

OVERCOMING “THE PRESENT LIMITS OF THE NECESSARY”: FOUCAULT’S CONCEPTION OF A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers a novel interpretation of Michel Foucault’s original and often misunderstood conception of philosophy as a critical activity. While it is well-known that Foucault’s critique undertakes to disclose contingent limits of thought that appear necessary in the present, the nature of the obstacle whose overcoming critique is meant to facilitate remains poorly understood. I argue that this obstacle, “the present limits of the necessary,” resides on the unconscious level of thought Foucault identified as the object of analysis for an archaeology of knowledge. Therefore, Foucault’s conception of a critique can be grasped only against the background of the distinctive conception of thought that informs his archaeological analyses of discursive practices. According to that view, thinking is always shaped by some historically specific system of unconscious norms that define the contingent set of conceptual possibilities subjects are able to recognize in the present. Drawing on Foucault’s largely neglected remarks on the obvious and the habitual, I argue that these unconscious norms of thought are enacted habitually in a discursive practice, which endows them with an appearance of obviousness. In this way, I explain how something contingent appears in the guise of necessity and begins to function as part of the present limits of the necessary. Finally, I argue that the task of a critique to expand the scope of conceptual possibility by disclosing these unconscious limits of thought is motivated by Foucault’s commitment to the ideal of autonomy understood as subject’s self-determination.

In the introduction to the second volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously states that for him the goal of philosophical activity, which he characterizes as “thought’s critical work on itself,” is to examine “how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise.”

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What would be the value of the relentless pursuit of knowledge if it should only ensure the acquisition of bodies of knowledge [*connaissances*], and not, in a certain way and to the largest possible extent, the distraction of the one who knows? There are moments in life when the question of knowing if one can think otherwise than one thinks and perceive otherwise than one perceives is indispensable for continuing to see or to think [*regarder ou à réfléchir*]. Perhaps I will be told that this playing with oneself is but to rest backstage, and that it belongs at best to this preparatory work that makes itself useless once it has had its effects. But what is then philosophy today—I mean the philosophical activity—if it is not thought’s critical work on itself? And if it does not consist, instead of justifying what is already known, of undertaking to know how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise?”¹

I want to begin from this oft-quoted passage because it brings into relief a crucial yet chiefly overlooked question about the nature of the *obstacle* that, according to Foucault, prevents us from readily grasping the full scope of possibilities for thought. After all, Foucault’s conception of philosophical activity as a critique clearly arises in response to the limits this obstacle poses to our freedom as thinking beings. Therefore, without grasping the distinctive nature of this obstacle also the specific task of a critique, as Foucault understands it, is bound to escape us. My main goal in this essay, then, is to elucidate the specificity of Foucault’s conception of a critique by explaining the nature of that obstacle.

In his essay “What Is Enlightenment?” Foucault explains that for him the task of a critique is to examine “what is the part of that which is singular, contingent, and due to arbitrary constraints in that which is *given* to us as universal, necessary, mandatory.”² Thus understood, the goal of a critique is to enable us to overcome limits of thought that are given to us as universal, necessary, and mandatory, although, in fact, they are singular, contingent, and arbitrary. In the same text, Foucault designates these limits as “the present limits of the necessary.”³ They consist in a historically dynamic configuration of norms that not only govern how we use concepts in thought and action but, crucially, also *constitute* a space of semantic possibilities that defines what kinds of contents we can so much as recognize as possible candidates to entertain as our thoughts in the present. In other words, the present limits of the necessary function as a *historical a priori*.⁴ They constitute the conceptual

¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2: L’Usage de plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 14–15. All the quotes from Foucault are my own translations.

² Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), vol. 2, 1393; emphasis added. All references to *Dits et écrits* are to the ‘Quarto’ edition from 2001.

³ Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” 1391.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Foucault,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 1451.

form of a particular mode of experience.⁵ This historically particular and contingent form belongs, as it were, inside the transcendental form of experience that, according to Kant's critical philosophy, constitutes necessary but not sufficient conditions for human experience as such. By disclosing the contingent status of the present limits of the necessary, a critique, according to Foucault, "seeks to *relaunch* as far and as widely as possible the indefinite work of freedom."⁶

