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Closet Existentialist: Paul-Michel Foucault's Unexplored Existentialist Leanings

Paul-Michel Foucault, one of the most visible, influential, and difficult philosophers of the 20th century, produced a vast body of work, delving into a broad range of subjects, and influencing modern thought in a number of fields outside of pure philosophy. Although Foucault is generally considered a structuralist in his overall philosophy, a close reading of his first major work, Madness and Civilization, reveals a solidly anti-structuralist bent. In this paper, I will present a brief overview of Foucault's life, his major works, and his major philosophy revealed therein. I will then delve into Madness and Civilization and attempt to illuminate the humanist existentialist elements that I have proposed it contains. Finally, I will offer a few suggestions as to why this philosophical dichotomy exists within Foucault's work.

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers, France in 1936 and received his education from the best schools in the country, completing advanced degrees in both philosophy and psychology. Throughout his life Foucault held numerous professorial positions at major universities in both Europe and America and traveled extensively, giving lectures across the globe (Gutting xi-xii). Foucault's work is incredibly diverse in its subject matter, reflecting his background in psychology and his interest and involvement in social issues and reaching beyond "standard" philosophical questions to deal with such concepts as madness, physical illness, homosexuality, and politics (Kearney 283). He has, at times, been described as a historian of sorts because his inquiry is so often historical in

nature, but he remains “first and foremost a philosopher” who uses history as a tool to trace those lines of thinking that come to make up that which modern scholars recognize as philosophy and to develop and illuminate his own ontology (McHoul and Grace viii).

It is, perhaps, this obvious diversity in both interest and approach that makes Foucault’s work rather difficult to classify, organize, or even fully understand. As Gary Gutting points out in his introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, Foucault’s “writings are typical of a modernist author in their demand for interpretation” (1). Interpretation of Foucault’s work, according to Gutting, means “finding a unifying schema through which we can make overall sense of [his work]” (1). Although, Gutting admits, such categorization of Foucault’s ideas can be dangerous in its potential to distort, it is at the same time necessary (2).

In the majority of discussions of Foucault, two of these categorizations emerge as most typical and most widely accepted. The first is his inclusion in the structuralist tradition. Although many scholars have some trouble labeling Foucault a structuralist—and indeed Foucault himself sporadically complained about being “labeled” in such a way—a general survey of his philosophy reveals a largely structuralist approach. Certainly, as Richard Kearney asserts in Modern Movements in European Philosophy, “Foucault’s use of ‘structuralist’ methods was never what might be described as purist,” however his “multidisciplinary approach” still primarily included just that: a “use of ‘structuralist’ methods” (283). Foucault is most obviously a structuralist in his anti-humanism. Jean-Marie Benoist’s The Structural Revolution points to Foucault’s epistemology as a key force in the promotion of the “death of man” movement. Foucault, he argues, rises up against the popular existentialist viewpoint to “show that the notion of

man as a subject present to himself, an everlasting conscience, is a very recent creation” (18-19). Foucault is avidly anti-humanist in his “conviction that the human subject is itself a limited consciousness subject to laws which are not of his own choice or making. . . . Foucault’s argument is that man’s increasing knowledge of himself does not result in a confirmation of the humanist notion of a transcendently free and creative subject, but in a dismantling of this notion” (Kearney 289). Foucault’s vision is of a new era in which “we find man becoming aware of unconscious structural laws which ultimately predetermine what we had previously deemed to be the free activities of the human consciousness” (289). Naturally, Foucault’s position put him at odds with the existentialist, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre, who was immensely popular at that time. As Paul Strathern points out in his biography Foucault, “. . . Sartre dominated the Parisian intellectual scene and would remain a constant presence almost throughout Foucault’s life: an example and a goad to his aspirations” (17-18).

The second major categorization that emerges in studies of Foucault occurs within his work and separates it into three periods or phases. In the preface to The Foucault Primer, Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace describe these phases stating that, “the first concentrates on the description of discourses or disciplines of knowledge (particularly the human sciences); the second turns to political questions of power and the control of populations through disciplinary (for example, penal) practices; and the third involves some apparently new discovery of a ‘theory of the self’” (viii). As McHoul and Grace go on to point out, however, each of these areas of focus can be found throughout Foucault’s work, whether or not one is emphasized above the others (ix).

