Book Review

Tuomo Tiisala, *Power and Freedom in the Space of Reasons:*
Elaborating Foucault's Pragmatism

Eli B. Lichtenstein

The entanglement of power and freedom is a hallmark claim of Foucault, but also one that has raised no shortage of confusion and criticism. For if the subject's capacities for freedom are in some way constituted and determined by power, it is not clear how Foucault can simultaneously claim that the subject has the potential for self-governing action or rationality; many readers have indeed insisted that the subject theorized by Foucault is instead fully subordinate to power. No doubt, this criticism often rests on a dichotomous view of the relationship between power and freedom, such that the latter is a self-standing capacity whose exercise is predicated on the absence of constraint from the former. To Foucault's defenders, it is often precisely this view which is disputed, while the alternative view purports that capacities for self-determination cannot be discredited simply because they are developed within relations whereby the subject is impacted or constrained by others. Nevertheless, a detailed account of why we should not thus discredit such capacities has yet to be provided, and even Foucault's defenders acknowledge that such an account is not fully developed within Foucault's work itself.[1] In this important book, Tuomo Tiisala turns to pragmatist philosophy of language in order to develop this account and to more satisfactorily explain how freedom as self-governing rationality emerges in conditions of power.

The book articulates the entanglement of power and freedom as the "problem of structural

---

[1] See, for example, Allen 2008.

heteronomy" and interprets it as the defining problem to which Foucault's philosophy responds. As motivated by Tiisala, the problem of structural heteronomy consists in a tension between, on the one hand, a commitment to autonomy as an ethical ideal, and on the other hand, the limits of intelligibility that all concept-users necessarily encounter. The author locates Foucault's most extensive examination of such limits in his archaeology of knowledge, which is the term Foucault used to describe his works of the 1960s that sought to reveal the implicit rules and norms that governed historical systems of thought. By demonstrating the relevance of archaeology to a critical project which aspires to greater autonomy through the identification of obstacles to self-determination, the book makes one of its major scholarly contributions, because other interpretations of this project have failed to explain how archaeology contributes to critique, focusing instead on Foucauldian genealogy or ethics. The book's other major contribution is to develop Foucault's account of the limits of intelligibility by drawing on pragmatist philosophy of language, in order to show how we can plausibly understand such limits in terms of the implicit, non-representational understanding that enables rational reflection. Tiisala argues that these limits serve as vectors for power and constraints on self-determination, but that by becoming conscious of them we can better attain the reflexive self-awareness required for autonomy. Though the problem of structural heteronomy can never be definitively resolved—because we always remain subject to the implicit rules that govern concept-use—Tiisala seeks to show how Foucault's critical project explains how we can still meaningfully pursue an ideal of autonomy specific to the realm of understanding.

The remainder of this review further explores these two contributions, which I take to be the book's most significant. I conclude by briefly motivating a few questions elicited by the application of such a pragmatist interpretive lens to Foucault.

Foucault identified autonomy with a process of transgressing limits constitutive of the self. That these limits constitute us as subjects in the first place indicates that the autonomous capacities we attain will not be metaphysically absolute. Tiisala summarizes Foucault's famous critique of the sovereign subject, which challenges the dominant philosophical view according to which the basis of knowledge and freedom is located in a unified and wholly self-governing form of subjectivity. In Tiisala's own interpretation of this critique, Foucault's archaeological works undercut the purported sovereignty of the subject with reference to *savoir,* while the latter names the implicit or "unthought" system of rules and norms which provides the requisite foundation for representational knowledge. It is thus *savoir* which ultimately "replaces" the sovereign subject as the foundation for knowledge and rationality. Yet if *savoir* plays this humbling role vis-à-vis the subject, reflexive awareness of it ultimately facilitates the achievement of freedom. The structural heteronomy which Tiisala identifies as Foucault's foremost problem can thus be cashed out as the tension between limits to intelligibility which are given in *savoir* and the effort to understand and subsequently surpass such limits. Insofar as the archaeology of knowledge provides Foucault's primary methodological access to *savoir*, then so archaeology will be necessary to a critical project which establishes the possibility of autonomy in the disclosure and critique of the limits which *savoir* contains.

