

## **Foucault and public autonomy**

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**Abstract.** In this paper I argue that the social constructionist view found in Foucault's work does not condemn one to a deterministic portrait of the 'self.' Attention to the early and late writings allows one to articulate a weak notion of autonomy even under the heavy-handed descriptions found in Foucault's early work. By recognizing autonomy as a public task, and not as a notion of freedom relegated to particular individuals, one is entitled to view autonomy as present in Foucault's work – and not merely in those writings dedicated to the 'techniques of the self.' Far from emphasizing practices of freedom, I demonstrate that we need not always think of autonomy as contained in necessary resistance. It is this that permits reading autonomy as a product of social construction, and not an objection to it.

### **I. Introduction**

The question of autonomy in the work of Michel Foucault is still a penetrating one, perhaps largely due to our saturation in a tradition that has again and again built systems upon an independent subject governing herself via rationally-derived rules. Indeed, the independent subject is the cornerstone of Kantian ethics – a resolute and final bulwark against the onslaught of carnal appetites. The Kantian picture of morality turns on a conception of autonomy – and the seeming absence of such autonomy in the Foucaultian corpus proves disconcerting at best. Almost anyone reading Foucault's work is struck by the degree of impotency a subject (when one is found) has in relation to her own understanding and behavior. More strongly put, the often absent depiction of any clear 'subject' calls into question the very idea of autonomy, and hence, in an important sense, the very idea of traditional ethics. For the sensitive reader, then, Foucault seems to have delivered the death-blow to the Enlightenment project of human progress via rational means: rationalities are constructed and manifested as modes of domination, and nowhere in the picture are we committed to saying that a subject relegates power, or that the subject maintains any degree of control in regard to her own life.

But there is still some hope. My aim in this essay is to articulate what might count as autonomy in Foucault's work – a notion that, much like everything else in Foucault, has an essential social dimension. Although I have chosen to call this social realm of freedom 'autonomy,' I must concede that those obsessed with strong accounts of autonomous action will inevitably be disappointed. It is not my thesis in this article that Foucault allows room for the subject to gain a complete control over such things as modes of expression and the regime of truth these modes express. In an important (and I think correct) sense, Foucault's work has pinpointed that there are realms over which agents have no control – and probably cannot have control. Nevertheless, the traditional criticism leveled against Foucault by various philosophers that he leaves no room for autonomy is, like much of Foucault's work, a bit on the hyperbolic side. My thesis in this paper is that, while Foucault certainly does not allow room for a strong autonomy, he does allow room for what autonomy colloquially means – that is, given Foucault's overall picture, it is not in principle impossible for a subject to make more or less free choices within a realm of possibility.

I have organized this discussion in the following manner. In section two, I present a classic criticism offered by Charles Taylor against Foucault's conception of power and its relation to freedom. Following this, I detail some of the themes in Foucault's early writings that might make Taylor's criticism tenable. In the fourth section of this paper, I emphasize developments in Foucault's thought that suggest a different reading of his early writings. Finally, I argue that it is possible to read Foucault's early texts (as well as his later ones) as permitting a conception of weak autonomy.

## **2. Foucault's power: A tense interpretation**

In "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," Charles Taylor has argued that taking Foucault's conception of power seriously requires that one re-think Foucault's basic position concerning both power and liberation. As Taylor puts it, "the Foucaultian notion of power not only requires for its sense the correlative notions of truth and liberation, but even the standard links between them, which makes truth the condition of liberation," (93). Given the stark absence of these notion in much of Foucault's early work, Taylor finds Foucault's notion of power as pervasive and outside of subjectivity troubling at best.

Taylor brings to light what has for too long been seen as an essential tension in the work of Foucault. On the one hand, Foucault presents localized histories which enable one to notice the differences in our current notions of things like sexuality, madness, punishment, and the like, from the notion of these things in previous epochs. Implicit in these histories, as Taylor (I think correctly, yet contentiously) points out, is an element of critique – a certain oblique recognition that the practices of days of yore are in certain ways less (or more) legitimate than current practices. On the other hand, however, Foucault explicitly denies this reading by repeatedly claiming that he is not in fact looking for an alternative.

Taylor's primary example of this is in Foucault's history of punishment: "he [Foucault] opposes the classical liturgical idea of punishment to the modern 'humanitarian' one; and refuses to value the second over the first."<sup>1</sup> Taylor claims that the reason undergirding Foucault's refusal to make valuational claims concerning these two forms of punishment turns on the notion that any such valuation arguably depends on a 'Schillerian/Critical Theory notion that modern discipline has repressed our natures and constituted systems of domination of man by man," (FT, 80). As is obvious, such a stance proves anathema to Foucault's basic endeavor. As one commentator puts it, "like Nietzsche, Foucault does not think that there is anything there that remains constant," (Hoy, 133). In other words, there is nothing there, before discourse has formed objects of analysis, to be repressed.