It is his aforementioned multidisciplinary approach that often creates an illusion of divided focus, but his deeper purpose remains constant. In the forward to what is generally recognized as his key work, The Order of Things, Foucault lays out this purpose, describes what was and would be his lifelong approach, and dispels any notions of (at least purposeful) wavering:

What I would like to do . . . is to reveal a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature. What was common to the natural history, the economics and the grammar of the classical period was certainly not present to the consciousness of the scientist . . . but unknown to themselves, the naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological. Taking as an example the period covered in this book, I have tried to determine the basis or archaeological system common to a whole series of scientific ‘representations’ or ‘products’ dispersed throughout the natural history, economics, and philosophy of the Classical period (xi).

A brief examination of this monumental work affords a better understanding of Foucault’s version of structuralism, what it shares with the “typical” structuralist approach, and the ways in which it differs from such an approach. Foucault expands on

the philosophy primarily originated by Ferdinand de Saussure and carries it far beyond the area of linguistics. According to Benoist, “Saussure’s seminal idea is that language (‘la langue’) . . . constitutes a self-regulating object of scientific inquiry and forms a system whose intrinsic arrangement lends itself to description” (3). In similar fashion, Foucault proposes a system of overarching knowledge structures, or *epistemes*, that define that which man considers to be truth. As Kearney explains, “An *episteme* represents a general field of knowledge which functions as the ‘historical a priori’ of the given epoch. It serves as a sort of ‘intellectual underground’ which all of the scientific minds of that epoch unconsciously tap or presuppose” (286). Kearney warns that “one would be wrong to think of the episteme of an historical period as merely the sum of its knowledge or the general style of its research. It may be more properly understood as the total configuration of structural relations which regulates the manner in which a multiplicity of scientific discourses emerge, predominate and interact in any period. It is, in short, what ultimately determines what can be said and what cannot be said” (286). Subsequently, these “codes of knowledge” can be rooted out, or decoded, through a study of dominant discourse (284). As previously stated, this is Foucault’s aim and that which he describes as “archaeological” (Order xi). Foucault further defines his purpose, describes his foundational philosophy, and justifies his multidisciplinary approach in The Order of Things, stating that, “It is these [epistemes] which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological” (xi).

Foucault's assertion that epistemes are not constant but change from era to era through "epistemic jumps" is a point of departure from the typical structuralist philosophy which views such structures as constant throughout history. Additionally, Foucault's belief in the cross-disciplinary nature of epistemes is revolutionary. To the traditional structuralist, structures are timeless yet confined to individual fields of inquiry. To Foucault, structures are overarching, spanning all areas of thought, but at once "time-bound" (Flynn 30). This difference is vastly important for two reasons: First, it justifies Foucault's historical and multidisciplinary leanings. Second, it raises a new question, whose answer is vital to the consistency of his overall philosophy. While classical structuralism begs (arguably unanswered) questions concerning the origin of the structures that it proposes, Foucault's vision of shifting structures seems to demand, not only questions of origin, but of the possibility of change agents as well. What is it that is powerful enough to cause these sudden epistemic leaps? It seems that the answer can be found in his first major work, Madness and Civilization. One would assume that Foucault's clearly anti-humanist viewpoint, evident throughout his writings, would never assign such power to man, but, surprisingly (or perhaps not so surprisingly) a deeper reading of this work reveals a decidedly humanist and necessarily anti-structuralist perspective.

Madness and Civilization was first published in 1961, melding Foucault's philosophy with his social consciousness and paving the way for all of his future work. This book puts into practice his concept of archeology (although he had not yet proposed it in print), tracing the history of the idea of madness. The main argument that Foucault lays out in this work is that throughout history the "mad" were accepted as a normal part

of free society until the Age of Reason when a sudden shift took place that forever changed the perception of madness. In order to fully understand the work itself, and in order to fulfill the broader objective laid out in this paper, we must search for the answers to three key questions. First, what caused this sudden shift? Second, who (surprising, perhaps, Foucault does give us a who) caused this sudden shift? Third, why exactly was it initiated?