But, to repeat the crucial question, what exactly is the nature of the constraint the present limits of the necessary impose on our freedom of thought? If the constraint functions by way of being a contingent configuration of norms that are given to us as necessary, universal, and mandatory, as Foucault says, how does the contingent appear to us in the guise of necessity? And why is there such an obstacle? Could it be removed for good? To address this series of questions, I will proceed as follows. To begin with, I will locate the obstacle, the object of Foucault's critical attention, on the level of "a positive unconscious of knowledge" he identified as the distinctive domain of his archaeological analyses in the history of thought.⁷ It is due to this peculiar type of unconscious status of the obstacle, I want to show, that a critique, according to Foucault, is "archaeological in its method."⁸ In the second place, I will bring together Foucault's largely neglected remarks regarding *obviousness*—"les évidences"—as the target of a critique, arguing that the obstacle appears necessary to us, as participants of a discursive practice, due to its guise of obviousness. It is under the appearance of obviousness, I hope to show, that something contingent is given to us as necessary. Thirdly, I will argue that Foucault's critical concern with obviousness, thus understood, is motivated by his commitment to the Kantian ideal of autonomy as subject's full self-determination. The overarching thought I seek to articulate and defend is that the present limits of the necessary undermine the full attainment of that ideal. Finally, in order to explain how this constraint on autonomy functions, I will show how the apparent obviousness of these limits of thought is constituted and perpetuated by the immediacy of *habit*. Only against this background, I want to show, can we come to grips with Foucault's claim that the task of thought's critical work is "to anticipate the danger that threatens in everything that is habitual."⁹

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Préface à l'*Histoire de la sexualité*," *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 1399.

⁶ Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" 1393; emphasis added.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "Préface à l'édition anglaise," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 877.

⁸ Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" 1393.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 1431.

1. THE OBSTACLE

In one of his earliest discussions of Kant's essay on the Enlightenment and the emergence of the historical present as a philosophical topic, Foucault states that both German critical theory and French *épistémologie* inherited that topic by adopting an essentially historical conception of rationality. In Foucault's words, for both traditions it is a question of investigating "a reason that . . . does not have an effect of overcoming [affranchissement] but on the condition that it comes to liberate itself from itself."¹⁰ Similarly, the overcoming that Foucault's critique aims to facilitate arises in response to an obstacle that, in some sense, is of reason's *own* making instead of being created by forces that are extrinsic to the activity of reasoning. As I have already indicated, I believe that the obstacle Foucault designates as the present limits of the necessary must be located on the level of a positive unconscious of knowledge he identified as the distinctive level of his archaeological analyses of discursive practices. In 1968, Foucault explains that these analyses

try to find in the history of science, of bodies of knowledge [connaissances], and of human knowledge [*savoir*], something that would be its unconscious. . . . Underneath that which science knows about itself there is something it doesn't know; and its history, its becoming, its episodes, its accidents obey a certain number of laws and determinations. It is these laws and determinations that I have sought to bring into light. I have sought to extricate an autonomous domain which would be that of the unconscious of knowledge with its own rules, like the unconscious of a human individual, too, has its rules and its determinations.¹¹

Foucault undoubtedly has this view in mind, in 1984, when he explains that a critique is a practice of scrutinizing "to what extent the work of thought to think its own history can enable thought to overcome [affranchir] what it thinks silently and to think otherwise."¹² If the obstacle Foucault's critique seeks to overcome is "silent," that is because it resides on the unconscious level of knowledge. In other words, the present limits of the necessary are operative in a discursive practice without being articulated in it. They are simultaneously implicit and efficacious. As such, they constitute a trap from which Foucault's critical work seeks to liberate us, as he explains in a 1971 interview.

It's true, however, that first and foremost I have discussed phenomena of the past: the system of exclusion and the imprisonment of the mad in the European civilization of the 16th and 17th centuries, the constitution of the medical science and

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Introduction par Michel Foucault," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 433.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Foucault répond à Sartre," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 693–94.

¹² Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 15.

practice at the beginning of the 19th century, the organization of the human sciences in the 18th and 19th centuries. But if I'm interested—actually, deeply interested—in these phenomena, that is because I have seen in them ways of thinking and behaving that are still ours. I try to bring into view, finding my basis in their constitution and historical formation, systems that are still ours today and inside of which we find ourselves trapped. Fundamentally, it is a question of offering a critique of our time, on the basis of retrospective analyses.¹³

How is it, then, that we are trapped inside such a historically specific system in the first place? In the same interview, Foucault explains that the trap exists, as I have suggested, because we fail to recognize it as such.

What I try to do is grasp the *implicit* systems that determine, without us being aware of them, our most familiar forms of conduct [conduits]. I try to assign an origin to them, to show their formation, the constraint they impose on us. Thus I try to take a distance with respect to these systems and to show in what way it would be possible to escape them. . . . One must 'put in play', display, transform, reverse the systems that peacefully order us. That is, as far as I'm concerned, what I try to do in my work.¹⁴

If we are "trapped" by a current form of thought, it is because it contains elements that "peacefully order us." And this ordering takes place peacefully, without any resistance, because we are not so much as aware of it taking place.

