

Kai Alhanen

Practices and Thought
in
MICHEL FOUCAULT's
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INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is known as a philosopher of knowledge and power, who has transformed our understanding of what thinking is as well as our ways of studying it. According to Foucault, thinking is not a free activity of autonomous subjects, but is instead directed by practices that shape both the objects of thought and the subjects who think. He also puts into question generalizations concerning human nature and reveals the historical contingency of what readily appear as timeless forms of thought. Because forms of thought emerge gradually and are constantly changing, Foucault maintains that thinking must be studied in terms of multifarious events and processes in history.

To date, scholarship on Foucault's work has chiefly consisted of two projects: on the one hand, to apply his conceptual and methodological innovations to new fields of study and, on the other, to interpret his philosophy from within a post-structuralist or post-phenomenological framework. Some of the most recent studies have also undertaken to clarify the relations between different parts of his oeuvre and to identify the influences underlying his theoretical commitments. Nevertheless, Foucault's philosophy has proved distinctly heterogeneous, and scholars continue to debate what its key presuppositions and aspirations are, as well as the continuities, breaks, and specific concepts it involves.

Arguably, however, the exegetical strand has neglected a central concept in Foucault's philosophy – the concept of practice (*pratique*). The wide variety of interpretations

concerning the nature of Foucault's work is, as I want to show, a consequence of that negligence. Though most interpreters use the term 'practice' in their work, only rarely do they clarify the significance and status of this concept in Foucault's thought. It is symptomatic that until very recently, the dictionaries which set out to catalogue and explain Foucault's terminology have not included an entry for 'practice.'¹ To a large extent, this is no doubt due to the fact that Foucault constantly employs the concept of practice throughout different contexts, but only rarely undertakes to define it.

Even though some commentators have underscored the centrality of the concept of practice in Foucault's work, especially Paul Veyne, John Rajchman, Frédéric Gros, and Thomas R. Flynn, none of them offers a comprehensive philosophical analysis of the topic.² On the other hand, however, a more general interest in the significance of the concept of practice in philosophy through the twentieth century has notably emerged during the past decade. In the context of this connection, Foucault has been referred to as a thinker who developed his philosophy in terms of practices.³ It follows, then, that a more careful analysis of the concept of practice could provide a missing perspective that could further elucidate Foucault's thought. Providing this analysis and perspective is the task of the present book. Building on the work of other scholars, I aim to develop a new, substantive interpretation of the significance and status of the concept of practice in Foucault's thought, proposing that it is precisely through the concept of practice that a unified structure can be recognized in Foucault's otherwise apparently dispersed thought.

I will begin by clarifying how Foucault *uses* the concept of practice at different stages of his career. I do not seek a unified theory of practice in Foucault's work, but, rather, will investigate how he continuously employs the concept of practice to make intelligible the various phenomena he studies through shifts in the topics of his analyses. In other words, I will analyze the significance of the concept of practice in connection with the conceptions of *knowledge*, *power*, and *ethics* that are central to Foucault's philosophy. Only through such an analysis can the significance of the concept of practice to Foucault's thought be adequately explained.

Foucault wrote, lectured, and published enormously, constantly moving from one topic to another while modifying both his views and the concepts he used to articulate them. Yet the concept of practice runs through the various phases of Foucault's oeuvre. Accordingly, by tracing and analyzing this constancy we will come to recognize a continuity running through Foucault's thinking that hitherto has gone almost completely unnoticed. As I will show, Foucault's oeuvre becomes both temporally and methodologically continuous when it is interpreted by relying essentially on the concept of practice. The temporal continuity is manifested by the way in which the concept of practice remains central to Foucault's thought as he extends his investigations to address new themes, questions, and fields of inquiry. The methodological unity in turn arises from the pivotal role of the concept of practice as enabling Foucault to bring the various objects of his investigations – knowledge, power, and ethics – to a common level of analysis. Thus, the use of the concept of practice provides a guiding thread running

through Foucault's thought, whose examination, I want to show, will open a fresh perspective for grasping his other central concepts and, in fact, understanding his entire philosophy.

It is worth recalling, however, that Foucault is often considered, and rightly so, to be an unsystematic, even obscure, thinker, whose philosophical claims, if there are any, need to be painstakingly abstracted from his historical analyses. The fact that he also repeatedly altered some of his central views, as well as repeatedly reinterpreted his former investigations in terms of new concepts, only exacerbates the issues. For these reasons it is indeed challenging to examine Foucault's thought as a whole, and one must carefully reflect on how best to approach his texts.

