The Subject and Historiography

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In 1966, Michel Foucault closed *The Order of Things*, his archaeology of the human sciences, with the now famous proclamation:

> Only one [set of epistemic arrangements], that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear . . . If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility - without knowing what its form will be or what it promises - were to cause them to crumble . . . then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.¹

The end of man, or the death of the author, soon became a recurring theme in the work of poststructuralists such as Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes.² The poststructuralists and their followers relentlessly attacked the humanist concept of the subject while attempting to devise approaches to texts, history, politics, and ethics that avoided it. Nonetheless, some commentators have suggested that in his later writings Foucault came to embrace the subject once again.³ Is man dead? Has he changed in some way? Or was the debate a storm in a teacup now best forgotten?

The identity of the subject is of intrinsic interest, but it also has implications for how we should think about history. We can highlight these implications through a study of Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical works. By doing so, we will set the scene for an analysis of how we might oppose many of his main philosophical targets without adopting the hostility to the humanist subject characteristic of much of his work. Our defence of the subject then will lead into a reconsideration of the
practice of history, a reconsideration that will juxtapose concepts such as tradition and dilemma with Foucauldian ones such as regime of power and technologies of the self.

Archaeology and Genealogy

Foucault’s archaeological studies, including The Order of Things, explored the successive historical epistemes that had governed theory and practice in psychology, health, and the human sciences. An episteme is a set of structural relations between concepts. It "delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognised to be true." An episteme is a fundamental code that governs the way people understand the world and act in it. Although epistemes are rarely held consciously, they exercise an all-pervasive influence; they saturate all of the religious, philosophical, scientific, social, and artistic practice of an age.

Foucault’s concept of an episteme embodies a quasi-structuralist hostility to the humanist subject, and, more particularly, to rationality and agency. For a start, epistemes are historical a priori in that they have no atemporal basis but nonetheless people take them for granted without questioning their validity. Far from epistemes being a reflection of a natural order or of rational deliberation, they construct both the world we study and the concept of rationality we adopt. Both the way we perceive the world and the way we classify things depend on the codes that govern our thinking. Each episteme prescribes rules for the ordering and classifying of our concepts, and these rules thus fix our view of the world at any given time. What is more, Foucault implies that epistemes are not products of the creative activity of individual subjects.
They are defined by the relations between their component concepts, and they rise and fall in abrupt, arbitrary discontinuities. Far from individual subjects constructing epistemes through their agency, epistemes define individuals by giving them their concepts, desires, beliefs, and so actions.

Any attempt to identify a clear break in Foucault’s work dividing an earlier structuralist period from a later poststructuralist one involves turning structuralism into a caricature of its true self. Still, in 1971 he published a methodological study, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which he adopted a noticeably more critical view of structuralism than he had previously. He no longer believed in fixed epistemes assigning a definite content to concepts. Discourse stood by itself, incapable of being reduced to a prior set of structural relations. Epistemes, conceived as monolithic structures that govern all of an epoch, were replaced in Foucault’s work by discourses, conceived as diverse and elastic ways of talking and writing about the world.

In his later histories, Foucault focused on discourses composed of endlessly proliferating meanings, none of which are stable. He turned from archaeology to a genealogy designed to follow fluid meanings along chains of interpretations without postulating an essence or origin behind the meanings. Genealogy traces meanings through statements and events as they happen to have occurred in history. A discourse consists, Foucault said, of a set of meanings that coalesce to create an archive defined as a tentative grouping of statements in accord with the contingent regularities and connections that link them to one another. Foucault talked here of "historical rules, always specific to time and place, and which, for a given period and within a social, economic, geographic, or linguistic zone, define the framework within which the enunciative functions are exercised." Once Foucault thus dismissed the notion of monolithic epistemes, it no longer made sense for him to conceive of historical change
as ruptures or breaks between epistemes. Change consisted instead of irruptions on the surface of the archive. The transition from one era to another occurs when the statements that act as bubbles on the surface of the archive operate to disrupt the archive itself.

The shift from archaeology to genealogy did not reintroduce the subject as a rational agent. Rather, Foucault saw the subject, archive, and change all as functions of a Nietzschean "will to power". History thus appeared as a "drama" of repressive construction in which power represses the subject as a body at the same time as it constructs the subject as a set of beliefs and desires.8 The subject, archive, and change arise as effects of power\knowledge, that is, the will to power masquerading as a will to truth. Whereas Foucault had seen the subject as a product of epistemes, he now saw it as the product of power/knowledge - "the individual is an effect of power."