2. ETHICS OF OBVIOUSNESS

Before moving forward it is important to underscore that, according to Foucault, such a historically contingent system of unconscious norms is a *necessary* structural feature of thought as a discursive practice. "One thinks inside an anonymous and constraining system of thought [*pensée*] of an epoch and of a language. . . . It is the ground on which our 'free' thinking emerges and sparkles for a moment. The task of contemporary philosophy . . . is to bring into light this thought before thinking [*pensée avant de la pensée*], this system before any system. . . ."¹⁵ While I have elsewhere defended this conception of thought in general and explained how it informs Foucault's project of an archaeology of knowledge in particular, the question I want to ask now is how this conception of thought is connected with Foucault's particular view of critique as thought's work on itself.¹⁶ What is problematic about this unconscious dimension of thought, so as to give an impetus to a critique if it

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Conversation avec Michel Foucault," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 1051.

¹⁴ Foucault, "Conversation avec Michel Foucault," 1060–61; emphasis added.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 543.

¹⁶ Tuomo Tuusala, "Keeping It Implicit: A Defense of Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1:4 (2015), 653–673.

is, after all, a necessary structural feature of thought as a discursive practice? I believe it becomes a problem only in a particular, distinctively modern philosophical context that is informed by Kant's conception of autonomy as the only unconditional source of value. In discussing "the *share*" of "a rational being *in the giving of universal laws*," a process he calls "ethical lawgiving," Kant expresses this commitment in the *Groundwork*, as follows: "nothing can have a worth other than that which the law determines for it. But the law-giving itself, which determines all worth, must for that very reason have a dignity, that is, an unconditional, incomparable worth; and the word *respect* alone provides a becoming expression of it that a rational being must give. *Autonomy* is therefore the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature."¹⁷ From this perspective, the idea of an unconscious dimension of thought is problematic because it undermines the ideal of autonomy as the subject's complete self-determination on the basis of representations of rules. The unconscious of knowledge introduces a heteronomous dimension to the lives of rational beings.

Now, against this background, let me quote a remarkable passage from an interview conducted in 1980, which contains a rare and perhaps most explicit statement of the moral commitments that motivate Foucault's philosophical work.

I am a moralist to the extent that I believe that one of the tasks, one of the points [*sens*] of human existence, that in which man's freedom consists, is to never accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, immobile. Nothing in reality has to make a definitive and *inhuman* law for us. To that extent, one can think that we need to rise against all the forms of power, but not understood simply in the narrow sense as power of the type of government, or of one social group over another; this is but an element among others. I call 'power' everything that actually tends to make immobile and untouchable what is given to us as real, true, and good.¹⁸

For Foucault, the definitive, untouchable, obvious, and immobile components of human experience pose a problem because they constrain the autonomy of human subjects. Of course, there are many things that necessarily constrain our freedom. But, as we have seen, Foucault is concerned with the ways in which our capacity for self-determination comes to be constrained by something that, in fact, is not necessary although it appears that way. Only from this perspective can one come to grips with Foucault's essential but largely overlooked characterization of *obviousness* – "*les évidences*" – as the

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:435–6, translated by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press: 1996).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "Interview de Michel Foucault, 3 novembre 1980," in *L'origine de l'hérméneutique de soi: Conférences prononcées au Dartmouth Collège, 1980* (Vrin, 2013), 143.

focus of his critical attention. Foucault explicitly identifies obviousness as the target of critical work, as follows: "Critique does not consist of saying that things are not well the way they are. It consists of seeing on what types of obviousness [*évidences*], familiarity, modes of thinking that are acquired and not thought through [*non réfléchis*] the practices one accepts are based."¹⁹ Accordingly, in 1981, Foucault retrospectively sums up the overarching aspiration of his work thus: "I wanted to reintegrate a lot of the obviousness [*des évidences*] of our practices into the historicity of some of these practices and thereby rob them of their obviousness, in order to give them back the mobility which they had and which they should always have."²⁰ This, of course, is the critical task of scrutinizing "what is the part of that which is singular, contingent, and due to arbitrary constraints in that which is given to us as universal, necessary, mandatory."²¹

The goal of Foucault's "critical history of thought" is to destroy the obviousness of the present limits of the necessary, because it is precisely their obvious status in a current set of practices that gives them the apparently definite, untouchable, and immobile status that limits the scope of freedom we are able to recognize.²² The present limits of the necessary enjoy a status of obviousness as the basis of our thought precisely because they reside on the unconscious level in the normative structure of a discursive practice. Therefore, in order to attack obviousness, a critique must target this unconscious level of thought that, according to Foucault, is always organizing and animating our practices.