Foucault acknowledged the deliberately unsystematic nature of his work. He sees no point in building comprehensive conceptual systems but holds instead that the task of a philosopher is to constantly rethink the problems. Neither did he want to treat the topics of his former investigations, or the theoretical positions adopted in them, as constraints on later studies, potentially different in kind. It is, admittedly, sometimes difficult to follow how Foucault's thinking evolves. The task of thinking that involves this constant movement, Foucault describes as follows:

I write a book only because I still don't exactly know what to think about this thing I want so much to think about, so that the book transforms me and transforms what I think. Each book transforms what I was thinking when I was finishing the previous book. I am an experimenter and not a theorist. I call a theorist someone who constructs a general system, either deductive or analytical and applies it to different fields

in a uniform way. That isn't my case. I'm an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before.⁴

Moreover, through his books, Foucault also seeks to transform the experience and thinking of his *readers*. With stylistic means borrowed from literature, he seeks to unsettle what is commonplace in the thinking of his audience. By presenting surprising contrasts between different historical eras, he aspires to question commonplace assumptions regarding the inevitability and progress of historical developments. He makes his readers feel puzzled by revealing how many apparently progressive developments are, in fact, the result of events that are often very different to customary assumptions. For instance, Foucault's studies show that the conception of madness as mental illness, the practice of punishing criminals in a prison, and the aspiration to liberate one's sexuality from repression do not reflect some inevitable trajectory of progress and liberation within Western thought, but are, on the one hand, intrinsically infused with contingent events in the history of thought, and, on the other, manifestations of new ways of exercising power.

Foucault's historical investigations are motivated in part by an ethical concern that is both personal and political. Foucault objects to the way in which the mad, the sick, criminals, and other individuals who deviate from norms are treated in our culture and society, and draws attention to a practice of intensified governing that enforces specific models of normality. He opposes the narrowing of our space of thinking and alerts us to the constant threat of treating as self-evident what are in

fact historically contingent elements within it. Foucault, however, is not a moralist. Instead of seeking to offer universally valid answers he urges his readers to think for themselves and differently to the manner in which they are accustomed.⁵

Despite his self-conscious lack of systematicity, at different stages of his career Foucault nonetheless presented several interpretations of the 'big picture' his work offers. I will approach Foucault's thought with the tools of textual comparison and conceptual analysis: I study his key concepts and more specifically their content, use, and the relations between them. When Foucault's philosophical claims may appear unclear or ambiguous, my analysis will relate them to his concrete historical studies. I do not, however, undertake to assess the validity of Foucault's historical analyses as an instance of historical scholarship.⁶ Rather, I want to show that Foucault's *way of making intelligible his objects of study* can only really be understood as consistent once it is analyzed in terms of the concept of practice. This does not mean, however, that all his views concerning practice form a coherent whole. The consistency is grounded in the vantage point opened up by the concept of practice, which remains the same even when Foucault moves from one topic to another.

Discussion of Foucault's philosophy can be needlessly exacerbated by the attempts of many commentators to imitate his original, wordy, and convoluted style of writing, as well as due to a fairly uncritical attitude towards the concepts he employs and the claims he makes. An especially heavy jargon has emerged in Foucault scholarship, which obfuscates attempts to become acquainted

with his philosophy and to assess its achievements and shortcomings. Wishing to avoid such jargon, I have tried to write with utmost clarity and transparency, yet without succumbing to simplification.

In the First Chapter, I will begin by presenting the key starting points of Foucault's philosophy. To do this, I will approach his work from a vantage point Foucault himself articulated when, toward the end of his career, he retrospectively interpreted his philosophy. Highlighting certain ideas from Foucault's own comments, I will argue that they constitute a core of his thinking that remains in place throughout his heterogeneous oeuvre. Essentially, at the center of Foucault's philosophy is the question of how human beings have become objects of their own thought, or, more specifically, how *practices objectify humans as different kinds of subjects*. Shedding light on this question from different perspectives constitutes the guiding theme of my study.