Choosing between models is nothing more than choosing between differing sets of power relations. It is in this notion that Taylor finds Foucault's analysis analytically violent.

something is only an imposition on me against a background of desires, interests, purposes that I have. It is only an imposition if it makes some dent in these, if it frustrates them, prevents them from fulfillment, or perhaps even from formulation . . . This is recognized by Foucault's thesis that there is no power without 'resistances' . . . But this means that 'power' belongs in a semantic field from which 'truth' and 'freedom' cannot be excluded. Because it is linked with the notion of the imposition on our significant desires/purposes, it cannot be separated from the notion of some relative lifting of this restraint, from an unimpeded fulfillment of these desires/purposes. But this is just what is involved in a notion of freedom (FT, 91–92).

Foucault's use of the concept 'power' implies some notion of liberation – and it is the seeming absence of a notion of liberation that leads Taylor to claim that Foucault's position is unintelligible (at least on this account). Be-

cause, on Foucault's view, "there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another," we cannot find liberation from power (FT, 94). To be liberated from one set of power relations is to be enslaved by another.

But if this true, why bother speaking of 'power' at all? On Taylor's view, this decisive insistence undermines one aspect of solid historiography: namely, its optimistic side. While new truth-regimes can be seen as devices of tactical control, on Taylor's view, they can also be seen as vehicles of liberation — vehicles which no doubt often have ill-effects, but not only ill-effects. "Foucault has missed the ambivalence of these new disciplines. The point is, they have not only served to feed a system of control; they have also taken the form of genuine self-disciplines which have made possible new kinds of collective action characterized by more egalitarian forms of participation," (81–82). Without taking account of the positive aspects of historical movements, we lose "a massive amount of what is specific to our civilization. Without this in our conceptual armory Western history and societies become incomprehensible," (83). To view all as power from the outset, Taylor suggests, is to ignore how certain discursive practices degenerate into forms of severe domination — and hence to toss out all hope of liberation from such domination — it is to sacrifice a notion of the emergence of domination in discursive practices for a blanket assertion about what discursive practices fundamentally are. Taylor's concern, in brief, is that "we will never see what is going on if we think of the disciplines as having their exclusive historical and social significance in forms of domination," (82).

Of course, as soon as we have admitted some positive (or negative) aspects of specific regimes of truth, we have already conceded a point Foucault is not willing to concede: that there might be some optimal form of life, some 'true' notion of truth-production, some goal toward which we ought to progress, simply by virtue of the fact that one has presupposed the existence of a seemingly neutral position for assessing a particular form of life. Admitting advantages in a discursive regime is admitting a conception of the 'right' or the 'good' which stands in some way apart from our methods of domination/truth production — and this is already to admit that some of our practices are spawned from falsity, and that larger doses of truth will lead us to liberation from these fabrications — and this is to give credence to one basic tenet of the Enlightenment project.

It is now a common contention that Taylor's objection, set as it is against the backdrop of the rich ideas given form in his *Sources of the Self*, fails to meet Foucault on his own ground. As I will argue below, Taylor's criticism

cannot account for the developments present in Foucault's later work – developments which can be seen as stemming from the tenets of his early writings. When we read Foucault's early writings through the lens of the later ones, we are entitled to resist the tempting Enlightenment-esque picture given above. It is my view that one can articulate a (thin) conception of liberation through truth in the Foucaultian corpus while also maintaining Foucault's position concerning the 'subject' and the discursive practices which constitute and dominate it. Before articulating a conception of autonomy that can plausibly be attributed to Foucault's work, I would like to present those themes in Foucault's early writings which give credence to Taylor's objection.

### 3. Discontinuity, power, knowledge: An overview

One of Foucault's primary concerns (at least in his early work) is to abandon the vocabulary of natural teleology and the legitimating practices of knowledge which have accompanied it. In Foucault's view (in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), such things as structuralism and continuity theory in historical investigation attempt to provide a theoretical undergirding to the rather pathological disposition to view the history of ideas as a history of human advancement – that is, as a justification of the Enlightenment ideal of human progress through rationality. Foucault's aim is "to analyze this history, in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn," (AK, 203).

The recognition of much historical analysis as a self-description of sorts leads Foucault to question the picture within which such histories are made intelligible. The notion of continuity – of ideas in such discursive practices as science becoming more and more accurate – is precisely the idea which Foucault rejects in engaging in localized historical analysis. The temptation to read history whiggishly – as a clean series of revisionistic thinkers trimming the fat off of their predecessors – is viewed (not so) simply as another way to place humanity at the forefront of nature. By cleansing historical analysis of its "transcendental narcissism," Foucault attempts to reevaluate those discursive practices which constitute our current regime of truth (AK, 203). More pointedly, by not postulating continuity, Foucault refuses to allow history to provide a foundation for our knowledge claims.

History has no privileged position on Foucault's account – it cannot ground certain formations within a discourse as 'the truth' (when this implies that the 'truth' is in some way separable from power relations). On the contrary, "history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked," (AK, 7). A cultural heritage, on this view, is largely a matter of defining the realms of appropriate historical analysis. What will count as an historical document – that is, as germane to one's heritage – will be more or less parasitic on what conception of one's heritage is already in one's possession. The immediate consequence of this view is that what Foucault characterizes as a 'total history' is impossible, simply by virtue of the fact that an historical description has already presupposed a set of discursive practices which act as enabling conditions for what will count as 'true,' as 'history,' and as 'germane.' "A total description draws all phenomenon around a single center – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape," (10). To construct such a history is to have already assumed the adequacy of a particular organizing principle – be it human progress, human regress, or whatever.