Thought indeed exists beyond and beneath systems and edifices of discourse. It is often hidden, but always animates everyday behavior [*comportements*]. There is always a little bit of thought even in the silliest of institutions, there is always thought even in the silent habits. Critique consists of driving out [*débusquer*] this thought and of trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious [*évidentes*] as people believe, making it somehow the case that what is accepted as going without saying would not go without saying anymore. Doing critique is to make difficult the gestures that are too easy to make.²³

If critique aims to bring into view and thus remobilize this silent thought that animates our practices and thus peacefully orders us, as it were, behind our

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Est-il donc important de penser?" in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 999.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, "Entretien de Michel Foucault avec André Berten, 7 mai 1981," in *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice. Cours de Louvain 1981* (Louvain-la-Neuve and Chicago: Presses universitaires de Louvain, University of Chicago Press, 2012), 236–46, at p. 242.

²¹ Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" 1393.

²² Foucault, "Foucault," 1450.

²³ Foucault, "Est-il donc important de penser?" 999–1000.

backs, then the primary focus of attention of critical work needs to be directed to those components of our practices that seem so obvious to us that it takes a special effort to even notice and identify them. That is why Foucault insists that the task of philosophy as a diagnosis of the present is not to discover something that remains hidden but, rather, to enable us to see that which is too close and too much on the surface of what we do, think, and say for us to ordinarily accord any attention to it: “It has been known for a long time that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden but to make visible that which precisely is visible, that is, to bring into view that which is so close, that which is so immediate, that which is so intimately connected with ourselves that we therefore do not see it.”²⁴ In this spirit of “the infra-ordinary”, Foucault’s critical work is driven by a battle against obviousness that masks a given historically specific constellation of contingent limitations that structure our current ways of thinking and acting.²⁵ Thus, by undertaking the task of a critique one becomes an exterminator of obviousness, a role Foucault once praised as follows: “I dream of the intellectual destroyer of obviousness [*des évidences*] and universalities, of the one who in the inertias and constraints of the present discerns and points out the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, the one who is incessantly moving and knows neither exactly where he will be nor what he will think tomorrow, for he is too attentive to the present. . . .”²⁶

3. FOUCAULT’S COMMITMENT TO THE IDEAL OF AUTONOMY

I have already said that Foucault’s critical concern with obviousness receives its motivation from his commitment to the Kantian ideal of autonomy.²⁷ By identifying the present limits of the necessary and pointing out their contingent status Foucault’s critique is enlarging the scope that subjects are capable of recognizing for the exercise of their autonomy as thinking beings. But, to clarify, I do not mean to suggest that Foucault subscribes to Kant’s view of

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “La philosophie analytique de la politique,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 540–41.

²⁵ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, translated by John Sturrock, Penguin Books, 1999, 209–211. For placing Foucault’s work in the broader context of 20th-century French thought permeated by a concern with the everyday and ordinary, see Alan Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, “Non au sexe roi,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 268–69.

²⁷ The important continuity between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault regarding the task of scrutinizing obviousness is a topic for another essay. See, Michel Foucault, “Pour une morale de l’inconfort,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 787; “L’intellectuel et les pouvoirs,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 1569.

the *content* of autonomous lawgiving or to Kant's account of the *metaphysical foundations* of the capacity of rational beings to be the source of the representations of rules they follow in reasoning. And yet I believe that Foucault nevertheless wholeheartedly embraces the Kantian *ideal* of autonomy as the source of value. This Foucault's commitment to autonomy consists in an endorsement of the unconditional *value* of subject's self-determination—that is, of the value of one's use of one's *own* understanding. And this commitment is independent of any particular views about how the capacity for self-determination *ought* to be exercised and what makes this capacity metaphysically possible. Nevertheless, Foucault's critique “aims to relaunch as far and broadly as possible the indefinite work of freedom,”²⁸ because it seeks to *enable* “the voluntary inservitude” and “the reflected indocility”²⁹ of subjects while leaving it to the subjects themselves to decide how to exercise their capacity for self-determination.

Once we attribute to Foucault this commitment to the value of autonomy, one can see that his somewhat notorious refusal to propose normative principles for action can be charitably seen as a *consequence* of that commitment. To that end, consider how, in an interview conducted in 1975, Foucault links this refusal to the very task of a critique, as follows:

“What are the tasks of the critique today?”

What do you mean by this word? Only a Kantian can attribute a general meaning to the word ‘critique’.

Yesterday, you said that your thinking is fundamentally critical [fondamentalement critique]. What does it mean for work to be critical?

