

Foucault and the Enlightenment: An Epistemological Note

ARVIND SIVARAMAKRISHNAN
University of Southampton
U.K.

Attacks on the Enlightenment are not new in modern critical thought. It would, for example, not be over-reading Karl Marx to suggest that in effect he thought he had revealed the ways in which certain Enlightenment-derived ways of thinking about society conceal or mask the true relations of power which generate the shape of society and of thought. Two of Marx's greatest inheritors, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, severely attacked the Enlightenment for allegedly collapsing all thought and action into the instrumental and nothing else (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986). And religious authorities have, it seems, always been suspicious of, if not actually hostile to, the Enlightenment. (Salman Rushdie might reasonably claim that as a long-lapsed ex-Muslim he was not guilty of apostasy in writing *The Satanic Verses*; but we can only wonder, for example, what would have happened if Rushdie had said about Islam what Voltaire said about the Catholic Church: 'Ecrasez l'infame'!).

In our own time, rejections of the Enlightenment have for over a decade been fashionable among humanities scholars and the more theoretically-inclined social scientists. In particular, in the English-speaking world many of the Enlightenment's critics march under the banner of Michel Foucault. Foucault's antipathy to the Enlightenment conceived as a continuous and progressive history of ideas goes hand in hand with his rejection of the human subject as a being with progressively widening knowledge, powers, and capacities (including self-constituting ones) which are developed in and through the deepening penetration of the world by reason. Now it is the case that a good many difficulties and problems in Foucault's work have already been identified (Merquior 1985; Dews 1987; MacIntyre 1990; Norris 1993). Here I shall attempt to show that there are yet further reasons why we should be wary of Foucault. In particular, the problems I shall identify here have to do with Foucault's often inaccurate scholarship and with his unquestioning acceptance of the success of the philosophic project of Immanuel Kant.

The attempt to provide a single brief account of Foucault's main arguments is inevitably problematic, but if Foucault can be said to have an identifiable project, it is set out in its densest form in his primarily epistemological works, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1970 and 1972). In *The Order of Things* Foucault is utterly serious about the impact of radical epistemic discontinuities such as the respective

shifts from pre-Classical to Classical thought in the early seventeenth century, from Classical to modern thought at the end of the eighteenth century, and from modern to contemporary thought in the middle of the twentieth century (Foucault 1970: 27). Yet, as Foucault himself says, he is not engaged upon the task of providing an aetiology of radical change between epistemes. Significantly, he does not say that that cannot be done, and he does not examine the question of why it cannot be done. Instead he restricts his project, and at the outset he is tentative:

It seemed to me that it would not be prudent for the moment to force a solution I felt incapable, I admit, of offering: the traditional explanations—spirit of the time, technological or social changes, influences of various kinds—struck me for the most part as being more magical than effective; I chose instead to confine myself to describing the transformations themselves, thinking that this would be an indispensable step if, one day, a theory of scientific change and epistemological causality was to be constructed (Foucault 1970: xiii).

Foucault's early caution is not confined to that statement of intention. He says he is taking a risk in 'having wished to describe not so much the genesis of our sciences as an epistemological space specific to a particular period.' And the task therefore becomes that of examining each event 'in terms of its own evident arrangement'; Foucault says this is carried out at a level which he calls, in his own phrase somewhat arbitrarily, archaeological (Foucault 1970: 218 and xi).

The periods of greatest interest to Foucault are the Classical and the modern. He barely glances at the pre-Classical and the contemporary periods, and here a parallel can be noted with Marx whose references to pre-capitalist production are at best skimpy while his writings on capitalist production are as constitutive of the contemporary *episteme* as anything else.

Now according to Foucault one of the defining features of the modern *episteme* is the centrality to its concerns of the human being. This development is 'certainly one of the most radical that ever occurred in Western culture', and Foucault identifies it in and through several sets of moves in economics, natural history, and grammar respectively.

According to Foucault, in economics the move was from money, trade, and exchange to labour as irreducibly explanatory of wealth. In natural history, the move was from taxonomy in terms of visible structure to classification by reference to underlying organic structure. And in grammar, the key move was the introduction of inflection, an internal architecture, into general grammar, which has led to our understanding languages as representing on the basis of their grammar and not merely as having a grammar because they have the power to represent (Foucault 1970: 221-26, 229-30, and 232-36 respectively).

