Foucault and the Human Sciences

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January 1, 2008
In this three-part essay, I endeavor to: (1) establish a basic understanding of postmodernism as necessary for situating the work of Michel Foucault, paying particular attention to his concept of subjectivity; (2) discuss Foucault’s critique of humanism and the human sciences; and (3) assess the implications of his work given an alternate understanding of the place of the subject. Ultimately, I demonstrate that Foucault’s work does not negate the possibility of the human sciences (as a preliminary assessment might infer), and that dismissal of his ideas without considering their application would be a mistake.

The word postmodernity is both misunderstood and overused. It is not my intention to set up a false dualism between modernism and postmodernism, the latter is not a mere reaction to the former. Foucault’s work prevents an understanding of the postmodern as continuation or historical outworking of a particular trajectory; indeed, he is skeptical of any attempt to fit historical events into a comprehensive framework. One pillar of postmodern thought is the rejection of metanarratives and the contextualization of all knowledge. Foucault endorses Nietzsche’s thesis on genealogical analysis that preserves the singularity of events and necessitates a gap between past and present. Events occur due to an elaborate web of causal factors, and meaning is constructed based on the intersection points between events.

For postmoderns, God is “dead” a la Nietzsche, as are transcendent value claims, absolute truth (i.e., objectivity) and the Cartesian subject (“cogito ergo sum”). Foucault’s philosophy is a decisive reaction against the philosophical tradition that assumes our autonomy as human beings (Sarup, 1993, p. 75). The elimination of subjectivity results in the impossibility of humanism and the human sciences. The self that is able to rationally reflect on its own existence has been eliminated, in its place are a series of self-constituting encounters, i.e., culturally and
contextually mediated discourse. Foucault follows Freud’s view of a divided and fractured ego, instead of the unified Cartesian concept (O’Brien, 1985, pp. 3, 30). Humankind has been replaced by discourse as the agent which constitutes reality, and must now be “analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse” (Foucault, 1969, p. 1636).

This is the root of Foucault’s identification as an anti-humanist. The humanists asserted that knowledge (in particular, self-knowledge) had the potential to be liberating; since, famously, man was the measure of all things. Foucault reacts against the idea that “man can subject his being to clarification” (O’Brien, 1985, p. 28). According to humanistic philosophy, people are capable of knowing themselves and revealing truths about their existence through rational reflection.

Humanism is associated with “methodological individualism” (Sarup, 1993, p. 76) – the idea that societies are comprised of individuals who are alone responsible for their actions and able to act rationally in pursuit of freedom, both individually and collectively. The human sciences require humans to be both subject and object, an impossibility for Foucault since humanist ideology places the origin of ideas in the subject (Sarup, 1993, p. 77). Where then, is this new source of knowledge, and, subsequently, action? If Foucault denies humans as both subject and object, how can he claim any knowledge whatsoever? Foucault’s source is not located within the subject nor the object, but the area found between the two; the relationship between them. This relationship determines all thought and knowledge about Man and the world, in a way it is what constitutes them (Bellemare, 2007, p. 176).¹

¹ Original text: L’objet sur lequel porte son analyse n’est donc pas directement le sujet, ni l’objet, mais le domaine qui se situe entre les deux, celui de leur rapport. Ce rapport determine tout pensee, tout savoir sur l’homme ou sur le monde; en quelques sorte, il le constitue.
Foucault believes that certain norms have been established upon the belief in rational, acting subjects and that these norms are legitimized through the human sciences (Sarup, 1993, p. 72). Akin to humanism, the human sciences are no longer possible without a transcendent self. The individual subject is a philosophical impossibility for Foucault, instead, existence is a result of the intersection of multiple, multi-layered, and multi-faceted discourse. For Foucault, any attempt at human science is not only a fallacy but actually dangerous, since the whole project rests on erroneous assumptions. Harmful social control is enacted through teachers, social workers, and other “controlling” professions. The human sciences are criticized in Foucault’s theory of power as enabling and reinforcing the structures of oppression.

Foucault’s critiques merit thoughtful consideration and can help reformulate traditional processes of inquiry. Repeatedly in his writings, Foucault opposes what he calls humanist epistemology, “in which all knowledge can be traced to an original and primary ego which is transparently given to itself” (O’Brien, 1985, p.3), however, it would be naïve to assume this negates the project of the human sciences as it is currently understood. I believe that the original concept of the human sciences had already been debunked and subjected to inter- and intra-disciplinary debate prior to Foucault. He was not the first to criticize the concept of man as developed by humanistic thinkers.

The human sciences have developed way beyond their original conception (as based in the humanistic ideal). If properly conducted, inquiry in the human sciences should be skeptical of its own methodological assumptions. Therefore, it would not be uncritical of humanism, despite shared foundations, nor exclusively epistemological, i.e., based on the notion that the human sciences should attempt to follow the same line of inquiry as the natural sciences.
Foucault’s philosophy can actually inform the project of the human sciences. He is critical of intellectuals posing as universalists - people who have expertise in a particular area but use that position to theorize about areas outside of their knowledge and experience. Foucault believes in action that is localized and conducted on the micro (not macro) level (Sarup, 2000, p. 86). This provides a helpful reminder for scholars in the human sciences not to attempt comprehensiveness or set unobtainable goals for their work.

The assumption that the human sciences cannot properly exist without a central and self-constituting human subject is not necessarily true. Foucault’s criticism is valid, yet may not have actual bearing on the way the human sciences are conducted, methodologically speaking. Regardless of ideas about origin and constitution of the self, practically speaking life proceeds in much the same way. If Foucault’s critique of the subject is “bracketed” (to use a phenomenological term), inquiry continues unimpeded. Determining what is most helpful might be a better methodological guide than the pursuit of truth. In order to conduct research, human scientists need to act as if they believe in the subject who exists and is able to act rationally. For most people, so-called “reality” mimics the traditional view of the Cartesian subject; thus, human scientists should continue to operate as such. However, taking Foucault’s ideas into consideration is helpful in re-imagining the concept of the self as human and the subject’s place in the human sciences. Foucault’s work should make us question our assumptions but not render the acquisition of knowledge impossible.

In his doctoral dissertation, G.D. Longford (2000) writes that “Foucault does not wish to extinguish or eradicate the thinking subject” (p. 378). Critical reflection should be viewed as limited without being rendered completely useless. The rejection of the humanist concept of subjectivity does not necessarily result in weakened concept or lessened affectivity. Longford
continues, speaking of Foucault’s ideal of a specialized scholar, who has achieved depth over breadth: “[B]y virtue of the local and specific nature of the knowledge and experience she has acquired on the ground…such an intellectual may constitute a greater critical and political threat than that posed by the general, universal discourses of the traditional intellectual…” (p. 386). This understanding can serve to strengthen the project of human science. Instead of completely abandoning its previous modern (humanistic) identity, Foucault attempts to “seize [the subject’s] functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies” (Leitch, 1635). The salient question for Foucault is the position of the subject within a given discourse.

The positivist self is impossible, yet transformative knowledge is still possible: “Foucault’s anti-humanism makes us more humane” (O’Brien, 1985, p. 30). A desire to improve upon the well-being of all people should be the normative project underlying all inquiry, particularly for those of us working within the human sciences.
References