I would say: it is an attempt to unmask as much as possible, that is, as deeply and generally as possible, all the effects of dogmatism that are related to knowledge [savoir], and all the effects of knowledge [savoir] that are related to dogmatism. . . . I don't want to conduct a critique that prevents others from speaking, to exercise in my name terrorism of the purity of truth. Nor do I want to speak in the name of others and pretend to say better what they have to say. My critique has as its goal to *enable others to speak*, without putting limits to their right to speak.³⁰

If it has been hard for Foucault's critics to take seriously this seemingly modest idea of a critique as *merely* enabling others to speak, it is because they have not adequately understood the nature of the obstacle whose overcoming

²⁸ Foucault, “Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?” 1393.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, “Qu'est-ce que la critique?” in Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la Critique? Suivi de La Culture de soi*, (Vrin, 2015), 39.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, “Michel Foucault. Les réponses du philosophe,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 1683–84; emphasis added.

requires the special effort of thought's critical work on itself.³¹ But once the unconscious status of the obstacle is understood, as well as how it functions to constrain the scope of possibility subjects are able to recognize in the present, Foucault's consistent refusal to articulate normative principles appears in a radically different light. After all, the ideal of autonomy assigns value to *self*-determination. And the conceptual point that needs to be stressed here is that autonomy just cannot be achieved or even promoted by legislating rules to others. The idea of autonomy does not represent just an ideal of conformity to rules, but an ideal of a distinctive type of conformity that is a result of one's own reasoning so that the conformity to rules is something one endorses. That is why the ideal of autonomy can be pursued only from the first-person perspective. The work of freedom whose scope Foucault's critique seeks to expand just cannot be externalized. It cannot be delegated to others, even though they might be "intellectuals."³² Therefore, the goal of enabling others to think differently for themselves is exactly what Foucault *ought* to pursue, given his commitment to the value of autonomy. In Foucault's own words, a critique is "a historico-practical test of the limits we can overcome, and thus . . . work of *ourselves* on *ourselves* as free beings."³³ There is no question about Foucault's high esteem for such work. As we have seen, it is for him "one of the tasks, one of the points [*sens*] of human existence, the one in which man's freedom consists."³⁴ The whole point of this task and what gives it value is that one undertakes it from one's own perspective.³⁵

4. THE HABITUAL

I have argued that the present limits of the necessary that Foucault's critique scrutinizes appear necessary despite their contingency, because they are given to us in the guise of obviousness. And I have located this obstacle on the unconscious level in the normative structure of a discursive practice. But in order to better understand how these unconscious constraints function so that they are able to order us peacefully, we need to turn to Foucault's rarely

³¹ A characteristic and particularly influential early instance of this widespread shortcoming is Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *PRAXIS International*, 1:3 (1981), 272–287.

³² Michel Foucault, "Les intellectuels et le pouvoir," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1.

³³ Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" 1394; emphasis added.

³⁴ Foucault, "Interview de Michel Foucault, 3 novembre 1980," 140.

³⁵ To see how radically Foucault here departs from the privileged role assigned to the intellectual in the Marxist tradition of critique, it is instructive to review his exchange in 1973 with "José," a worker who maintains that it is the task of an intellectual to make the working class fully self-conscious of its exploited status. Michel Foucault, "L'intellectuel sert à rassembler les idées mais son savoir est partiel par rapport au savoir ouvrier," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, esp. p. 1289.

discussed remarks on the role that the habitual plays in the lives of concept-using subjects. Foucault explicitly connects thought's critical work on itself with the danger that lies in the habitual, as follows: "The work of thought is not to denounce the evil that would secretly inhabit everything that exists, but to anticipate the danger that threatens in everything that is habitual, and to make problematic everything that is solid. The 'optimism' of thought, if one wants to use this word, is to know that there is no golden age."³⁶ What troubles Foucault, I believe, is the semi-automatic execution of habit, its unreflectiveness, which makes it a force operating behind our backs, a source of heteronomy. The production and exercise of habit requires no representation of what one is doing, and this character of the habitual brings with it the distinctive danger of doing out of habit something one would not do upon reflection, that is, after representing and evaluating the action and one's reasons for and against it. It is in this way, habitually, that subjects conform to and perpetuate the norms on the unconscious level of thought that function as the present limits of the necessary. This unreflected habitual component of all thought is what makes everything that involves thought potentially dangerous, because it makes the use of concepts always partially escape the representational powers and reflective endorsement of thinking subjects. Since the requirement for such an unconscious habitual component results from the normative structure of reasoning itself, there cannot be a "golden age" of a completely autonomous thinking subject. For the same reason, thought's critical work on itself is an endless task that consists in disclosing the unrepresented patterns of thinking that, unbeknownst to us, shape our understanding of our discursive possibilities with respect to topics that matter to who we are and how we live.