It is at this point that the dominant figure of the modern *episteme*, namely the human being, makes an entrance and takes centre stage. The human being is

... a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since his (*sic*) is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders knowledge possible (Foucault 1970: 318).

Foucault's terminology is at best obscure here, but his point is that thought itself is of a different character in the modern *episteme*:

In modern experience, the possibility of establishing man (*sic*) within knowledge and the mere emergence of this new figure in the field of the *episteme* imply an imperative that haunts thought from within; it matters little whether it be given currency in the form of ethics, politics, humanism, a duty to assume responsibility for the fate of the West, or the mere consciousness of performing, in history, a bureaucratic function. What is essential is that thought, both for itself and in the density of its workings, should be both knowledge and a modification of what it knows, reflection and a transformation of the mode of being of that on which it reflects (Foucault 1970: 327).

According to Foucault one of the most important results is that what he calls the pure forms of knowledge, by which he seems to mean the sciences, attain 'sovereignty and authority' over empirical knowledge. Empirical knowledge for its part becomes 'linked with reflections on subjectivity, the human being, and finitude, assuming the value and function of philosophy, as well as of the reduction of philosophy or counter-philosophy' (Foucault 1970: 248).

Here we must note that Foucault's early tentativeness has vanished, and that he gets more and more assertive. The modern development, the arrival of the human being as the central focus of concern, remains potentially transient, just another feature of the modern *episteme*, which itself may disappear just as earlier *epistemes* did. In that event, as Foucault says, '... one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault 1970: 387). And meanwhile, as long as modernity is with us, the archaeologist must continue the work of epistemic description.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault maintains his hostility to the human subject and by implication to the idea of the Enlightenment conceived as the progressive spread of ideas of universal validity (Foucault 1972: 138-40; Merquior 1985: 78). Foucault's aim here is 'to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme', and to provide 'a pure description of discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it.' As so often, Foucault is at best obscure here, but a discursive event seems to be 'a science, or novels, or political speeches, or the *oeuvre* of an author, or even a single book.' And discursive events subsist in 'the space of discourse in general', or 'the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written)' (Foucault 1970: 26-7).

Now the idea of a pure description of anything is highly problematic, but—the related problems notwithstanding—the project stated here by Foucault is an archaeological one, which produces 'the intrinsic description of the monument' and rejects the idea of a continuous history of thought (*sic*) as no more than an attempt to create 'a privileged shelter for the

sovereignty of consciousness' (Foucault 1972: 7-27).

According to Foucault, who gives little or no evidence in support here, today's history is already well on the way to being archaeological in his sense of the term. It has 'broken up the long series formed by the progress of consciousness, or the teleology of reason, or the evolution of human thought; it has questioned the themes of convergence and culmination; it has doubted the possibility of creating totalities' (Foucault 1972: 8). And the human subject, this consciousness which stands at the centre of the modern universe and acquires, progresses, and remembers, is therefore no more than a feature of this *episteme*.

So it is not continuity but discontinuity which constitutes the new field of interest for the archaeologist; it has become 'one of the basic elements of historical analysis' (Foucault 1972: 8). And as *The Archaeology* progresses, Foucault seems to replace the idea of *epistemes* with that of discourses and archives, whose constitutive elements are statements and events (Foucault 1972: 70-87). Here I shall not go into great detail over what Foucault means by statements and events; he himself spends some time saying what statements are not, and the term 'event' occurs throughout *The Archaeology* anyway. The term 'archive', however, is more pertinent to my purpose here; Foucault calls the archive 'the general system of the formation and transformation of statements', a bewildering definition amplified by Merquior as 'a machine generating social—as opposed to linguistic—meaning' (Merquior 1985: 81).

With that Foucault's decentering, or even abolition, of the human subject, and of its history as continuous and progressive, is as complete as it could be. Foucault, we are given to understand, then moves from archaeology to genealogy by linking the idea of discourse with that of power, the rules and controls which determine the production of discourse (Merquior 1985: 84).