In this way Foucault throws the 'correctness' of the Enlightenment project into the proverbial waste basket of philosophical conjecture. By claiming that the Enlightenment project has sought to legitimize itself in (euphemistically speaking) directed historical investigation, Foucault makes the tacit claim that the continuity theorist's position is another instance of a Nietzschean will to power.

That which licenses Foucault to make such assertions also seems to license the criticism discussed above proffered by Charles Taylor. In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to justify Foucault's rejection of continuity theory against the larger backdrop of his view of knowledge's inextricable link to power relations. This first approximation of Foucault's position will also give credence to Taylor's well-known critique. To come to terms with Foucault's connection of truth and power, consider the following passages from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

We are now dealing with a complex volume [the archive], in which heterogeneous regions are differentiated or deployed, in accordance with specific rules and practices which cannot be superimposed. Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other place and time, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements of events (with their own condition and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They

are all statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive (AK, 124).

Further,

the archive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated . . . it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements (AK, 130).

If one considers *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as posing the question “How can such divergent thinkers as Freud and Pavlov, Heraclitus and Kant, Aristotle and Einstein, all be considered as pieces of one respective discipline?,” the archive is Foucault’s answer. We can classify the pairs above as within the same respective discipline because they are contained in the same “general system of the formation and transformation of statements.” More precisely, the archive can be considered a limiting condition – it “is the first law of what can be said,” (AK, 129). Via the archive, Foucault presents a way in which differing discursive practices (behaviors) can be united under general rubrics without falling prey to the pathological dispositions of the continuity theorist. On the contrary, the archive is “that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration,” (129). What this boils down to is that the archive is not “the library of all libraries,” nor is it the accumulation of a tradition. The archive is simply that which enables particular statements to be made at particular times.<sup>2</sup>

The archive is not a permanent ahistorical matrix against which the accumulation of mass documentation is made intelligible. It is simply a realm of possible articulation – a set of rules which define the limits of our historically-situated discursive practices. It is in this important sense that the archive

deprives us of our continuity, it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies; and where anthropological thought once questioned man’s being or subjectivity, it now bursts open the other, and the outside. In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason

is the difference of discourse, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make, (AK, 131).

More than merely not being a basis for identity, the archive calls into question the very notion of identity, pointing out that what it means to be human, or the member of a tradition, is historically situated in the rules that govern what can be said in a given epoch. In this important sense, our own discursive practices play a fundamental role in establishing not only how we view history and ourselves in relation to history, but also what exactly will count as 'history' within our archive.

Another important point to notice in the above passage is that our modes of articulation within particular discursive practices are radically distinct from the modes of articulation utilized by other archives. Our humanity is not the same as the humanity of a 15th-century German mystic, nor is it the same as a 19th-century psychoanalyst. In a word, our differing archives (and the methods of truth-production these employ) establish that "we are difference." We cannot escape our own archive because "it is from within these rules [of the archive] that we speak," (AK, 130). Our statements (speech acts) and validity claims are the products of our discursive practices, and the basis of our difference. We are these differences in the sense that an individual is nothing more than the product of existing discursive practices. We make these differences in the sense that we actively engage in such discursive practices and the rules of statement formation they presuppose. Our identities are not established via distinctions because any formulation of a distinctive trait is ultimately dependent on existing discursive practices.

Foucault's view of history, of course, is subject to its own analysis. This point does not, however, remove the unfortunate sense of free-floating impotency Foucault gives to our traditional notion of the subject. As agents existing within an archive which controls the way we speak, and hence the way we experience, the notion of liberation and/or autonomy may appear far-fetched at best in this context.

But the story can be made even worse. It is the differentiation which is produced in discursive practices which exemplifies (though certainly does not exhaustively explain) the emergence of power relations. Power is caught up in discursive practices to the same extent that discursive practices produce divisions among 'subjects' – that is, in so far as what we count as knowledge places individuals into categories which control the way they experience themselves and the world, these articulations of knowledge are constructions of



power relations – they prescribe certain ways of seeing and behaving in the world. It would be a mistake to think of these as arbitrary, however, or as simply the product of a few megalomaniac geniuses floating about in discourse. Knowledge claims presuppose modes of truth-production. Truth is

the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true . . . ‘True’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which it induces and extends it, (FR, 73).<sup>3</sup>

It is around this regime of truth that battles of the modern intellectual are won and lost. ‘Truth,’ as something “essential to the structure and functioning of our society,” is also the cause of our existence in power relations (FR, 73). The emergence of categorizations (such as insane, homosexual, criminal) creates a structure of domination based on the modes of truth-production within a particular discourse.