The first question is the simplest and is typically addressed in any summary/review of the work. According to Foucault, for centuries leprosy was quite common. The leper, he believes, played a key role in society. In his necessary isolation, the leper was symbolic, particularly in a religious sense, to a European society whose every aspect was greatly influenced by religion. He was, Foucault suggests, “a constant manifestation of God, since [he] was a sign both of His anger and of His grace” (Madness 6). This was a strange but important dichotomy. For mankind of the Middle Ages, the concept of God’s wrath in the face of sin was constantly reinforced in his “obvious” visible punishment of the sins of the leper. Surely the non-leprous could not fail to consciously or unconsciously draw comparisons among themselves and these unfortunate outcasts, drawing at least some measure of pride and comfort in the fact that their health denoted an antithetical level of virtue and normalcy. At the same time, this same punishment was evidence that God was, in His grace, still mindful of man—so much so that he bothered to deal with his sin through leprosy (6). Although Foucault does not concentrate too much on the role of religion in society’s view of leprosy, the concept should not be underestimated in its importance as it is later developed extensively in his discussion madness.

Foucault's belief that the decline of leprosy left a gap in the structure of society is clearly consistent with his overall philosophy. His proposal that the mad came to fill this gap is not problematic in structuralist terms. It is an exploration of the second question that begins to raise some red flags. As stated, one would most likely assume that an anti-humanists like Foucault would be unlikely to credit man with the conception of even a minor epistemic shift (if there can even be such a thing) and would certainly never assign him enough power to elicit such a shift as the one with which he is here concerned—a shift significant enough to eventually birth an entire branch of science dear to his own heart. This is, however, exactly what he does. The moment that this shift occurred took place in 1656 with the establishment of the Hopital General in Paris. According to Foucault, this event began a rapid and widespread phenomenon that he refers to as “the great confinement”, during which large numbers of “houses of confinement” were created and “one out of every hundred inhabitants of the city of Paris found themselves confined there, within several months” (38-39). It is within his chapter on this “great confinement” that Foucault begins to use some interesting phrases> In the very first sentence he states that this separation of the mad from society occurred “by a strange act of force” (38). In the next paragraph he asserts that it was “absolute power” making use of “letters de cachet” that directly commissioned this confinement—a fully human “judicial conscience” acting swiftly and purposefully (38). Later Foucault describes the Hopital General as “a strange power that the King establishes between the police and the courts, at the limits of the law: a third order of repression” (40). All the while, Foucault seems to attempt to doggedly cling to his structuralist roots. He pauses occasionally in the midst of his blatant assignation of blame on those in sociological positions of power to rather

weakly insist that “there must have formed, silently and doubtless over the course of many years, a social sensibility, common to European culture, that suddenly began to manifest itself in the second half of the seventeenth century; it was this sensibility that suddenly isolated the category destined to populate the place of confinement” (45). But in the very next sentence he is shifting the blame that he briefly placed on an anthropomorphized “sensibility” back to a fully human agent. “To inhabit the reaches long since abandoned by the leper,” he boldly states, “they *chose* a group”, namely, the mad (45). Although Foucault gives no indication of exactly who “they” are, the very use of the pronoun betrays “their” humanity.

Now recall, if you will, Foucault’s earlier emphasis on religion’s influence on the view of lepers during the Middle Ages. He draws a significant parallel between this influence of religion on perceptions and subsequent treatment of lepers and the influence of religion on perceptions and subsequent treatment of the insane during the Age of Reason. He warns us, “Let us not forget that we are in a Quaker world where God blesses men in the signs of their prosperity” (247). The madman, then, has been found unworthy of blessing and again stands as a foil to the “righteous”, or “normal” members of society. Foucault clearly places a measure of responsibility for the shift in question on Quaker shoulders. He attacks Samuel Tuke, a Quaker reformer who ran an asylum known as the Retreat and whose work with the insane had been widely celebrated, revealing what he believes to be Tuke’s “true” motives as a religious zealot trying to advance his own cause. He sneers, “We must therefore re-evaluate the meanings assigned to Tuke’s work: liberation of the insane, abolition of constraint, constitution of a human milieu—these are only justifications. The real operations were different. In fact Tuke created an asylum

where he substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility; fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience” (247).