That *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are shot through with problems hardly needs saying. Foucault has been taken severely to task for assuming that *epistemes* are monolithic and undifferentiated, for underplaying the continuities between successive epistemes, for his highly selective use and reading of examples, and for nothing less than very shoddy scholarship in respect of history of science (Merquior 1985: 43-75 and 141-60; Foucault, in Rabinow 1986: 341-42). (It is worth noting, though, that Merquior—who pays meticulous attention to technical detail in his argument against Foucault's reading of Velázquez's painting *Las Maniñas*—emphasizes that Foucault's scholarship on the subject of sexuality is altogether better (Foucault 1970: 1-17; Merquior 1985: 43-49 and 136-38).) Further, even at the time of Foucault's archaeological writings, certain historians of ideas were arguing in detail that the study of the history of ideas can be conducted very much better than it often is, and not abandoned altogether as Foucault seems to require us to do (Skinner 1969; Dunn 1972; Merquior 1985: 80). Another very distinguished critic of Foucault's, Alasdair MacIntyre, queries the nature and status of the genealogist's project. MacIntyre asks if there is

any place in the genealogist's narrative for the genealogist themselves. That is, if the range of possible interpretations of any event or discourse is unlimited, then even the genealogist is not committed to abiding by any of their own utterances. At this point the very idea of truth has been dropped, and the genealogist is only exempting their own utterances from the considerations to which they subject everyone else's. Further, if the genealogist does attempt to amend or justify their position in response to criticism, then they thereby admit the authority of the very rationality they repudiated in the first place (MacIntyre 1990: 49-55 and 206-10).

That should at the very least make us suspicious of the nature of Foucault's project. Neither is it difficult to find further reasons for caution about his work. For example, in *The Archaeology* he says the tranquillity (*sic*) with which 'pre-existing forms of continuity' are accepted must be disturbed, and suggests that this activity, rather than closing a discourse upon itself, enables us to free the contents of a discourse from 'all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities.' We can then recharacterize the given discourse by describing 'the interplay of relations within it and outside it' (Foucault 1972: 25 and 29). Foucault also, in a passage which could well account substantially for his popularity among contemporary theorists of literature, says, 'The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is node within a network' (Foucault 1972: 23).

The passages I have just cited above are not apparently very iconoclastic. But the assumptions underlying them are startling. First, it is not clear that anyone would want to defend the idea that a book or an author's *oeuvre* exists in *vacuo*. We give accounts of texts and *oeuvres* all the time, and do so by referring to other works, other *oeuvres*, to social, political, and any number of other contexts and issues, and it is scarcely conceivable that we can make any sense at all of any such work without doing so. Foucault is attacking an imaginary target here. Secondly, Foucault has no licence to assume that everybody accepts the categories of life, of our political condition, or anything else, either as natural and universal or with tranquillity. It does not seem to occur to Foucault that we have to learn about our world or any feature or features of it, that we might hate it on first acquaintance and then get used to it or even to like it, or see that we can do nothing about it and continue hating it even though we keep quiet. Similar problems can be found in both Freud and R.D. Laing. Freud has been charged with taking the non-pathological far too much for granted, and so too has Laing, who in his early works seems to take it that only the schizophrenic live in a condition of ontological insecurity while everyone else is secure and untroubled about what happens to them and how what they do turns out (Gellner 1986; Laing 1965; Pugmire 1975; Sivaramakrishnan 1988).

In effect, Foucault assumes that any given discourse subsists in a condition

free from interrogation or uncertainty. And by failing to engage with our existing uncertainties, he also fails to show why these might themselves not be sufficient generators of criticism and evaluation and therefore require his *apparently* more radical treatment.

Now the assumption that we all live in a tranquil world of untroubled continuities and 'natural, immediate, universal unities' is at best startling and even implausible. Yet it is not an isolated feature of Foucault's work. It is, as I shall now attempt to show, of the greatest significance to almost everything Foucault says in respect of modernity.

The key text here is Foucault's paper 'What is Enlightenment?', a response to a paper published by Immanuel Kant under the same title in 1784. Foucault regards this short text as highly significant; he says that it is 'located in a sense at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history', and that it enables us to recognize 'the outline of what one might call the attitude of modernity' (Foucault 1987: 163). Of Kant's paper he says:

... it seems to me that it is the first time a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing. It is in the reflection on 'today' as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to lie (Foucault 1987: 163).