In repeated formulations, Foucault emphasizes that critique consists in a critique of *power*.[2] Critique is thus not merely an epistemological or even ethical project, but one which is also political, insofar as the limitations which critique uncovers are those brought about in contexts of force and strategy. If one might at first worry that Tiisala depoliticizes Foucault by reading the limitations to freedom foremost in primarily epistemic terms of *savoir,* this worry is addressed when Tiisala attempts to demonstrate how *savoir* should simultaneously be interpreted as embodying relations of power. Accordingly, the book explores how the forms of thought enabled by *savoir* in fact inhere in

---

[2] See, for example, Foucault 2007: 47 and Foucault 2000: 236.

social practices and institutions, such that any effort to isolate Foucault's archaeological studies of knowledge from an analysis of power (as is sometimes done, for example, when commentators sharply divide Foucault's archaeological period from his genealogical period) may miss the social grounding and function of *savoir* itself. A system of thought, that is, comprises "what is said *and* what is done" (87, italics added) and thus the constraints operating on the level of *savoir* have a determining, if often unnoticed, effect within institutions, strategies, and habituated practices. I take it that the book's interpretation of the famous concept of power/knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*) is more subtle here than many standard accounts, when it underlines that even this implicit foundation of knowledge is in some way power-laden (thus going beyond the easier and more obvious examples of the power-laden nature of discourses such as psychiatry, criminology, etc.). By underlining that even this implicit foundation is traversed by power, the book further supports its effort to read archaeology as an essential complement to genealogy in Foucault's critical project, insofar as it identifies between the two methodological orientations a shared object of power/knowledge. Where genealogy documents the formation of this object in history, archaeology outlines its very form—a form which serves to limit freedom, and which critique must accordingly engage. If much commentary on Foucault prioritizes the genealogical dimension of critique, then this book makes a persuasive case for the importance of its archaeological dimension, too.

Foucault's call to overcome the "contemporary limits of the necessary" (1997: 313) is a common point of reference in treatments of his account of autonomy, yet the precise nature of such limits remains relatively unclear. Tiisala turns to pragmatist philosophy of language to develop Foucault's conception of *savoir* such that it further elucidates the nature of these limits, and also to explain how the subject can attain autonomy in relation to them. This turn represents the most ambitious dimension of the book, and also that which ultimately raises the most questions.

Beginning with his pragmatist development of the concept of *savoir*, Tiisala dedicates the first

chapter of the book to an overview of Wittgenstein's analysis of the rule regress and Sellars's and

Brandom's related accounts of the relationship between concept-use and the non-representational

preconditions of concept-use. The general pragmatist solution to the rule regress, details of which

Tiisala develops with resources from these three philosophers, consists in the appeal to an implicit

or dispositional form of understanding which provides a foundation of "socially coordinated

dispositions to enact norms" on the basis of which successful rule-following and discursive

cognition becomes possible (8). The stated aim of the chapter is to demonstrate how this solution to

the regress itself generates the problem of structural heteronomy, as it reveals the constitutive

tension between, on the one hand, dependence on such a dispositional understanding and, on the

other hand, the ideal of autonomy *qua* rational control over the norms that inhere in this

understanding. However, in my mind, the more important function of the chapter is to motivate a

model which will in subsequent chapters be used to interpret how *savoir* itself functions as the non-

representational basis of representational knowledge, or *connaissance* (to use Foucault's terminology).