This sketch of some of the major themes in Foucault’s work serves to buttress Taylor’s claim that there is a tension between the notion of power and a notion of liberation through truth that the concept of ‘power’ demands. Taylor’s contention, of course, is by no means unanswerable. It is my contention that when we consider Foucault’s early writings through the lens of his later ones that the purported tension of which Taylor complains evaporates.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Answering Taylor: Developing power and the subject**

There is an extraordinarily rich irony pervading the conclusion of Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. A mock interviewer tackles Foucault’s project with a barrage of questions concerning the place of the subject in Foucault’s localized histories. Foucault meets these questions with a textual smile, responding that “I misunderstood the transcendence of discourse; in describing it, I refused to refer it to a subjectivity,” and further that he “wanted not to exclude the subject, but to define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse,” (AK, 200). The interviewer, of course, persists in questioning, and therein lies the irony: Foucault and his mock interviewer are making moves within a discourse – as subjects, they are following certain rules of statement formation and truth-production. The interviewer has questions concerning the ‘where’ of the subject (forgetting, I

suppose, to notice his own location) – questions which are legitimated by the discursive practice within which he acts. Foucault responds, also within this practice, that the notion of the subject has not been simply abandoned (how could it be, given that Foucault speaks within a discourse?), but that it has been placed on the periphery. It is in this way that Foucault makes questions concerning the subject moot – or at least entirely academic. ‘Of course subjects exist in discourse,’ he might say, ‘how else could I give so many interviews?’

It is with this in mind that I turn to a consideration of what role the subject can play in discourse. The criticism has frequently been leveled against Foucault that there is no room for autonomy in his description of discursive practices, and Foucault has repeatedly replied to such criticism that it is in no way so straight-forward. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, for instance, Foucault claims that

the positivities which I have tried to establish must not be understood as a set of determinations imposed from the outside on the thought of individuals, or inhabiting it from the inside, in advance as it were; they constitute rather the set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised, in accordance with which that practice gives rise to partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified. These positivities are not so much limitations imposed on the initiatives of subjects as the field in which that initiative is articulated, (AK, 201).

This is the root of a notion more thoroughly articulated near the end of Foucault’s career. It is given salient expression in the afterword which accompanies the study done by Dreyfus and Rabinow.

power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power . . . freedom must exist for power to be exerted (SP, 221).

Further, even though “power relations are rooted in the system of social networks [t]his is not to say, however, that there is a primary and fundamental principle of power which dominates society down to the smallest detail,” (SP, 224). Of course, we are still a far cry from full-blown autonomy<sup>5</sup>, but one can quickly see that Foucault believes (or at least comes to believe) that he has not infringed on the conception of subjects as having (at least in prin-

principle) a realm of possibilities from which they might choose – even if this involves the smaller details of social life. The criticism leveled by Taylor ignores the presence of such possibilities in the Foucaultian corpus, though its presence in the early writings is easily over-powered by an apparent tension between power and choice, autonomy and domination. Indeed, the pervasiveness of power often leaves one with a sense of fatalism – especially given the ways in which Foucault has articulated his conception of power. This gut reaction notwithstanding, however, it is important to note that this superficial first-glance of Foucault need not rule out the coherent take on power and freedom present in Foucault's work. To facilitate articulating Foucault's view, consider the following passage from the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*:

power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms . . . would they not accept [power] if they did not see it as a mere limit placed on their desire, leaving a measure of freedom – however slight – intact? Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability (HS, 86).

The question which arises in the above passage amounts to asking whether we are to consider autonomy in terms of power relations or power relations in terms of autonomy. The latter view (a strong reading of the passage) stands in direct opposition to the passages cited above in which Foucault allows something like freedom in specific realms of social life. On this reading, Foucault has unhappily fallen prey to the conception of power as merely a limiting condition on one's ability to act freely. This view takes autonomy as primary – as a condition upon which power is imposed.

In an obvious sense, this reading misses the mark. Power is not something one undergoes, it is something within which one exists. As Foucault goes on to say, "one remains attached to a certain image of power-law, of power sovereignty, which was traced out by the theoreticians of right and the monarchic institution. It is this image that we must break free of," (HS, 90). It is this image (i.e. the image of a sovereign/subject or master/slave relationship) which envisions power as a 'pure limit' on human action. Foucault's conception of power is a far more robust notion. "What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions," (SP, 220).<sup>6</sup> When power is interpreted as a pure limit (that is, as nothing but a limit), it is seen as a purely repressive mechanism of control. As one commentator puts it, Foucault in-

sists that “power is positive and productive, not simply repressive; it is, he reminds us, not always suffered but sometimes enjoyed,” (Hoy, 134). On Foucault’s view, power “is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult,” (SP, 220). In this important respect, power cannot be a pure limit – power produces a realm of possibilities within which the subject can act – it makes certain actions more permissible than other actions, and in some cases, more enjoyable.

It is for this reason that reading the above passage in the strong sense proves foolish. Foucault’s point is not that freedom is in principle impossible, but that individuals tend to view autonomy as the test case for power relations. As Foucault makes clear in “The Confession of the Flesh” interview, “if one tries to erect a theory of power one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence deduce it,” (CF, 199). As I noted above, however, Foucault balks at witch hunts aimed at the undiscovered origins of such things as power. A theory of power (that is, a theory explaining the emergence of power) is precisely not what is needed on Foucault’s view, primarily because such a theory will lead us to postulate a freedom which comes before any power relation. Individuals engaged in such theoretical accounts of power (such as Rousseau) view power as coming from localized sources and as imposing specific limits on what one can and cannot do – not as a pervasive force which determines specific realms of possibility via truth apparatuses. Power is simply not localized on Foucault’s view: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere . . . One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name of a complex strategical situation in a particular society,” (HS, 93).