Likewise, regimes of power are not a result of the actions of individuals but of power itself. Power exists throughout society, appearing in innumerable micro-situations, the cumulative effect of which is a given regime of power. For Foucault, the subject is produced now by the external and internal constraints of regimes of power. Hence Discipline and Punish explores the external controls that preclude certain identities, notably by defining certain bodily desires as unacceptable.10 The History of Sexuality, likewise, explores the internal controls that provide technologies of the self by which individuals can construct themselves in accord with the ruling configuration of power/knowledge.

An awareness of Foucault’s consistent opposition to the subject – to agency and rationality – highlights three themes that recur in his genealogy as well as in his archaeology. The first theme is a focus on mentalities, activities, and processes. For Foucault, any set of social arrangements rests on a particular, arbitrary conceptual
structure, an episteme or regime of power. His histories always focus, therefore, on mentalities. The key to understanding a social practice is not its legal character, its class composition, or the patterns of behaviour associated with it; rather, all of these things, like the institution itself are understood in terms of the ideas or concepts that give them their character. The shift in Foucault's work from archaeology to genealogy occurred as he moved from regarding a set of concepts as intelligible in terms of the structural relationships within an episteme to regarding it as devoid of any such logic and so wholly contingent. In his genealogical studies, the relevant sets of concepts and practices are decentred. They appear to arise out of the largely random interaction of numerous micro-practices. Particular local programmes of governance in prisons, hospitals, asylums, the economy, and social security "inform individual behaviour" and “act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things” so as to “crystallise into institutions.”

Foucault’s decentred studies of social practices explore the ways in which they are created, sustained, and modified through the meanings at work in a host of micro-practices. They focus on the devices or policies that give effect to a regime of power and the ways in which these devices and policies define, control, and regulate the subjects within that regime of power. Foucault thus encourages us to study a politics beyond the state, a politics of child-care, schooling, punishment, self-improvement, and the corporation.

A second theme in Foucault’s historiography derives from his hostility to agency. He emphasises the ways in which individuals are constructed or normalised by epistemes or regimes of power. His decentred studies concentrate on power as it acts on and through individual subjects who are thus given little, if any, self-defining capacities. Foucault vehemently rejected Sartre’s idea of the subject as its own foundation - the subject as capable of having meaningful experiences, reasoning,
forming beliefs, and acting outside of a particular social context. Foucault also rejected the idea that a necessary historical dialectic, whether Hegelian or Marxist, would culminate in the realisation of such a subject. For Foucault, the subject is at any given time a contingent product of a particular set of techniques of government and technologies of the self. Thus, his genealogies analyse the ways in which new forms of subjectivity arose as effects of disciplinary power and pastoral power. Far from asking how agents create social practices and relations of power, he asks how social practices and relations of power create forms of subjectivity.

Some commentators argue that Foucault's later work allows for agency. Colin Gordon, for example, suggests that because pastoral power works through the self-regulation of subjects, "it pre-supposes rather than annuls their capacity as agents."14 Foucault does indeed distinguish between the operation of discipline and pastorship. Discipline, he suggests, is inherently violent. Laws, rules, and norms are set up, and people who infringe them are punished with violence – beaten and incarcerated. Such violence might confront resistance, but it cannot allow resistance since it operates by dominating, by forcing others to conform: "if it [violence] comes up against any resistance, it has no other option but to try to minimise it."15 Pastoral power, in contrast, has to flow through the consciousness of subjects in such a way that they internalise the relevant laws, rules, and norms so as to regulate themselves in accord with them. It operates not as a direct, immediate form of domination as does violence, but as a type of influence. Moreover, because it must work by convincing the subject of the rightness of certain acts, it must treat the subject "to the very end as a person who acts."16