Foucault proceeds in the acceptance of the authority and status of Kant's text, but will not allow it anything other than a particular historical location:

We must never forget that the Enlightenment is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a single word, even if many of these phenomena remain important today (Foucault 1987: 168).

Foucault reads the work of Kant as the apotheosis of the Enlightenment search for what he himself calls formal structures with universal value. And having located Kant and the Enlightenment historically, he says criticism must instead be a historical investigation:

In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will 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 not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom (Foucault 1987: 170).

Now as far as I can tell Foucault pays little or no attention to the single greatest response yet written to Kant, namely Hegel's *The Science of Logic*. Some of what he says in reaction to Kant's project does suggest echoes of Hegel's response to Kant, but at no stage in his epistemological work does Foucault attain anything like the rigour that Kant's work requires by way of a response. In particular, Foucault has accepted the success of Kant's project as definitive of Enlightenment conceptions of the self. This is deeply damaging to Foucault's own work on several counts. First, Foucault gives Kant's paper 'What is Enlightenment?' a standing which is at best contentious. Kant was certainly not the first philosopher to have a sense of how what they taught or wrote was connected with both the theory of knowledge and the moment of their historical and political location. The trial and death of Socrates is the obvious example of precisely that, but Foucault makes no reference either to Plato's or Hegel's respective accounts thereof (Plato 1993: Hegel 1892: 425-48).

Secondly, it is far from clear that Kant was quite the emblematic Enlightenment figure Foucault takes him to be. For example, Kant explicitly and strikingly places curbs on Enlightenment conceptions:

... even the *assumption*—as made on behalf of the necessary practical employment of my reason—of God, *freedom* and *immortality* is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For in order to arrive at such insight it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to objects of possible experience, and which, if also applied to what cannot be an object of experience, always really change this into an appearance, thus rendering all *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith* (Kant 1933: 29).

Thirdly, and most importantly, Foucault takes it apparently without question that Kant's account of the self is tenable. He is aware of a connection between Kant and Hume, but he makes no attempt to show whether or not Kant's adoption of Hume's epistemology makes it possible for Kant to provide an intelligible account of the self (Foucault 1970: 325). Hume, for his part, knows that on his own epistemology the idea of personal identity collapses, and he does not flinch from the result; despite the centrality of an account of the self to his entire attempt to found an ethics on sense-experience, he completely withdraws his account of personal identity in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 1888: 1-176, 251-63, Appendix 623-39). Now Kant recognizes that Hume's epistemology, in which experiences are particular, received solely as sense-impressions, and need no further characterization, makes it impossible to derive an account of the self which is other than, in Hume's phrase, a bundle of perceptions, and, in Kant's terminology, phenomenal; but Foucault seems not to see this at all, and assumes that Kant has succeeded in establishing the idea of a transcendental self. Yet in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant explicitly *denies* that this can be done (Kant 1933: 328-30, 380-83). Neither does Foucault examine the difficulties Kant faces, and acknowledges, in the attempt to establish the

necessity of a unitary self which transcends the spatial and temporal particularity and phenomenality of sense-impressions, or—in Kant's terminology—intuitions (Kant 1933: 135-69).

Two highly significant results follow. First, we have to wonder how Foucault has achieved his extraordinarily inaccurate reading of Kant, to whose work he is said to have paid constant attention throughout his working life. Secondly, if the attempt to base a transcendental self on the epistemology of Kant—and thereby of Hume—fails, then Foucault's charges against Kant as the apotheosis of the Enlightenment, and thereby his charges against the Enlightenment itself for creating the transcendental self, must also fail.

Now some of the consequences for Foucault of the inheritance, *via* Kant, from Hume have been noted by Norris, who identifies them in the context of a running battle with Rorty over Foucault (Norris 1993: 77-81). Norris rightly points out that Foucault's repeated encounters with Kant amount to a reenactment of the response of Kant to Hume. (Kant himself famously says that reading Hume awoke him from his 'dogmatic slumber.')

But instead of focusing on Hume's epistemology, Norris, drawing on Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* rather than the *Treatise*, goes on to try and find a way out of the various impasses which Hume's epistemology generates for Hume himself, and for Kant and Foucault.