‘Power’ is a clandestine nominalism. It exists in the very language we speak and the discourses we employ in the production of truth. It is inextricably linked to our archive, and it is impossible to step outside of it.<sup>7</sup>

Given this characterization of power, it is certainly not difficult to respond to Taylor’s classic criticism. Taylor points out that Foucault recognizes that ‘power requires resistances.’ The passage to which Taylor refers runs as follows: “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power,” (PK, 142). Here, as early as the *Power/Knowledge*

writings, Foucault points out that resistances themselves are forms of power – to resist power is already to be a compatriot of power. This truism, however, in no way belittles the concept of resistance – that is, it doesn't make one's resistance 'less real.' Resistance is always resistance to a form of power – not to power itself (which would, in essence, be resistance to a nominalism).

More importantly, however, is the claim that resistance must be present for power to emerge. Taylor reads this claim as the recognition that simple impositions (such as the foods we grow to like in childhood) cannot count as power relations. It is worth noting, however, that one can read this passage with equal plausibility as a recognition that until someone recognizes something as a power relation (and hence is enabled to resist this relation), we cannot speak of the relationship in terms of the dynamic of power. It is only when power is exercised that resistances can be formed, and only when this exercise is seen for what it is – that is, only when it is seen as a power relation.

This reading of the above passage is perhaps anachronistic. It turns on Foucault's notion of 'agonism': "Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an 'agonism' – of a relationship which is at the same time incitation and struggle; less of a face to face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent condition," (SP, 222).<sup>8</sup> In other words, in recognizing a power relation, one recognizes both sides of the relationship – the (often willing) agent whose actions are acted upon, and the strategy employed to act upon these actions. The operative word in the dynamics of power is the word 'relation.' One cannot separate a figurative 'herald' of power and a dominated agent. Power is more pervasive – its sense in Foucault's work is far more robust.

It is for this basic reason that we are entitled to reject Taylor's claim that Foucault does not view impositions as power relations. These are certainly power relations the instant they are called into question – that is, they can be analyzed as power relations the instant I raise questions about their legitimacy – the instant I resist. There is no essential constitution which is 'power' – it arises in specific contexts at specific points in history. It is surreptitious and multifarious. Although I am raised on an omnivorous diet – one which is imposed upon me – I cannot recognize this as a power relation until I later become a vegetarian – until I have resisted that which was imposed on me.

But Taylor's well-known criticism goes further. Taylor maintains that a conception of power requires a conception of liberation, and further a conception

of truth. It is relatively obvious from all that has been said that Foucault does indeed include a notion of liberation in his account of power relations. In one interview, for instance, Foucault makes the striking assertion that “to claim that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what,” (PK, 141–142). I want to stress the point that Foucault is consistent in holding the views Taylor claims are antithetical. Liberation from a form of power is entirely possible, but liberation from power itself is impossible.

A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. Which, be it said in passing, makes all the more politically necessary the analysis of power relations in a given society, their historical formation, the source of their strength or fragility, the conditions which are necessary to transform some or to abolish others. For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of society, such that is cannot be undermined. Instead, I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the ‘agonism’ between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is the permanent political task inherent in all social existence, (SP, 222–223).

Such assertions as this directly respond to Taylor’s argument. This is not to say that Taylor has simply missed Foucault’s point. On the contrary, Taylor seems to contend that such a thin conception of power doesn’t seem to do any significant work.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this essay, however, suffice it to say that when we read Foucault on his own terms, liberation from solitary power relations is indeed possible, but not liberation from all power relations – that is, because power is always exercised, it is never exorcised. By calling into question specific modes of truth production, no doubt via other modes of truth-production, the agent is able to ‘liberate’ herself from encapsulation in a specific discursive practice. In an important sense, this liberation constitutes a change of behavior.

Of course, Taylor also contends that liberation will be tied to some notion of truth – in this instance, something like the recognition of difference as constitutive of discourses.<sup>10</sup> Foucault also seems to address this point by claiming that

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The prob-

lem is not changing people's consciousness – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth. It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself (FR, 74–75).

What might liberation amount to when truth is regarded in this light? On one level, liberation might be facilitated, as mentioned above, by recognizing that modes of truth-production are ultimately historically contingent (though not arbitrary) consequences of our historically situated archive.<sup>11</sup> To 'liberate oneself through truth,' in this light, would be to apply counter-strategies to those systems of truth-production which currently condition the dividing practices within the social realm. This is not to say that power would in some way be usurped. On the contrary, power would be played against power – liberation would thus turn out to be another form of enslavement – but not one which was itself final.

It is a picture such as this that answers Taylor's claim that notions of power require at least the idea of liberation through truth. Liberation is indeed possible from specific power relations via the recognition (that is, the taking as true) that these modes of knowledge production are optional ones – that they do not capture the entire picture. Of course, we are still a far cry from anything remotely similar to full-blown autonomy. The ways in which counter-strategies can be employed in liberation tactics is still dependent upon one's historical situation. Though I have conceded from the outset that we will not reach any conception of fully autonomous agents, I do think that we can progress further towards this end within the Foucaultian picture. In the following section, I will sketch what form this autonomy might take given what has thus far been said.