Despite the important differences between discipline and pastorship, however, the emphasis of Foucault, and scholars inspired by him, remains on the construction of
the subject by social power: little attention is paid to the ways in which subjects act as agents to create social practices. There are several respects in which this is so. For a start, neither the self-regulating capacities of individuals nor the techniques of the self in which they might be expressed appear as corollaries of the creative and innovative capacity of the subject to form new beliefs and to perform novel actions. They appear, rather, as means by which modern power constructs as objects, studies, and classifies the individuals within the population. Foucault shows us how doctors, criminologists, psychologists, religious ministers, and counsellors establish norms and patterns of deviancy. Pastoral power does not represent a form of creative agency so much as a process through which individuals internalise norms so as to act upon and reform themselves. Individuals do little more than subjectify themselves to the modern regime of power.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, even when individuals are allowed some measure of creativity, this creativity seems to be restricted by clear limits imposed by a regime of power. Foucault and his followers typically present each regime of power as constituting a particular way of constructing, or at least problematising, the identity, ends, and behaviour of the subject. Individuals might be able to explore various modes of life - to select some patterns of behaviour rather than others - but they can do so only within the context of a particular problematisation. Indeed, it is “the power of normalization” itself that “individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another”.\textsuperscript{18} Finally, Foucault and his followers often seem to be calling us to resist what they see as the false freedoms tied to pastoral power. For Foucault, "the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualisation which is linked to the state."\textsuperscript{19} Surely,
however, it makes sense for us to refuse what we are only if we see our identity as in an important sense imposed upon us? Surely we will want to liberate ourselves from the modern form of individualisation with its concomitant freedoms only if we believe such freedoms to be illusory?

A third theme in Foucault’s historiography derives from his hostility to rationality. He emphasises the contingent, accidental, and discontinuous nature of the processes through which social practices have arisen. He rejects the idea of an objective and universal, or even subjective and local, reason lying behind our world. All forms of reason are the contingent products of the will to power masquerading as the will to truth. Again, the rationale or justification for any policy or activity always exists in the context of a particular set of goals and principles: there is never a meta-context or meta-theory such that the rationale or justification can stand independent of the particular context. For Foucault, practices do not express a universal principle or developmental law - not a functional one, not psychological characteristics, not a process of modernisation and differentiation. They are, rather, random constructs that arise out of the blind interaction of numerous micro-practices. A crucial aim of his genealogical studies is, therefore, to unsettle our uncritical assumption of the natural reasonableness of our social practices. His genealogies constitute histories of the present in that they undermine the presumptions and orthodoxies of our time. They show that what we often think of as natural or rational is in fact historically contingent and more or less random.

There is an obvious synergy between Foucault’s hostilities to agency and to rationality. To deny agency is to reject the notion of individuals forming beliefs and performing actions on the basis of their reasoning. Similarly, to depict subjects as products of regimes of power is to explain their beliefs and actions by reference to an
irrational social force operating through various micro-practices. Foucault's
genealogies rarely ask what reasons people had for adopting new techniques of
discipline or new technologies of the self. They are far more likely to explore the
ways in which such techniques and technologies were later made authoritative through
various social discourses. Experts, whether criminologists, psychologists, doctors,
religious ministers, or counsellors, do not appear in Foucault's histories as people who
have good or valid reasons for adopting one set of beliefs and practices rather than
another. They appear instead as a transmission belt through which an irrational form
of power imposes itself upon individual subjects.

The Subject After Foucault

Certain themes in Foucault’s historiography reflect his continuing hostility to
the humanist subject. His genealogies as well as his archaeologies remain indebted to
structuralism at least in their opposition to agency and to rationality.20 Perhaps we
might suggest, therefore, that poststructuralists such as Foucault can reject human
agency only by positing a series of positions akin to those of the structuralists. They
present performances in the context of decentred structures understood as endless
chains of signifiers, regimes of power, or conjunctions of micro-practices, not the
decisions of individual subjects. The only possible reason for denying agency is that
the character of performances really does derive from these sorts of structures, not the
informing presence of individual subjects. But decentred structures can prescribe the
character of performances only if they loom over performances in the way structural
linguists believe langue looms over parole.21 Concepts such as power/knowledge
make the individual subject irrelevant only if they are self-contained and they
determine the nature of performances. It is for this reason that Foucault denies that his
regimes of power are products of subjectivity whilst arguing that texts and actions are mere functions of these regimes of power.

