: 'it is about a subjective circularity […], a difficulty one would call ontological, if this term didn't refer to a sphere of reflection foreign to this discussion.'[58] The relationship between life and historical (tragic) destiny is identical to that of between the body and the mind: one cannot exist without the other; history is only history by virtue of its bodily manifestation. Foucault introduces this idea with an existentialist/phenomenological turn of phrase: life 'is the being-there [*être-là*] of consciousness, its manner of being in the world'.[59] Consciousness is constrained to be embodied; it must have a both a time and a place. Without a body of any kind, it is simply not there. Consciousness cannot exist in pure abstraction as the content of a disembodied mind. Rather,

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[53] *LC*, 57.
[54] *LC*, 55.
[55] *LC*, 57.
[56] *LC*, 57.
[57] *LC*, 58.
[58] *LC*, 59.
[59] *LC*, 59.

it always has the character of being externalised, communicated, or represented and so is always temporal and spatial; consciousness is always something spoken, written or at the very least thought by somebody at some time and in some place. The fundamental, phenomenological characteristic of consciousness, then, is that it is not just *be*, but *be-there*.

From this standpoint, phenomenology approaches the body as the necessary, but not sufficient, condition of the mind and of its history. As Foucault writes, life and conscience are 'effected by a complex relation of partial dependence and partial independence'.[60] Hence, *La Constitution* considers the 'contingency' by which living beings came to be endowed with consciousness.[61] Yet, in this very act, according to Foucault, the contingency is dissolved since it is impossible to think of life, whether sentient or not, without thinking. This idealist philosophical move licenses Foucault's reformulation of the main question of Hegel's *Phenomenology*: 'what is the genetic relation between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject?'[62] The relation of life and destiny is not reciprocal since thought is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of life. That is the sense in which their relation is 'genetic': the transcendental subject generates the empirical subject. Life is not life unless it is consciously grasped as such; although there can be no thought without life, there cannot even be the thought of life without thought. Therefore, to engage with a history of thought is already to grapple with the tragic destiny of life – tragic, because the painful scission of living beings and their self-consciousness is contained in the very fact that life can be conceptualised.

It is for this reason *La Constitution* brings into play the version of Husserl's constituted/constituting ego as described above. For Husserl and Foucault alike, the transcendental is something impersonal, composed of a series of discrete experiences, at the same time as this composition is an act achieved in advance. As we saw, for Foucault, the transcendental ego is constituted by stitching together the series of lived-experiences into a coherent whole. Without the series of moments that it passes through, there is no narrative flow to the history of thought, no material content that could give body to its own internal logic. History has no logic to it if there are no events to which this logic applies: hence, 'constituted' ego. As we have just seen though, for Foucault, to work with the material of these experienced events, their embodied-ness, temporality, spatiality, is already to be lost in thought. If the events of history can appear to follow one another, it is only because they appear against the background in which they are thought as-one. Experiences are woven together by a single thread, namely, that of the transcendental, 'constituting' ego.

However, we do not learn anything from this mere positing of a transcendental ego. By this point, we, as readers, have perhaps long-since formed the impression that *La Constitution* is engaged in a hopelessly circular task: philosophy originates in a history; history originates in experiences; experiences originate in thought; thought originates in a transcendental subjectivity, and so on *ad nauseum*. Foucault tries to summarise his point of view in an abstract included with his thesis in a way that moves us ever-so-slightly forward:

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[60] *LC*, 59.

[61] *LC*, 59-60.

[62] *LC*, 61.

> Considered in its totality knowledge is a transcendental "milieu" in which the constituting subject is the ego [le moi] and the constitutive structure, the concept. The transcendental unity is an "I know"[63]

We may note two things. Firstly, we learn that the stitching-together of discontinuous experiences into a continuous whole is embodied in the mundane act of announcing "I know". Foucault uses the indefinite article 'an' (*'un "Je sais"'*), which suggests that knowledge does not originate prior to any particular experience but only in the everyday act of speaking. To say "I know" is an instance of something commonplace, but this is in fact the crucial point: 'language, it is the speech [*parole*], it is the being-there [*être-là*] of the Spirit'.[64] In the simple, repetitive experience of stating "I know", the transcendental milieu is constituted.