## 5. Foucault and public autonomy

Many commentators have recently paid careful attention to the sort of autonomy articulated in Foucault's later writings. The emphasis in these writings has been largely on notions found solely in the later work – notions such as 'transgressing limits.' While I find the bulk of this work convincing, I do not think we need to limit the conception of autonomy in Foucault's work to that found in the later writing. Moreover, an emphasis on the conception of

freedom as simply existence within resistance can obscure the role of social construction in our ability to be autonomous beings. If freedom just is resistance, as some commentators have suggested, and resistance must be present for the existence of power relations, it seems that freedom is of necessity present in any 'self' caught in the throes of power – and all selves are caught in the throes of power. Before considering what is lost by emphasizing the later writings alone, I would like to present another conception of autonomy one can wrench from the Foucaultian writings.

Among many other thinkers within the current intellectual milieu who have leveled criticisms concerning autonomy at Foucault's project, Richard Rorty is perhaps the most noteworthy in regard to the question with which I am here concerned. The basic reason for this is that Rorty takes autonomy to be a fundamentally private matter, and it is this conception which Foucault's picture seems to throw up for grabs. Consider the following passage:

The sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek is not the sort of thing that could ever be embodied in social institutions. Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do. The desire to be autonomous is not relevant to the liberal's desire to avoid cruelty and pain – a desire which Foucault shared, even though he was unwilling to express it in those terms (CIS, 65).<sup>12</sup>

What is interesting about this passage is two-fold. On the one hand, Rorty recognizes Foucault as aiming at some type of autonomy – one that happens to be contained exclusively in the private sphere and which is actualized (in Foucault) via the destruction of those unities which divide us. On the other hand, Rorty finds the concept of autonomy irreconcilable with the liberal's project of avoiding cruelty because of its link to the private realm.

There are several means of dismantling the Rortian notion that autonomy must be a private enterprise. The most obvious way is to level the token criticism concerning the public/private distinction – namely, that things which have traditionally been associated with the 'private' have distinctly public dimensions (such as the family). This line of criticism seems far too well-treaded to be of any real value here. Instead of engaging in such criticism, it would be far more fruitful to recognize that, if a conception of autonomy can be pulled from the Foucaultian corpus, it will necessarily have an essential social dimension. I should reiterate that my aim is not to show



that Foucault's project entails autonomy, it is merely to show that it does not exclude it.<sup>13</sup>

If we are to take Foucault seriously, we must understand institutions as creating human capacities, not as actualizing universal human possibilities.<sup>14</sup> As I pointed out above, discursive practices are made possible at moments in history by an archive – that is, by a general system of rules governing the formation and transformation of statements. These rules are inextricably linked to forms of power in that they define a realm of possibility within which a subject can act (that is, within which a subject can speak). Further forms of power exist in the particular discursive practices which are contained within a given archive. For example, the discourse of psychology (which follows the rules of an archive) designates certain individuals as sociopaths. Through this designation, these individuals are placed in a subordinate position of a power relation which is only made possible by the truth-producing practices of the discourse of psychology itself.

In these modes of power and knowledge, the subject is created. There is nothing lying 'behind' the subject, as I pointed out above, because nothing lies outside of (that is, independent of) discourse. Even when Foucault's focus shifts from archaeology to genealogy, from discursive practices to truth apparatuses, Foucault still maintains that all forms of truth/power have a specific discursive dimension. It is in this sense that discourse manufactures the agents which, in turn, perpetuate and alter that which created them.<sup>15</sup>

Given this, it seems that autonomy could only be facilitated by discourse – a fundamentally public 'entity.' Thinking of autonomy as a fundamentally private concern already denies Foucault's basic stance concerning individuals – namely, that they are the products of discourse. If we accept Foucault at his word, speaking of autonomy would be speaking of autonomy as embodied in the interaction of particular institution-formed individuals.<sup>16</sup> When one describes the contents of one's life, for instance, one engages in those discursive practices which constitute one's understanding of the world and the 'self' created by discursive practices. In this crucial sense, any talk of autonomy in Foucault's idiom has already presupposed the entire network of social relations. If we can call ourselves autonomous, it is because of social institutions and the 'public' sphere, not in spite of them. Autonomy does not occur in a vacuum, and an articulation of the autonomous 'self' as completely independent of the social is vacuous: autonomy is not something attainable in isolation. It is for this very reason that Foucault can reject the criticism that autonomy cannot be the product of social institutions; autonomy can be nothing but this.