It is no accident, then, that the habitual plays a central role in the conception of power Foucault developed in his line of inquiry through the early 1970s that culminates in *Discipline and Punish*. These reflections on the role of the habitual in the historical development of the techniques of disciplinary power provide also the most comprehensive illustration in Foucault's work of his philosophical view that the habitual is inherently dangerous and calls for a critical attention. When summing up his 1972–73 course at the Collège de France, Foucault introduces the notion of disciplinary power, as follows:

It seems to me that we live in a society of disciplinary power, that is, of power that is endowed with devices whose form is sequestration, whose aim is to constitute a labor force, and whose instrument is the acquisition of disciplines or of habits. It seems to me that since the 18th century these devices for the fabrication of

³⁶ Foucault, "À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours," 1431.

disciplines, imposition of coercions, inculcation of habits have been constantly multiplied, refined, and specialized. I wanted this year to do the very first history of the *power of habits*, the archaeology of these devices of power that serve as the basis of the acquisition of habits as social norms.³⁷

Foucault then argues that the habitual plays a key role in the functioning of disciplinary power because, unlike the legal system of rights that defines relations only between property owners, techniques for inculcating habits can be used to establish new relations of power between all members of modern society regardless of legal status.³⁸ The following year, Foucault elaborates this point by describing how the formation of habits, among other things, functions as the technique by which these relations of power escaping the juridical framework can have an effect on subjects by being quite literally invested in their bodies: “I would like to advance the hypothesis that something like disciplinary power exists in our society. By this I mean no more than a particular, as it were, terminal, capillary form of power; a final relay, a particular modality by which political power, power in general, finally reaches the level of bodies and gets a hold on them, taking actions, behavior, *habits*, and words into account . . .”³⁹ Through these relations of power a second nature is being produced, a set of acquired dispositions a subject learns to repeat and perpetuate almost automatically by the force of habit: “Disciplinary power . . . looks forward to the future, towards the moment when it will keep going by itself and only a virtual supervision will be required, when discipline, consequently, will have become *habit*.”⁴⁰ This line of analysis culminates of course in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault again contrasts the subject that is fabricated by techniques of disciplinary power with the legal subject by underscoring the habitual relationship these techniques create between a subject and her patterns of conduct. With the deployment of disciplinary power it is a question of techniques that aim “to piece together not so much the subject of right that is found in the basic interests of the social contract [but] the obedient subject, the individual who is subjected to *habits*, rules, orders, an authority that is continuously being exercised around him and over him, and that he must let function *automatically* in him.”⁴¹

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *La société punitive: Cours au Collège de France 1972–1973* (Paris: EHESS/Gallimard/Seuil, 2013), 240; emphasis added.

³⁸ Foucault, *La société punitive*, 242.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique: Cours au Collège de France 1973–1974* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2003), 42; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique*, 49.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 131–32; emphasis added. See also, pp. 134, 137–38.

The importance of these discussions is not merely historical. I believe that this account of the deployment of disciplinary power in a particular constellation of penal and other practices that emerged in Western Europe starting from late eighteenth century illustrates Foucault's philosophical conception of the role of the habitual in our lives as thinking beings. It brings into relief the grounds for Foucault's often implicit, but consistently promoted, attitude that the habitual is *ethically* problematic because it makes parts of our practices definitive, untouchable, obvious, and immobile—because the habitual constitutes and congeals the present limits of the necessary.

5. PRESENT LIMITS OF THE NECESSARY

I have argued that Foucault's critique seeks to undermine the apparent obviousness of the present limits of the necessary that function as a historical *a priori* and are created and sustained through socially acquired, habitually perpetuated patterns of concept use in thought and action. Thus the obstacle is of reasons's own making, residing in the implicit normative structure of a discursive practice. It is therefore illuminating to cast Foucault's conception of a critique against the background of Gaston Bachelard's epistemological work, where *epistemological obstacles* are understood as conceptual blindspots that arise from within the specific conceptual architecture of a given scientific theory.⁴² As Gary Gutting notes, Bachelard locates epistemological obstacles precisely on the unconscious habitual level of scientific practices: "The attitudes that constitute given concepts and methods as epistemological obstacles are not explicitly formulated by those they constrain but rather operate at the level of implicit assumptions or cognitive and perceptual habits. Consequently, Bachelard proposed to develop a set of techniques designed to bring them out to our full reflective awareness. He spoke of these techniques as effecting a 'psychoanalysis' of reason."⁴³ Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, too, is such a technique, and it for this reason that "critique is archaeological in its method."⁴⁴ By means of an archaeology of knowledge Foucault aims to uncover the current historically specific *form* of thought, "the present limits of the necessary," whereas genealogy is a technique for revealing the contingency of that seemingly obvious form by tracing its *formation* through multifarious events on the historical field of social practices.⁴⁵ But Foucault's critique extends Bachelard's project of a psychoanalysis of reason from the

⁴² Gaston Bachelard, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (Paris: Vrin, 1938).