Secondly, we move beyond the mere positing of an act of constitution to the insight that the structure of this act is 'the concept'. What "I" claim to know is always something. If the ego both establishes and expresses itself by uttering "I know something", this implies the existence of a shared vocabulary of concepts and of an addressee. This mutual recognition between living, conscious beings constitutes a condition of the possibility of knowledge in general – no one can be said to know something if others are not also capable of acknowledging it as true. Here, *La Constitution* diverges from Husserl's essentially solipsistic conception of other minds. As Husserl asks, 'What are others, what is the world for me? – constituted phenomena merely something produced in me. Never can I reach the point of ascribing being in the absolute sense to others.'[65] Contrastingly, Foucault's explicit assertion that language is the *sine qua non* of subjective consciousness prevents him from reaching Husserl's conclusion. The question of other minds is redundant if the mind is only manifested in the concrete being-there of language.

This has a further consequence in that the constitution of a transcendental subjectivity is fundamentally linked both to the dialogical and the generative aspects of language for Foucault. One speaks, but always to an addressee, using concepts that are a matter of agreement or disagreement. Consciousness embodies itself in speech, in writing, *etcetera*, yet this is never a mere *fait accompli*. Language multiplies itself, finding 'its negation […] in the following utterance' and it contradicts itself, 'finding its truth in another utterance that denies and overtakes it'.[66] One person speaks, another replies; one person says "yes", the other says "no". The transcendental ego manifests itself in the ongoing contestation of one word by another. In this sense, consciousness and language are only singular things to the extent that one describes them using the singular nouns 'consciousness' and 'language'. In reality, these things multiply and differentiate themselves to infinity in the ongoing fact of speech.

A sceptical question emerges: what sense is there to the idea of minds as distinct entities if they are only manifested in speech? Furthermore, if Hegel (and Foucault) are concerned with the historical unfolding of self-consciousness, this scepticism extends into a doubt

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[63] "Abstract," in *LC*.
[64] *LC*, 99.
[65] Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 52 fn, (<238>).
[66] *LC*, 104.

concerning history itself. If history is only manifested in the discontinuity and the multiplicity of instances of speech, then it is not so much the unfolding of a singular self-consciousness as its disintegration into a formless manifold of nows. History would then only be a real thing in that it is designated by a singular noun. In emphasising the multiplicity, non-identity and non-continuity of its instantiations, the temporal character of self-consciousness begins to appear illusory. Self-consciousness' capacity to gather the past, present, and future together in the form of a singular history is undermined by the concrete, multifarious fact of its own speech. History begins to lose its historical character: the question that arises here is whether the philosopher/historian can gather the numerically distinct 'traces' of the past without appealing to a metaphysical one-ness that is beyond them. It should be obvious that any appeals to normative limits or to Kantian syntheses of the manifold would be question-begging since it is precisely the nature of these limits or syntheses that are in question. If Foucault is to overcome this scepticism here, it will be necessary to show what the "I"'s continuity is in the distinct instances of saying "I know". This would imply showing what it is about past occurrences, whose plural traces historians/philosophers lay claim to, that justifies them in referring to history as the singular object of their enquiry. This question applies just as much to Foucault's own later genealogical 'history of the present' as it does in the Hegel thesis.[67] However, we will see in the following sections that Foucault does not fully acknowledge the implications of this sceptical position, even if he does momentarily recognise its force.

FINK'S PARADOXES AND THE "BEING-THERE" OF THOUGHT

So far, we have seen that Foucault's aim is to find the point in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at which philosophy reaches the threshold of its historical existence: it seeks its own condition of possibility in an origin before which it has no being. Utilising what it calls a phenomenology, *La Constitution* finds that if philosophy has its historical condition in something non-philosophical, that 'something' is the brute fact of language. History and thought are not founded upon language's semantic or even syntactical qualities but, more fundamentally, upon its tangible there-ness. Just now we anticipated a sceptical moment in the argument of *La Constitution*, for if consciousness is nothing but language, what are individual human beings to do with their sense of self or with the idea that they have a history or a reflective autonomy which they realise in the world? Language threatens to mortify thought; the naïve, pre-reflective, language of the mundane menaces philosophy with irrelevance. In the following, we will see that according to Foucault, Hegel's strategy for sidestepping this threat is simply to project philosophy into everything in the guise of the dialectic. Yet, this solution is unsatisfactory since, by doing so, philosophy never really approaches its own history, limits, or conditions (i.e., everything that precedes or evades conscious reflection) but only itself.