It is because autonomy must be construed as an outgrowth of social institutions that speaking of autonomy solely in terms of resistance is problematic. Resistance is a fact about our existence in power. The degree of our resistance, as well as the political efficacy of our resistance, however, is an entirely contingent matter – something that could only grow out of our emergence with and through discourse and social institutions. The realm of possibility inherent in social life can be wide or narrow – and it is in this realm that autonomy can be articulated. Limiting the articulation of freedom to resistance – at least where resistance is viewed as a necessary condition in the existence of power – misses this point. If we are free, it is not because resistance is a necessary feature of social ontology, it is because we have been constructed such that we are capable of free choice.<sup>17</sup>

But is there a problem with even articulating the notion of autonomy? Does it conflict with Foucault's notion of power as pervasive? The answer to this (admittedly rhetorical) question is an unequivocal 'no.' A weak notion of autonomy does not entail an absence of Foucault's notion of power (though it does exclude, to a certain degree, a complete subject/sovereign or master/slave relationship). The fact that we are always in relationships of power does not entail that we cannot make choices freely. It seems clear that the psychologist can decide whether or not a patient is a sociopath regardless of the fact that the designator 'sociopath' presupposes (and perpetuates) a network of power relations. Existing in the exercises of power does not mean existing without choice – it means only that choices occur within a realm of possibilities defined by discursive practices. And this view, I dare say, is not one that can simply be partitioned to Foucault's later work. As one commentator puts it, "the idea of an aesthetics of existence in Foucault's later work is not a solution to the analysis of power he had previously written," (Bell, 86). Nor is it a solution to the determining effects of discursive practices, as discursive practices are those things within which we live. If autonomy exists in the Foucaultian corpus (and many recent commentators agree that it does), it exists as a function of social construction in discourse, not as an alternative to it.

Autonomy, in this picture, thus already involves a certain set of limiting conditions – a field in which choices are made. My point is not that every discourse contains this 'field' – it is only that a discourse can, in principle, contain an arena within which an agent can act freely.<sup>18</sup> When we consider Foucault's view that discourses and institutions create human capacities, there is no obvious reason to reject the idea that one capacity which could in principle be created would be the capacity to make certain choices within those discursive practices – choices which are more or less free ones.<sup>19</sup>

The ‘more or less’ in the above assertion is perhaps the crucial point. Even if institutions/discursive practices can create individuals who have free-range over the choices they make in regard to a number of issues, this by no means entails that the decision-procedures which allow the individuals to make these choices will be autonomous ones. I suppose the answer to whether or not Foucault’s work can admit of autonomy will turn on this issue. If, by autonomy, one has in mind the ability to choose which discursive practices and modes of truth production one will employ when engaging in decision-procedures, Foucault is obviously the wrong place to look. If one has a more general concern about individuals being able to choose between alternatives in instances of such things as ethical dilemmas – and to be able to call these choices free – Foucault, if my argument holds, at least does not exclude the possibility of discourses constituting individuals in such a way as to allow room for free choice.

It is this picture which justifies my thesis that Foucault allows room for a ‘weak’ autonomy, understood as the ability to make more or less free choices within a realm of possibilities. I want to emphasize, in conclusion, that such an ability seems to undergird the sense of liberation I presented above. In order to assess differing discourses within history, recognizing that these discourses and truth-producing practices are ultimately optional ones, seems to presuppose an ability to evaluate (make choices) about the status of truth and its corresponding set of dominating practices. This, for Foucault, is the current political question. It is difficult to see how one might begin to answer such a deep question without some (albeit weak) ability to engage in autonomous action.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. A list of abbreviations is to be found in the bibliography. All future citations occur within the text.
2. Following Dreyfus and Rabinow, I take Foucault’s use of a ‘statement’ to be what Searle refers to as a ‘speech act.’ The important caveat to note in this identity is that Foucault is “not concerned with everyday speech acts. Thus he is not interested in speech act theory – the rules which govern the production of each type of speech act . . . Rather, Foucault is interested in those types of speech acts which are divorced from the local situation of assertion and from the shared background so as to constitute a relatively autonomous realm,” p. 47–48, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.
3. Although the interview in which Foucault made these claims appeared several years after *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, it is implied by Foucault’s discussion of the archive in that book. I am certainly willing to concede that Foucault’s view of statements evolved to

incorporate this notion of ‘truth,’ but the evolution was a meager step given the striking similarity between the role of the archive and that of ‘truth’ in the above interview.

4. As an interpretive tactic, this may seem a bit suspect. Most responses to Taylor tend to focus on the notion of ‘transgressing limits’ that appears in Foucault’s later writings. While this is certainly a plausible retort to the criticism leveled against Foucault, it tends to dodge the questions surrounding Foucault’s early works. By reading the early works as at least anticipating Foucault’s later thought, I hope to show that even Foucault’s early work is not anathema to a conception of autonomy.
5. By ‘full-blown autonomy’ I mean the sort of self-governance we expect from the Enlightenment tradition: namely, the ability to have more or less complete control over one’s decision procedures. Or, as Kant puts it, “autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself independent of any property of the objects of its volition,” (Groundwork, Ak. 440). Foucault has been a crucial figure in the onslaught against this notion of ‘freedom of the will,’ and it is for this very reason that so many commentators have felt obligated to show why the absence of this sort of freedom does not commit us to a helpless determinism. Bell’s “The Promise of Liberalism and Performance of Freedom” provides a nice articulation of this very point. By relying heavily on Foucault’s later writings, Bell claims that the idea of an aesthetics of existence in Foucault’s thought is “concerned with how one lives one’s life in the present,” (86). Given this, it should be clear that articulating an Enlightenment-esque conception of freedom of the will (that is, a fullblown autonomy) is not a reasonable aim: Foucault and Kant do not share the same vocabulary here. We cannot hope to attribute to the Foucaultian subject a substance behind action which contains some metaphysical freedom. We should consider the conditions under which subjects emerge, not the conditions of agency per se, if we are interested in autonomy.
6. I take this to mean that the actions in which we partake are in some sense given in advance – that is, the realm of possibilities within which we live and breathe has been decided for us. Our actions are in this way ‘acted upon.’
7. By virtue of the fact that we cannot step outside of power, it is misleading to think of ‘power’ as a nominalism in the traditional sense – that is, as something ‘merely’ about language. Foucault is distinguishing that which enables us to experience ourselves *as* selves, not simply a blanket term applicable to specific instances but having no substantial existence of its own. ‘Power’ is that which situates us in normative space. It would be misleading to reduce this to the traditional notion of a nominalism. The thrust of this point should be clear in what follows.
8. The articulation of freedom and resistance in this text is admittedly more developed than the articulation found in the PK writings. I am lumping the two views together for the sake of exegetical convenience and with the hope that nothing is lost thereby.
9. It is for this reason that Taylor refuses to think of power as anything but domination.
10. It is important to point out that this ‘truth’ is present as early as AK (cf. 131, quoted above), and resurfaces again and again in Foucault’s writings. The later writings obviously develop this notion in a far more robust way than the early ones.
11. It may here be objected that I am being far too anachronistic – that the ‘archive’ is a notion we should relegate to AK, and leave it there. I can only respond that I view Foucault’s texts as continuous – as demonstrating different emphasis, though not different content. Applying the concept of an ‘archive’ to Foucault’s later thought is thus not so much anachronistic as it is an attempt to show how the early writings contain, in