Thus, the key—and in no way insignificant—claim here is that *savoir* enables and constrains

discursive cognition in the same way as those implicit norms and competences to which pragmatist

philosophers appeal in order to resolve the rule regress. Though Tiisala is seeking to *develop*

Foucault's account of *savoir* along such pragmatist lines, the author thus simultaneously makes the

interpretive claim that Foucault already understands the preconditions of discourse in a manner

largely consistent with pragmatism, marshalling as evidence passages that seem to reveal a similar

conception of the implicitness of rules. This interpretation of Foucault's pragmatism receives

perhaps its clearest articulation when Tiisala writes, "[A]lthough Foucault does not mention the

distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how,' his own distinction between *connaissance* and

savoir needs to be drawn in terms of a contrast between representational content, on the one hand,

and a practical ability, on the other…. [W]e can see now that *savoir* must function as the background of dispositional understanding that enables discursive cognition" (61).

As the basic foundation of representational thought, dispositional understanding is also that which limits its scope, for it sets the rules according to which concepts can be used and inferences made. The book develops an account of autonomy in terms of rational control over concepts and inferential patterns, a control which is enabled through the cultivation of an awareness of the implicit norms that govern their use. Here Brandom's conception of "semantic self-consciousness," as complemented by Sellars's own theorization of control over concepts, provides the model for an account of autonomy specific to the realm of understanding. As characterized by Tiisala, "Semantic self-consciousness is achieved by turning implicit norms of dispositional understanding into representations of rules", which may subsequently be subject to assessment and revision (21). This reflexive capacity of assessment and revision enables autonomy insofar as it allows subjects to transform previously unknown constraints on their own thought and action into objects of free and rational decision; it allows subjects to decide for themselves if and how to employ concepts whose use was previously determined by inaccessible norms of dispositional understanding. Tiisala acknowledges that this specific construal of autonomy as reflexive and rational control over concepts is not explicitly avowed or elaborated by Foucault. However, the author claims that Foucault's more general account of autonomy as an activity of self-governing and self-transformation may be compellingly developed with reference to such a pragmatist perspective. In the more developed account, Foucault's critical project thus serves the aim of autonomy by facilitating the attainment of reflexive distance from implicit rules of *savoir,* which may accordingly be submitted to rational and autonomous control. In his famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?"— a repeated point of reference in this book—Foucault states that critique seeks to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking

what we are, do, or think. It … is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (1997: 315-16). By employing the conception of semantic self-consciousness to further "elaborate Foucault's pragmatism," this book provides a clear view on what this work consists in, even if its outcome—as the outcome of autonomous and therefore indeterminate action—cannot be foreseen in advance.

There is much to recommend this book. It makes a strong case for the centrality of archaeology to Foucault's critical project, correcting a scholarly trend that treats genealogy as the sole methodology of critique. It convincingly demonstrates that the problem of structural heteronomy was a persistent object of philosophical concern across Foucault's works, and provides a highly novel elaboration of both the limits his philosophy sought to overcome and the nature of the autonomy that would therein ensue. This elaboration itself rests on an ambitious attempt to bridge philosophical traditions which may otherwise appear to share little common ground. Doing so is undoubtedly instrumental to the success of a more systematic aim of the book, which is to demonstrate to a broader audience why the rejection of an individualist or liberal conception of the subject need not entail a corresponding loss of autonomy; to demonstrate, in other words, how autonomy can indeed emerge from the basis of heteronomy. Though other commentators on Foucault have also tackled the relationship between freedom and power, this book provides a highly novel and lucidly articulated pragmatist strategy of doing so, which thus contributes greatly to the literature on Foucault's critical project and philosophical trajectory.

Of course, the attempt to elaborate a philosophical vision by appeal to some other set of resources risks drifting away from the original vision. The risk may be justifiably undertaken for the potential reward of a more coherent or completed account—which is what I take this book to have achieved. Thus, the questions which I now motivate are less shortcomings of the work itself, than

the index of tensions that an application of Brandomian and Sellarsian pragmatism to Foucault would almost inevitably produce, tensions which may nonetheless deserve further philosophical attention.