With all the foregoing, the problem now changes: the question is no longer how a transcendental ego and its contents mutually condition one another. Rather, a new paradox

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[67] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* [1975] (1991), 31.

emerges. Language, as the only interface between thought and non-thought, oscillates in its status between condition and conditioned. Language is 'but one domain of the field of experience'.[68] Yet, transcendental enquiry, as the expression of philosophy's self-knowledge, must do so in the medium of language:

> The content of the *Phenomenology*, which has guided us to this point, to the constituting ego, returns once more to its point of arrival, in the same form in which it expresses itself: how has philosophy been able to enunciate the knowledge which it finds itself with?[69]

Language is at once the condition of possibility of the transcendental ego, whilst also being conditioned by it as one of its contents. Being at once a mere content of the subjective experience and its condition of possibility, language renders transcendentalism self-defeating, 'if it wants to express itself, the constituting ego must be the opposite of itself'.[70] Language is a subset of what is included in experience, but experience is a subset of what is expressed in language.

The paradox Foucault identifies above echoes those described in Eugen Fink's 1933 essay "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism", which is cited in *La Constitution's* bibliography.[71] To summarise, Fink's paradoxes concern the communicability of phenomenology's insights, given that its methodology demands the direct experience of the phenomenological *epoché* rather than mere communication of its results: 'communication […] has the meaning of a provisional transmission of phenomenological knowledge whose purpose is that of leading the other to the performance of the reduction on his own'.[72] Phenomenology demands the suspension of precisely those mediating norms of reason it seeks to ground in the immediacy of the *epoché*: 'all ontic forms of identity are unable to define "logically" the constitutive identity of the transcendental and human egos'.[73] Thus, Fink and Foucault alike acknowledge the problem of scepticism that any totalising philosophy encounters when faced with its own discourse as an object of enquiry. Philosophy describes the world as if from outside yet only manifests itself inside that same world. Fink's response to the problem is simply to reaffirm the difference between philosophy and the world and to think of phenomenology as a meta-language that is somehow ontologically different from normal language. But this response is obviously insufficient: phenomenology is somehow different from ontic language, but what is the nature of this "somehow"?

Foucault's answer is different to Fink's; nevertheless, he is just as reluctant to accept the consequences of his initial observation. For Foucault, the appearance of philosophy's transcendental presumption results from a mistaken, representational understanding of what language does. Language, according to *La Constitution*, should not be understood as

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[68] *LC,* 90

[69] *LC,* 91

[70] *LC,* 93

[71] "Bibliography," in *LC.*

[72] Eugen Fink "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism" [1933], in *The Phenomenology of Husserl: Selected Critical Reading,* ed. R.O. Elveton (2020), 134.

[73] *Ibid.,* 136.

a doubling of the thing which it is about. There is no mystical relationship between signifier and signified. Thus, to affirm that language is the being-there of consciousness is not equivalent to saying that language replaces or doubles the reality of immediate-experience. In contrast to Fink and Husserl, Foucault posits that there is no such thing as immediate experience that is not already linguistic:

> This liaison of thought to the word must not be envisaged as an incompletion, as an imperfection of thought: the word is nothing but that aspect of thought by which it is a being-there: there are not two things for thought, to be thought and to be a determined existence; the two do nothing but constitute its total reality.[74]

Philosophy's relation to language is not really a relationship at all, since they are two things that are not really distinct from each other. The history of philosophy originates in the fact that all thought is embodied in 'the word'. The relationship between experience and language is that of quasi-identity since the former only exists as embodied by the latter. However, this is only a quasi-identity. The distinction between thought and language is said to be a false one, yet Foucault is constrained to describe two aspects of the same entity: there are 'not two things', and yet 'the two […] constitute its [thought's] total reality.'