- outline, those ideas developed late in Foucault's career.
12. In the discussion that follows, I am using Rorty in much the same way that Rorty uses Davidson—namely, as a springboard for the articulation of certain ideas. I do not mean to imply that Rorty's 'private autonomy' is non-discursive, or not facilitated by social roles and practices. I am using Rorty's position in CIS heuristically.
  13. It is certainly possible, if one focuses on Foucault's later work, to make the stronger case that something like autonomy is entailed by Foucault's later thought. Jon Simons has made a similar argument in *Foucault and the Political*. See especially Chapter 7, where Simons claims that "Foucault's conceptualization of power relations as agnostic implicitly includes a regulative principle for the assessment of political regimes," (86).
  14. Some commentators come dangerously close to forgetting this, or so it seems to me. In *Foucault and Social Dialogue*, for instance, Christopher Falzon speaks as though the creative capacities of human agents are a necessary condition for social dialogue (cf. especially Chapter 2). While this is a tempting picture, I don't think a 'transcendental' argument of this sort is necessary to get a notion of freedom from Foucault's texts. Autonomy is not essentially based on anything — whether that be a will, a regime, or a creative capacity. If we are autonomous, it is not because of a capacity we had in advance, but because of the discursive regimes that constitute us. To be fair to Falzon's quite good discussion, I should acknowledge that his treatment only *sometimes* implies an argument from 'necessary conditions,' though the implications are far from hidden. Falzon claims, for example, that "it is this irrepressible human talent for creative transgression which both continually gives rise to new historical forms and *makes possible* their transformation, and which makes historical dialogue *possible*," (*my italics*, 56). This certainly comes off as a 'transcendental' argument — that is, an argument about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of x. To even conceive freedom/dialogue in history, Falzon claims, we must confer 'creative transgression' onto historicized subjects. This philosophical anthropology is acceptable, perhaps, but it is not necessary to wrench a notion of freedom from Foucault.
  15. This point is widely agreed upon among commentators, and has been made in a number of interesting ways. Falzon employs a notion of 'dialogue' (reminiscent of McDowell's *Mind and World*) to explain how agents actively change their environs.
  16. Foucault distinguishes between discursive practices and institutions. Although I am not invoking this distinction in the context of this essay, for clarity's sake, the distinction can be summed up as follows: "Everything which functions in a society as a system of constraint and which isn't an utterance, in short, all the filed of the non-discursive, is an institution," p. 198–199, "The Confession of the Flesh," in *Power/Knowledge*.
  17. Bell makes this same point obliquely by pointing out that "the practice of liberty is not a set of activities that could ever be exhausted by the notion of an aesthetics of the self," (86). I take Bell's point here to be that we ought not limit the articulation of liberty in the social constructionist view to the view of 'aesthetics' found in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Much more can be said about the sort of autonomy possible in social existence.
  18. I take this view to be present in AK, though Foucault's discussion of 'freedom' in his later work does seem to involve a more robust notion of practicing the transgression of limits. The work done on this portion of Foucault's thought is ample. My contention

here is that we need not limit discussions of autonomy to the developed form of 'autonomy' present in Foucault's final writings.

19. Notice that this is a different claim than the one often formulated in the secondary literature. Commentators often point out that resistance plays a crucial role in Foucault's writings. This is certainly accurate, but the role of resistance is not straight-forwardly translatable into 'autonomy' – especially when resistance is articulated as a necessary condition for the existence of power relations. The point here is that, even if we cannot count 'resistance' as freedom, we can envision institutions constituting agents such that these agents can make free choices – and we can envision this independently of our stance concerning 'resistance.'
20. I am grateful to both Georgia Warnke and an anonymous referee for many helpful comments on and queries concerning earlier versions of this paper.

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