These questions foremost involve the appropriateness of reading the Foucauldian conception of autonomy through the Brandomian lens of semantic self-consciousness. There are a few ways in which this reading may miss or conflict with other key commitments of Foucault, while they all involve a potential underestimation of the enduring impact of power. Most notably, the model of rational control over concepts seems to require a more robustly independent source of such control than Foucault himself would allow. To state that "concept-users can transform unknown forces they are subjected to in a discursive practice into forces they authorize autonomously and wield intentionally" (21) may aptly describe the reflexive goal to which Foucauldian critique aspires, but only if it is followed by the qualification that such authorization and wielding will in turn rely on *other* forces, that the assessment or revision of concepts requires appeal to *other* concepts which impose their own constraints, and that "desubjugation" (Foucault 2007: 47) also entails a new "mode of subjectivation" (Foucault 1990: 28). In developing the book's pragmatist conception of dispositional understanding, Tiisala emphasizes that the implicit rules that govern concept-use are grounded in social practices, and rightly indicates the overlap between this conception and Foucault's own view that thought exists not only in "what is said," but also in "what is done." However, there is a difference between social practice *per se*, and the robust conception of power developed across Foucault's *oeuvre*. From the perspective of power, the rules and norms that may be rendered explicit are ultimately aspects of political projects and interests and strategies, and as are the other rules and norms to which we would appeal in reflecting critically on them. This more power-centric perspective appears to jar somewhat with the sense of neutrality given in the pragmatist image of rational control, and we might even wager that the latter remains a bit closer to

the Kantian view of autonomy than warranted. In developing Foucault's conception of autonomy by way of Sellars and Brandom, we might wonder if at certain points we've in fact parted with it.

A greater focus on the impact of power may also reorient our conception of autonomy to the body. For—as Tiisala briefly discusses—the very vehicle for the attainment of our conceptual competences consists in habituated practices that simultaneously shape, coordinate, and control bodies. Though it is certainly worthwhile to specify how autonomy exceeds the field of agency and extends to understanding, we may query how the latter field of autonomy interfaces with the subject's habituated and embodied experiences. We might consider, for example, how the attainment of rational reflexivity facilitates new forms of resistance to power's hold on the body— and therefore greater agency—and how, conversely, acts of resistance to such power can stimulate new reflexive successes in the realm of understanding. That such a line of inquiry is merited is indicated by the impossibility of separating knowledge from power as a force at once epistemic and physical. Of course, an inquiry along these lines lies outside the stated aims of the book, and thus the latter can hardly be faulted for not including it. However, such questions are worth at least flagging, because at stake is the very notion of autonomy that we attribute to Foucault, and by foregrounding the pervasiveness of power we may be able to avoid a misleadingly robust or rationalistic notion. It is surely for considerations including these that Foucault refers to freedom not foremost as a rational capacity of control over concepts but rather as the work of self-transformation; achieved through this work is foremost a new, experimental, and embodied relationship towards oneself which may require further transformation in turn, as new relations of power are encountered. The freedom sought here is thus not a freedom from all constraint, but rather freedom from constraints specific to a time and place; it expresses not a will to not be governed as such, but rather, "the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault 2007: 75). The book does in fact underline that the work of freedom is ongoing, while its ongoing nature results from the problem of

structural heteronomy, which can never be definitively resolved. However, the contrast between this work of freedom and the conception of control found in Sellars and Brandom could be more extensively explored. In doing so, Foucault's conception of autonomy may come even more clearly into view.

REFERENCES

Allen, A. (2008), *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Foucault, M. (1990), *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

———. (1997), "What Is Enlightenment?" In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One)*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Catherine Porter. New York: The New Press.

———. (2000), "Questions of Method." In *Power (Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three)*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Colin Gordon. New York: The New Press.

———. (2007), "What Is Critique?" In *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, translated by Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).