In other words, Foucault's solution generates a performative contradiction. If 'the consciousness of self is perfectly adequate to its own language',[75] that is, if language and thought are one thing, why does Foucault find himself forced by that very language to describe two things? Arguably, the point of view Foucault is expressing here encompasses both perspectives, resolving the antithesis of language and experience by showing it to be a false one. However, this *Aufhebung* does not get around the problem inherent in claiming that language and consciousness are 'perfectly adequate' to one another whilst maintaining a distinction in the very same sentence. Rather, what is shown in this analysis is Foucault's refusal – like Fink's – to follow the paradoxes of transcendental thought through to their ultimate conclusions.

Here we touch on the question, once again, of philosophy's relevance. If Hegelian philosophy is in any way relevant to the real world, that is because the young Foucault will force it to be so. If philosophy has a history, that is only because it projects itself into a world that has no intrinsic relation to it, which existed long before it and which can get along just fine without it. The account of Hegel given in *La Constitution* is one in which the distinction between thought and language is denied without fully committing to the idea that they are equivalent. This is because it must leave room for the 'dialectic' and for the projection of reason onto reality.

What does Foucault understand by dialectic, then? In *La Constitution*, dialectic is a process of gathering together distinct instances of self-consciousness, i.e., speech, writing, *etcetera*. The history of thought is not the progressive unfurling of incorporeal abstractions, ready-made and lying-in wait. Rather, it is the process of language's continual self-negation. Foucault writes:

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[74] *LC*, 94.
[75] *LC*, 94.

> At the level of language were revealed two modes of the overtaking of determinations one by another: for one part, we have seen that each utterance [parole] found its truth in another which denied and overtook it; but this "vertical" transcendence was doubled by a "horizontal" transcendence by which each utterance found its negation purely and simply in the following one.[76]

This horizontal and vertical transcendence suggests two things: firstly, that the history of thought contains numerically-distinct instances of speech. As we already saw, Foucault understands history as a transcendental milieu; an impersonal consciousness that manifests through the conduit of the human speech organ in the numerically distinct instances in which one says, "I know". Considered as individual events, determined by their numerical difference, each instance of saying "I know" is discontinuous with what precedes and follows it. One utterance follows from the next in such a way that it is always possible – providing one speaks the language – to discern one word from the next. The duration of each word is bounded either by silence or by another word which it is not: this is the 'horizontal' transcendence of language. The 'vertical' transcendence is the propensity of each utterance to limit the others by negation: "yes" and "no" are not only numerically distinct sounds or signs but mutually exclude one-another; one is a continuation of the other only in the manner of its negation. As Foucault states, this series of negations is precisely where 'transcendental investigation finds itself joined to a pure and simple historical becoming'.[77]

Secondly, the history of thought can only be established on the basis of its remaining corporeal traces. As Foucault puts it, this trace is the word:

> This liaison of thought to the word must not be envisaged as an incompletion, as an imperfection of thought: the word is nothing but that aspect of thought by which it is a being-there [être-là]: there are not two things for thought, to be thought and to be a determined existence; the two do nothing but constitute its total reality'.[78]

The tangibility of history, in the form of what is written, recorded, or otherwise preserved, embodies both the vertical and horizontal order we saw above. The relation of thought to language does not consist of the latter conveying the former's meaning. Rather, the word is embodied, and it finds itself so alongside other words, as one word said after another. Foucault reaffirms this by equating this aspect of language with speech: once again, 'it is language [*langage*], it is speech [*parole*], it is the being-there of the Spirit'.[79] Language does not become meaningful by representing reality to the mind. Rather, language is an autonomous thing (or better, things) in no need of human justification, and its function as such is characterised only by the relations between its elements of agreement, disagreement and numerical differentiation.

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[76] *LC,* 104.

[77] *LC,* 104.

[78] *LC,* 94.

[79] *LC,* 99.