⁴³ Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17.

⁴⁴ Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" 1393.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 17.

epistemology of specific sciences to the everyday experience of human subjects, thus identifying a scope for a historical ontology of ourselves, and in doing so anchors the project, somewhat implicitly, in the ideal of autonomy.

Ian Hacking was the first to note the role of Foucault's archaeology as a technique for overcoming epistemological obstacles, thus understood. Already in 1973, Hacking concluded his Dawes Hicks lecture at the British Academy on Descartes and Leibniz and the problem of eternal truths, thus: "The flybottle was shaped by prehistory and only archaeology could display its shape."⁴⁶ But whereas Wittgenstein used the metaphor of a flybottle to illustrate his view of philosophical problems as conceptual confusions that are created by an *illegitimate* use of concepts, characteristically by philosophers themselves, for Foucault and Bachelard alike there is nothing illegitimate about the use of concepts that generates the epistemological obstacles that call for a psychoanalysis of reason or a critique by means of archaeological and genealogical techniques. However, there is another simile in Wittgenstein's rich repository that captures exactly how the call for a critique, as Foucault understands it, arises from the structure of reasoning itself as a discursive practice. In one of the most striking passages of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein describes how the limits of necessity are partially a result of historical transformations in the normative structure of a discursive practice, as follows:

94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thought may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters of the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is no sharp division of the one from the other.

98. But if someone were to say 'So logic too is an empirical science' he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.

⁴⁶ Ian Hacking, "Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths," in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 213.

99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.⁴⁷

In this simile, the dynamic status and historical transformations of the river banks, which define the current scope of empirical inquiry, represent “the present limits of the necessary” that Foucault’s critique aims to disclose and make mobile again. The convergence between Foucault’s and Wittgenstein’s thought is striking regarding the *contingent* status of these limits, as well as the *functionally* necessary structural role such limits play in a discursive practice. As Wittgenstein puts it, “the river-bed of thought [that] may shift” is “the *inherited* background against which I distinguish between true and false,” but which itself is *not* propositionally articulated. This unrepresented background, which Wittgenstein also designates as a world-picture, “*Weltbild*,” constitutes the fundamental level in the normative structure of a discursive practice where reasons come to an end but “the end is not an ungrounded presupposition, but an ungrounded way of acting.”⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, too, registers that this habitual repetition of patterns of reasoning confers to them a status of obviousness in a given discursive practice: “I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course [*selbstverständliche*] foundation . . . and as such also goes unmentioned.”⁴⁹ Here Wittgenstein’s choice of word, ‘*selbstverständliche*’, corresponds precisely to Foucault’s use of ‘*les évidences*’—both are plausibly translated into English as ‘obvious’. Wittgenstein notes that if the implicit background of a world-picture *were* represented as a set of propositions, these propositions *would* express rules. But, crucially, in that case the rules will express norms of a practice that were originally operative without being represented as such. For, though Wittgenstein says about these rules that “their role is like that of rules of a game,” he underscores immediately that “the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.”⁵⁰ And it is this implicit status of the fundamental norms of a discursive practice that makes them function as “the matter-of-course foundation” of reasoning. Whereas Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* articulates this pragmatist epistemological view and discusses in detail its consequences with respect to the very idea that knowledge has foundations, only Foucault adopts and elaborates this pragmatist perspective in connection with core topics in moral and political philosophy such as freedom and

⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, §§94–99.

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §110. “*Aber die Ende ist nicht die unbegründete Voraussetzung, sondern die unbegründete Handlungsweise.*” Translation slightly modified to retain the original syntax.

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §167.

⁵⁰ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §95.

power. And I hope that my interpretation of this pragmatist orientation in Foucault's work enables us to begin to appreciate his philosophical project as an attempt to think through the implications of the new epistemological landscape for the tradition in moral and political philosophy that is structured around the Kantian ideal of autonomy.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, I want to place three main components of my discussion—thought's critical work on itself, present limits of the necessary, and the ideal of autonomy—within the framework Foucault developed for analyzing the history of ethics. This way of applying Foucault's analytical tools to his own work will illuminate the specificity of his own ethical project. Foucault defines ethics as a subject's relation to itself, and he suggests that changes in the history of ethics can be accordingly analyzed in terms of four distinct yet interdependent aspects of this reflexive relationship: (1) ethical substance, (2) mode of subjection, (3) ethical work, and (4) *telos*.⁵¹ Ethical substance is the part of the moral subject that is the object of ethical attention (thoughts, actions, desires, memories, feelings). Ethical work, in turn, is what a subject undertakes in order to transform the chosen ethical substance. The *telos* is the final end the subject aspires to obtain by means of performing ethical work on the ethical substance. And, finally, the mode of subjection is the way in which the subject recognizes herself as bound by a moral obligation to perform this ethical work (through divine command, pure practical reason, utility maximization, natural law, obligations of a social role). Accordingly, the structure of the ethical project that envelops Foucault's conception of a critique can be presented as follows. The *ethical substance* consists in habitual patterns of concept use that make up an unconscious dimension of thought and through repetition become congealed into the present limits of the necessary that appear obvious although they are, in fact, contingent. The *telos* is the ideal of autonomy understood as subject's self-determination. Critique, understood as thought's work on itself by using the techniques of archaeology of knowledge and genealogy, is the *ethical work* that identifies the present limits of the necessary and unmask their contingency, thus enlarging the scope we recognize for the exercise of our autonomy as subjects. The *mode of subjection*, finally, is simply our nature as thinking beings whose capacity to think is essentially socially acquired and therefore always exercised in some historically particular form whose normative structure cannot be made fully explicit at once.