The revelation that we have just uncovered, in and of itself, is not entirely new. Clearly, certain scholars of Foucault’s work have picked up on it. In his essay on “Foucault and the History of Madness”, Gutting refers to Foucault’s “view of madness as a variable social construct” (48). Gutting also cites H.C. Eric Medelfort’s “Madness and Civilization in Early Modern Europe: A Reappraisal of Michel Foucault” in which he “presents as Foucault’s fourth basic contention—the ‘invention’ of mental illness by the nineteenth-century reformers” (51). Kearney too states that Foucault outlines the way in which those in power (politicians, scientists, etc.) willfully attempt “to standardize our modes of perception by constructing supposedly ‘objective’ definitions of . . . the insane . . . whose purpose is the maintenance and extension of social control” (291) Despite this recognition, scholars have largely failed to expand upon and fully expose this blatantly humanistic position and the threat that it poses to Foucault’s overall philosophy. How can these two concepts coexist within a single system of thought, let alone a single work? Simply put—they cannot.

As if he is not already in enough philosophical trouble, Foucault goes on to propose a comparatively down-to-earth motivation behind the “great confinement”, giving us the answer to our third question. He reminds us that the “confinement” was kicked off by royal edict and points out the highly practical (and probably economic) advantages that it posed for the government. His quotation of “Colbert’s contemporaries” is telling: “‘Since you have established yourselves as a people, have you not yet

discovered the secret of forcing all the rich to make all the poor work’” (Madness 46)? His sarcasm is almost audible in his insistence that, “Before having the medical meaning we give it, or that at least we like to suppose it has, confinement was required by something quite different from any concern with curing the sick. What made it necessary was an imperative of labor. Our philanthropy prefers to recognize the signs of a benevolence toward sickness where there is only a condemnation of idleness” (46). Additionally, as has been stated already, the (particularly Quaker) religious powers used the mad as they once used the lepers, as proof of the existence of God, His wrath toward sinners, and their obvious righteousness and authority (247).

Now that we have uncovered this distinct contradiction between Foucault’s philosophy and interpretation of social history, one final question arises: why does Foucault, a brilliant scholar, clearly capable of grasping and synthesizing a much broader range of information that I could ever hope to, allow such a gigantic slip to occur in his work? Although it will never be possible to answer this question completely, a glimpse into his personal life may offer some insight. As Strathern reveals, Foucault’s was by no means a “normal” or easy life. He drank heavily, participated in all kinds of sexual experimentation and promiscuity, and eventually contracted AIDS. As a homosexual, as, for a time, a Marxist, as an anti-Sartrean, and as a radical proponent of social reform (1-76), Foucault was always on the fringe. It is obvious he had a subsequent personal affinity for others who shared a similar position and whom he saw as oppressed, such as the mad, women, prisoners, and others (Kearney 283). His sympathy for those that have been labeled “mad” is apparent throughout Madness and Civilization. Madness, he states, “is closer to happiness and truth than reason . . . closer to reason than reason itself . . .”

(14). He continues, “[Wisdom], so inaccessible, so formidable, the Fool, in his innocent idiocy, already possesses. While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it, the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere . . .” (22). Foucault celebrates the work of such famous “madmen” as Holderlin, Artaud, and Neizsche as triumphant bursts of the brilliance of insanity that resist “by their own strength that gigantic moral imprisonment which we are in the habit of calling, doubtless by antiphrasis, the liberation of the insane by Pinel and Tuke” (287). Neitzsche in particular emerged as a philosophical hero for Foucault, despite his existentialism. Strathern suggests that it was, perhaps, exactly Neitzsche’s existential humanist perspective that drew Foucault to him, not philosophically, but personally. Neitzsche’s assurance that “the truth about oneself was not ‘something given, something which we have to discover, [but rather] something we must create ourselves’” was understandably attractive to Foucault, although it represented the exact opposite of his own professed philosophy (22-23). Foucault’s lifelong struggle for acceptance, both for himself and for others like him, bred in him a deep desire for the ability to elicit major social change, a possibility that his structuralist philosophy would not allow for but that his practical personal dreams kept within his sights. It is only natural that these dreams would find their way into his scholarly writings.

The problems with Foucault’s work that have been raised in this paper should by no means detract from his recognition as a brilliant philosopher whose original ideas continue to expand the horizons of thought and inquiry. They should serve instead to remind us that even the most intelligent philosopher is still a human being wrestling with issues common to all mankind and to reemphasize the importance of his quest for Truth.

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