For Hume the response to philosophic inquiry whose conclusions seen in the light of day were 'cold, strain'd and ridiculous' was to live his normal life, socializing and doing work fitting for one of his station. But Foucault responded in no such way. He was a committed political activist, and readers of Foucault therefore face the problem of how Foucault's apparent relativization of the Enlightenment's pursuit of such things as truth could result in imperatives of political action.

That Foucault himself, later in his life, recognized the necessity to intelligible political action of some form of identifiable and binding truth, and recognized too that the search for truth issues in political commitments, is well documented (Foucault, in Rabinow 1986: 340-72 and 372-80; Norris 1993: 91-7; Merquior 1985:140-60; Dews 1987: 144-70 and 170-99). Dews in particular shows up serious incoherences in Foucault over this issue, identifying the way Foucault never bridges the gulf between his various suggestions that political struggle is a matter of class-conflict and his various other arguments that suggest a hostility on his part to any 'conscious formulation of aims or strategic calculation' (Dews 1987: 164).

In addition, we have to note that Foucault's account of power cannot lead to imperatives to action. Dews points out that although Foucault has no difficulty in describing modern societies as systems of power, he cannot specify how things might change if, say, an operation of power is cancelled or a repressed desire is rendered conscious. Indeed Foucault explicitly rules out the possibility of such specification. For him, power is omnipresent; it comes from everywhere and is therefore an all-pervading force. The result is that if

any repressed entities, such as an apparently natural sexuality, are themselves constituted by and are products of power, then what might look like liberation itself is a form of servitude. In effect, the links between power and oppression are dissolved; lacking anything determinate to which it can be opposed, power therefore 'loses all explanatory content and becomes a ubiquitous, metaphysical principle' (Dews 1987: 166). The consequence is that Foucault's treatment of the question of power lacks even the implication of liberating possibilities (Dews 1987: 164-66; Merquior 1985: 108-18). We may have our differences with Marx and Freud, but at least there is no doubting the direction of their commitments.

Therefore, in the light of the critiques to which I have referred above, it is difficult to take either Foucault or some of the things said by his followers seriously; an example would be the remark that Foucault has devised a new political theory and practice which replace the now discredited Marxism (Sheridan 1980: 218-21). Merquior's slightly surprising remark that Foucault is a philosopher for our times might more accurately have it that Foucault is a philosopher of our times; whether our times are such that anyone can take heart at that is another matter.

Those issues, however, are not directly pertinent to my project here. I have attempted to show that Foucault's apparently unquestioning acceptance of the idea that Kant's account of the self is tenable undermines much of his own epistemological work. The consequences for Foucault's prolonged siege of Kant, too, hardly need stating. At the very least, it is deeply ironic that the incoherences embodied by what Norris calls the arbiters of postmodern intellectual fashion have their sources in the work of the ablest, most thorough, and most honest of British empiricists, namely David Hume.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am considerably indebted to David Pugmire for his comments on drafts of this paper, and to A. Giridhar Rao for his comments and his help with the practicalities.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T.W. and M. Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London: Verso, 1986.
- Dews, P.K., *Logic of Disintegration*, London: Verso, 1987.
- Dunn, J., 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. P. Laslett and W.G. Runciman, Oxford: Blackwell, 1972.
- Foucault, M., 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- , 'Politics and Ethics: an Interview', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, London: Tavistock, 1972.

- Foucault, M., *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, London: Tavistock, 1970.
- , 'What is Enlightenment?', in *Interpretive Social Science*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, 2nd ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Gellner, E.K., *Freud*, London: Fontana, 1986.
- Hegel, G.W.F., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892-4.
- Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: Clarendon, 1888.
- Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, London: Macmillan, 1933.
- Laing, R.D., *The Divided Self*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- MacIntyre, A.C., *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, London: Duckworth, 1990.
- Merquior, J.G., *Foucault*, London: Fontana, 1985.
- Norris, C., *The Truth about Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tradennick and Harold Tarrant, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993.
- Pugmire, D.R., 'Philosophy and Madness', unpublished text of an open lecture, University of Southampton, 1975.
- Sheridan, A., *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, London: Tavistock, 1980.
- Sivaramakrishnan, A., *Social Science, Professional Authority, and Citizenship*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Southampton, 1988.
- Skinner, Q.R.D., 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8, 1969, 3-53.