The history of thought comes about through a process, and that process is the Hegelian dialectic, in which the discontinuity of language finds its continuity. That is, despite inviting certain comparisons, *La Constitution* contrasts with the later, archaeological phase and its emphasis on historical and linguistic discontinuity. Here, Foucault implicitly assumes that speech, as the historical trace of thought, is inherently related to other speech, and that Hegelian dialectic is composed out of discreet instances of speech. Much as the transcendental milieu is composed out of distinct cases of the utterance "I think", dialectic is also articulated in a similar way. Foucault argues that dialectic is embodied as an entity in its own right:

> language is itself dialectic, or rather it is the dialectic, since the dialectic is this negative movement of which consciousness, in the immediate, recognises its prey, but which is nothing more at bottom but the activity of the consciousness itself, than the dialectic [which] knows nothing in reality but language.[80]

The difference, then, between transcendental subjectivity as "I think" and as dialectic is that difference between the definite and indefinite article. There are many instances of "I think"; there is only one dialectic, 'the' dialectic. Nonetheless, Foucault stresses that dialectic is also something embodied. If the dialectic were incorporeal or atemporal, it would represent an absurdity: 'if the dialectic were posed as a determining principle of the real from the start: this would be to admit the worst kind of apriorism'.[81] The dialectic cannot simply be posed without explanation as the motor of history; instead, it must find its basis in the corporeal reality of language. For this reason, the dialectic ought to be derived empirically since it is more or less identical with something in the physical world. This "more-or-less" is significant: the dialectic cannot exist prior to words, as it is only identifiable in language; yet it is not identical with any one of these words, either.

The dialectic's ontological dependence on the plurality of speech is contrasted by the singularity of its synthesizing role. Foucault writes that the dialectic will not be 'enclosed in the real nor idealised in empty thought, it will be the proper nature, the veritable determination of the understanding'.[82] Thus, it is embodied in language but is not quite identical with this embodiment; it is not 'empty' abstraction, yet it predicates to something other than itself its 'proper nature'. Dialectic is characterised not as an object or attribute but as a process: again, 'the negative movement by which consciousness, in the immediate, recognises its prey'.[83] The dialectic is in language, but it is not language; it is what incorporates each *parole* into the next. In this sense, despite what we just mentioned concerning the discontinuity of the history of thought, *La Constitution* undoes this by its definition of dialectic. The history of thought is incarnated in words – words which negate and contradict each other, which are not continuous with one another, yes; but as their unbroken thread, the dialectic once again binds each scribble and each sound to what it is

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[80] *LC*, 100.
[81] *LC*, 101.
[82] *LC*, 101.
[83] *LC*, 100.

not. Philosophy liberates what precedes it in language only to corral it once more within the dialectic.

Foucault's Hegel thesis is still, therefore, trapped in the 'ideological use of history' disparaged in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.[84] There is a world of difference between *La Constitution* and the more explicitly political writings of the other French Hegelians, Existentialists and the rest who were writing in the late 1940s. Nonetheless, what all of these texts have in common is an attempt to make themselves relevant, to make philosophy into the hidden truth that has always been implicit within reality, and, as the *Archaeology* puts it, to 'restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him for over a hundred years.'[85] The mature Foucault never specifies which ideology he is criticising, here, yet there are plenty of reasons to believe that Foucault's later invective can be directed at his own earlier writing, along with that of the French Hegelians, Marxists and Catholics who inhabited that earlier milieu.

PATHOS, DEATH, AND THE MESSIANIC ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

This 'ideological use of history' is well hidden in *La Constitution*. Nevertheless, the attempt to 'restore to man everything that has unceasing eluded him' can be seen in his recuperation of non-human, non-conscious reality within thought. This is exemplified in the relationship *La Constitution* poses between philosophical *versus* everyday language. Pre-reflective speech is supposed to represent the material condition of possibility of philosophy, yet it is revealed in the course of the dialectic that the one is simply the other:

> but there must be acknowledged in the Phenomenology two juxtaposed languages, one which would be the expression of the different experiences of the conscience, and the other which would be the veritable expression these experiences inserted into the totality of experience; it would be necessary to distinguish empirical language of Hegel borrowed from living language and a philosophical language which would borrow from the tradition or forged from its pieces.[86]

Foucault credits this insight to Alexandre Koyré's essay "Note on Hegelian language and terminology". As Russel Ford summarises, Koyré's central claim in this paper is that the difficulty of Hegel's written style is not merely an idiosyncrasy but vital to his method of showing that the entire reality of history is already latent in the ideal movement of language. Where the everyday style of expression represents a pre-reflective naivety, the Hegelian idiom reveals a logic which is not readily discernible in ordinary language.[87] It is the job of (Hegelian) philosophy, then, to restore human consciousness' link to the real world by showing that the real world is already perfectly contained in its ideal form in language.

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[84] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969] (2011), 15.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] *LC*, 96.

[87] Russel Ford, introduction to "Hegel and Kierkegaard," in *Jean Wahl. Transcendence and the Concrete: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore (2017).

As Koyré remarks at the end of his piece, 'the best commentary on Hegel remains, until the arrival of a new order, a good, *historical* German dictionary.'[88] In other words, Koyré understands the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as capturing history through traces that remain of its perpetually shifting self-consciousness. It would be pointless for Hegel to develop a metalanguage (an outside perspective) for this purpose as to do so would travesty the historical reality that is already latent in everyday speech:

> fixing and isolating the diverse significations confounded or reunited by language, sep-
> arating thus philosophical thought from spiritual values and from the life of the spirit
> incarnated in language, it ends up arresting thought; at its atomisation, at its fixation;
> that is to say, at its death.[89]

Philosophy puts itself at the ultimate risk in returning to everyday vocabulary. If it defines a 'univocal and reciprocal relation between a term and its signification',[90] philosophy becomes obsolete as soon as everyday usage changes since this change would be reflective of a change in reality's self-consciousness. Yet if philosophy asserts everyday language as the true discourse of reality upon itself, it renders itself equally redundant. This risk is ameliorated by posing the necessity of a philosophical style of writing which shows what is only latent in the movement of language. The difference between thought and language cannot truly be dissolved: one is in constant need of a philosophy that recuperates the differences into itself. Philosophy is never at risk, because it is always there, in every agreement, disagreement and compromise, whether it is acknowledged or not.

Foucault's thesis has a similar way of reducing philosophy's risk of death. The turn to language leads to scepticism. This moment in the history of thought is exemplified by 'he who is doubtful not of what conscience thinks, but of what conscience is, the scepticism which fears not the failure to recognise things, but the failure to recognise conscience everywhere that it expresses itself'.[91] Philosophical conscience fears the loss of itself once it recognises that it can only express itself in the medium of language. One has access only to language as the embodiment of thought but not to the immediate experience of the thinker. Language embodies thought, but language is somehow not the same as thought. Thus, 'conscience, in language, abandons itself completely in death'.[92] This death must – paradoxically – be endured, if the transcendental subject is to come into being. Language

> Expresses the absolute knowledge and the constituting ego which loses itself in the mul-
> tiplicity of its experiences, only to rediscover itself at the bottom of each of them as the
> totality of these experiences. This recognition of the constituting in the constituted is the

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[88] Alexandre Koyré, "Note sur la langue et la terminologie hegeliennes," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 112 (1931), 439 (my translation ; Koyré's emphasis).
[89] Ibid., 414.
[90] Ibid., 413.
[91] *LC*, 98.
[92] *LC*, 98.

act of the transcendental ego and its expression is the Phenomenology of Spirit; language is thus the ego [le Moi] which is made Word, the Logos of the Spirit [93]

This transformation of the living, individual consciousness into an inanimate object is its tragic fate. And much like the hero of a tragedy, the constituting subject experiences 'pathos'; 'Passion wherein it risks death, and even where it knows death, since at each moment it recognises itself as error'.[94] However, much as Koyré says, the philosopher of absolute knowledge is never really at risk of death. Philosophy projects itself into language as such and raises itself to the level of God, 'the death of a carnal God is never anything but the advent of a spiritual God'.[95] Philosophical consciousness is no longer just consciousness but something heroic; it is not just heroism of regular mortal humanity doomed to its own tragic fate but the messianic (arm-chair) heroism of the human turned God.