To grasp the significance of the concept of practice in Foucault's philosophy, we need to identify in which phase of his studies he adopts and employs this concept. While the concept of practice has no important role in Foucault's early investigations, it is in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that he begins to conceptualize his objects of study in terms of practices. Although it is common to date the most important change in Foucault's thought to the 1970s, when he allegedly shifted from archaeology of knowledge to genealogy of power, less attention has been devoted to the shift that takes place in Foucault's thought between *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). And yet there are good reasons to argue, as I will show, that his adoption of the

concept of practice significantly transforms his philosophy and restructures his thought from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* onwards. This concept of practice continues to be elaborated in Foucault's studies as he moves to examine new questions.

In the second chapter, I discuss Foucault's views concerning *discursive practices*. Foucault called *archaeology* the method he developed for the study of scientific discourses. I will follow Foucault's exposition of how the archaeological level distinctive to his studies is identified. Following this, I will examine in greater detail Foucault's views concerning the objectivation and subjectivation which occur in discursive practices, and, finally, discuss the related important methodological ideas concerning the study of the objects and subjects of discourse. This analysis of the concept of practice will also clarify Foucault's views concerning *discursive formations* and *the levels of scientificity of discourse*.

Few scholars have come to grips with the way in which the concept of practice also structures Foucault's views regarding *the limits of knowledge*. I will argue that Foucault's controversial view of the rules that regulate discourse becomes fully intelligible only once it is examined by means of the concept of practice. The limits of knowledge uncovered by archaeological analysis are not transcendental but *contingent* rules of concrete practices in space and time. Further to this, Foucault's ideas concerning the study of *discursive changes* will be clarified through an examination of practices.

In the third chapter, I will investigate Foucault's view of the relations between discursive practices and non-discursive practices. According to Foucault, practices make

up complex functional unities: *apparatus* where human beings are objectified as certain kinds of subjects. The objectivation of subjects is directed by relations of power whose constitution is integral to those very practices. Interpretations of Foucault's analytics of power tend to neglect, however, the distinction between relations of power and governing. Yet it is only by interpreting Foucault's conception of power according to this distinction that can one grasp his views on the nature of power as intentional but not-subjective, resistance as internal to a relation of power, and networks that are made out of power relations. As we will see, it also gives rise to new possibilities for interpreting his famous claims about the *relationship between knowledge and power*.

I will conclude the third chapter by outlining the main points of Foucault's criticisms directed against specific forms of exercising power that have emerged in modernity. Foucault does not object to governing as such, but to one distinctly modern form of governing: *governing that is normalizing* in the sense that through its practices individuals are directed to conform their conduct to certain norms. It is particularly dangerous, Foucault maintains, that in modernity sexuality and related practices of confession have become a core area of this type of governing.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will analyze Foucault's conception of ethics as a practice. Foucault singles out three dimensions of morality: collections of moral codes, moral behavior, and *practices of the self*. These practices consist of different techniques of altering one's relation to oneself, and as such, Foucault argues, they constitute the core of ethics. Foucault views ethics primarily as a

subject's deliberate exercise of freedom. Many critics have conflated Foucault's investigations into ethics in antiquity and his own ethical views. In contrast, I will relate Foucault's ethical views to his historical analyses. In this way, we can see that his ethics do not involve ontological presuppositions regarding a subject's relation to herself, nor regarding one's relations to others, but reveal instead how historically evolving practices lead subjects to constitute *different kinds of relationships* to themselves, others, and communities.

Thus, Foucault's own ethics are not to be sought in his studies of antiquity but, first and foremost, in his reflections regarding the significance that practices of the self may have in the present. Central to Foucault's ethics is his conception of *practices of the self as resistance* and his idea of *'life as a work of art'*. In particular, I will engage with certain readings of Foucault's ethics that, in addition to these ideas, identify its starting point in his notion of *philosophy as a practice of the self*. For, in order to understand Foucault's own ethics one must also take into account his particular relationship to the Enlightenment tradition, as well as his conception of the link between the activities of thinking and of contemporary social or political action. The concept of practice will also prove central to my attempt to elucidate these themes.

While Michel Foucault's philosophy has been widely influential, it is difficult to grasp in its entirety. The premise of this book is that through the concept of practice a new kind of coherence can be perceived in his work.

The focus of the book is the role of practice in the three axes of Foucault's philosophy: knowledge, power and ethics. This provides a deeper understanding of his central philosophical question: "How have humans become objects of their own thought?"

Practices and Thought in Michel Foucault's Philosophy offers a concise introduction to Foucault's main philosophical ideas. It also makes an original contribution to scholarly discussions of his key concepts and their development in his works.

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