⁵¹ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 33–35.

It is clear now, I hope, why Foucault's conception of a critique cannot be understood but on the basis of the specific epistemological view that underlies his notion of an archaeology of knowledge. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, in 1970, Foucault argued that the order of discourse is organized by three principles of exclusion, the most familiar being simply the prohibition to say certain things while the second principle is the line we draw between reason and madness. Yet, it is the third principle of exclusion, namely the division between a discourse that is true-or-false, on the one hand, and the space of unarticulated and therefore semantically indeterminate and unintelligible possibilities, on the other, that constitutes the sustained point of focus Foucault continues to examine from different perspectives throughout his career. In the inaugural lecture, Foucault states that this division between a well-defined conceptual space and an outside terrain of semantic unintelligibility is "a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system."⁵² This is the unconscious system that functions as a historical *a priori* of particular modes of experience, the implicit system of norms that peacefully orders us to a particular mode of experiencing what is possible and what is obvious. The task of a critique as thought's work on itself must be understood vis-à-vis the distinctive type of obstacle that arises from this structural constraint in the order of discourse.

Once we appreciate this epistemological basis of Foucault's conception of a critique, it also becomes evident how decidedly different the resulting picture of ethics is from the problem of self-incurred minority in Kant's original discussion of the Enlightenment. While both Kant and Foucault are concerned with overcoming obstacles that limit one's autonomy as a subject, the respective sources and characters of the obstacles they identify result in a radical divergence concerning the respective remedies they propose. For Kant, the problem is fundamentally *psychological*, even though it is deeply embedded in a social and political context, because it concerns the extent to which an individual relies on her own faculty of understanding. "It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction . . . , nevertheless gladly remains minors for life," according to Kant.⁵³ Correspondingly, the task of exiting this state is a psychological challenge. Kant writes that "it is difficult for any single individual to extricate himself from the minority that has become almost nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is really

⁵² Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours: Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 16.

⁵³ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" translated by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8:35.

unable for the time being to make use of his own understanding, because he was never allowed to make the attempt.”⁵⁴ To be sure, these psychological challenges and the connected relations of power are not to be belittled, but nevertheless, there is an important sense in which the solution Kant offers is remarkably simple and straightforward: *use your own understanding!* “Have *courage* to make use of your *own* understanding” is the motto of the Enlightenment Kant proposes as the solution to the state of self-incurred minority.⁵⁵

In contrast, for Foucault the issue has nothing to do with psychological states like “cowardice,” “laziness,” and “courage,” but arises with an inevitability from the very structure of thought itself. The Foucaultian subject is trapped within “the present of limits of the necessary,” which silently, unbeknownst to the subject, orders the subject’s ways of thinking and acting through those patterns of reasoning that have assumed the status of obviousness as a result of habitual repetition in a practice. Thus, even when the subject *is* using her own understanding, the subject does not know exhaustively, and never can, the normative underpinnings of the concepts that are being used. This limitation to the full autonomy of the subject is not a psychological problem but an epistemic obstacle that is constitutive of the structure of thought as a discursive practice. The key insight animating Foucault’s work is that no subject can make its ways of understanding completely its own. Thus the “minority” of the Foucaultian subject is not self-incurred and, in fact, it is rather misleading to characterize it as a state of minority at all. According to Kant, “minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another.”⁵⁶ But the epistemological obstacle, which the present limits of the necessary constitute, emerges regardless of the extent of self-reliance one exhibits in reasoning. Because the limitation to full autonomy is not a psychological problem for Foucault, the remedy he proposes is not the virtue of courage but, as he states, “the critical attitude as virtue.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” 8:35–36.

⁵⁵ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” 8:35–36; emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” 8:35.

⁵⁷ Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que la critique?” 35.