We thus begin to recognise something distasteful in the insistence upon philosophy's political relevance. As we mentioned right at the start of this paper, the philosophy of the French Hegelians was, by their own accounts, concerned very much with death in the literal sense. For Kojève, Merleau-Ponty, Hyppolite and the rest, negation was not a mere abstraction but something very real and present; Stalinist purges, Nazi occupation, death-camps and the advent of nuclear warfare all fresh in the mind. Yet, to talk of political relevance here is a ruse as Hegelian philosophy does not so much make sense of history as justify philosophy's own existence on the basis of pointless suffering and violence. Merleau-Ponty's 1947 *Humanism and Terror* does little hide this fact, insisting, as it does, that events in Stalinist Russia parallel the stages of Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and that such ordeals would be a necessary prelude to the realisation of the 'rational state' and to the expansion of 'man's relations to man'.[96] Hyppolite's 1949 *Genesis and Structure* at least limits itself to the French Revolution and ancient Greece in its rehearsal of these kinds of analysis.[97] Foucault's thesis effectively offers a theoretical justification of this idea: if history is encoded in language, and language is dialectical, then history must be dialectical. The role of the philosopher is prophetic, the passage of history is apocalyptic, and the coming of absolute knowledge is a messianic event. To repeat, 'language is thus the ego [*le Moi*] which is made Word, the *Logos* of the Spirit'.[98] But such historical occurrences as wars are surely not reducible to the concatenation of different signifiers; nor, surely, do we credit someone as God simply because they open their mouth to speak.

CONCLUSIONS

Nevertheless, there is something novel and worthy of attention in *La Constitution.* Time and time again in *LC*, Foucault touches on the theme of scepticism yet never allows this scepticism to inform his understanding of history as the place where so-called origins are

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[93] *LC,* 100.

[94] *LC,* 100.

[95] *LC,* 99.

[96] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* [1947] (1998) 67, 102, 150.

[97] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure,* 334-368, 461-462.

[98] *LC,* 100.

found. If the history of thought is nothing but a series of traces, words, sounds, marks, and symbols, then the question of an origin undermines itself: what is an origin, on this model, other than yet another trace?

Such questions would, in turn, problematise a certain use of history that is close to the heart of many Foucauldians today. Many authors interpret the mature Foucault's method of doing history as primarily of ethical importance – I offer only a small sample of two here, but others could certainly be given. For instance, Lynne Huffer claims that we bear an ethical responsibility with respect to the future, and that even the most ancient, pre-human traces of past extinctions and violence indicate what this responsibility is: 'This archival fossilisation of matter opens up the recoiling moment of ethics as a question'.[99] Similarly, Claire Colebrook indicates that Foucault's emphasis on the granularity of archival documentation over the continuity of narrative history offers a 'counter-ethics' to the general post-Kantian philosophy of history, in which the relationality of past and present, individual and society is held paramount.[100] But equally, as *La Constitution* briefly suggests, the accumulation of such evidence (archival, fossil or otherwise) may be a meaningless process, preserving the meaningless traces of a meaningless past; the (re-)constitution of a transcendental milieu from these traces may well reveal nothing more than their own being-there. From the French Hegelians, we learn that the discharge of these ethical duties – if indeed they are such – may lead us equally to misery as to salvation. Yet, we receive no convincing explanation from them, or from Foucault, as to why such processes should be understood dialectically. The value of Foucault's masters' thesis, then, is that it entertains, if only very briefly, very obliquely, this question concerning the meaningfulness of the term "relationality" as an explanation of what words, human experience, and history are/do. One reaches the limits of language, for no answer is capable of transcending its own being-there.

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[99] Lynne Huffer "Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy," *Foucault Studies* 20 (2015), 124-125.
[100] Claire Colebrook, "A Cut in Relationality: Art at the End of the World*," Angelaki* 24:3 (2019), 177-178.

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