We can distinguish three possible types of relationship in which structures or quasi-structures would lie behind performances. First, structure might influence performance but the nature of this influence might preclude our identifying limits to the forms a performance can take. This relationship can not sustain a rejection of agency. If structures only influenced performances, we could not explain even the bold outlines of actions and texts by reference to structures, so individual subjects would remain crucial to our accounts of performances. Second, structure might restrict performance by establishing identifiable limits to the forms it can take without thereby fixing the form it takes within these limits. This relationship can sustain only a partial down-playing of agency. If structures restricted performances, we could explain why actions and texts remained within certain limits by reference to structures, but individual subjects would continue to provide the reference point for our accounts of the concrete character of performances within these limits. This truncated version of the structuralist and poststructuralist position might allow us to explain the bold outline of social orders in structural terms, but it would not allow us to do away with the subject. Third, structure might decide performance with every detail, no matter how small, of every performance being determined by the relevant structure. This relationship alone can sustain a full-blown rejection of agency. If structures decided every feature of performances, then we really could give complete accounts of actions and texts in terms of structures in a way that would make the subject irrelevant.

But, of course, structure does not decide performance in this way. Because people adopt different theories and actions against the background of the same social
structure, there must be an undecided space situated to the fore of any given structure. There must be a space in which the subject can adopt either this theory or that theory, and perform this action or that action. Hence, structure can not decide performance for there is an open space within the constellation of theories people accept and the set of actions they perform. It is not enough for poststructuralists to suggest that some aspects of performance are uniform within a structure, say, that certain theories are common to everyone who deploys a particular form of discourse; it is not enough because this would leave other aspects of performance that are not so determined, and these aspects would constitute an undecided space; it is not enough because this would imply that structure only restricts - not decides - performance. The poststructuralists must argue that structure decides all the details of each and every performance: after all, if it does not do so, we will need the concept of the subject or agency to explain what remains undecided by structure, so we will be unable to reject the very idea of agency.

We can not allow that structure decides performance because the diversity of performance entails, at the very least, a moment of agency when the subject decides what theory to adopt within the framework a given episteme, or what action to perform within the context of a given regime of power. Although a linguistic structure forms the background to our statements, and a social structure forms the background to our actions, the content of our statements and our actions does not come directly from these structures, but rather from the way that we use or respond to these structures in accord with our intentions. So, the most we can allow is that structure influences or restricts performance, and this means that we must retain something of the humanist concern with the subject. The extent to which we must refer to agency depends on whether we are dealing with an area where structures
either influence or restrict the performance. When structure influences performance, we have to rely almost exclusively on the idea of agency to account for a performance. Structures that merely influence the subject do not even fix limits to performance, so to understand performances, we must focus on agency, with the structure appearing as a background factor. When structure restricts performance, we have to invoke agency to give a full account of a performance. A structure that restricts individual subjects ensure they only undertake performances that remain within certain boundaries, but to understand why their performances have the particular character they do within these boundaries, we must focus on their agency.

Foucault’s rejection of the subject appears to need an account of structure as a self-contained determinant of performance. Yet the only viable analysis of structure is of a system of conventions, based on past and current performances, which influences or restricts later performances. Although our analysis of structure thus differs from that seemingly postulated by poststructuralists, it suffices to support many of Foucault’s criticisms of alternative philosophical perspectives. One obvious philosophical target of Foucault’s is Sartre's existentialist account of the integrity of the subject. Sartre depicts the subject as wholly autonomous; as individuals, we make our decisions without being influenced, let alone restricted, by anything akin to social structures. To deny this to oneself or others is, he argues, the archetypal act of bad faith. It is not always easy to accept our existential freedom, and the anxiety inherent in recognising absolute autonomy leads many people to pretend their lives and choices are the result of social forces, roles, and circumstances, not their own decisions. Nonetheless, our existential freedom entails our making our own choices and so lives unencumbered by external influences or pressures. There is no sense whatsoever in
which either social structures or the unconscious can determine the character of our performances.

To reject Sartrean existentialism requires only our analysis of structure. If structures always influence or restrict performances, the subject can not be wholly autonomous, so there can not be a realm of existential freedom where we make choices totally unaffected by social pressures. Consider the process of forming beliefs. A belief in existential freedom here presupposes an appeal to signifieds fixed independently of all theoretical contexts - we can not arrive at beliefs uninfluenced by social tradition unless we can know things independently of all prior theories. So, if we accept that language is differential, we will argue that signifieds are fixed only within a theoretical context, so we necessarily reach the beliefs we do against the background of the traditions of our community. Consider now the nature of action. We always act within a social context that restricts the actions we can perform successfully: we can not sell something if nobody will buy it; we can not vote outside of a shared electoral practice; and we can not get married unless the law allows us to do so. People live in a social context composed largely of the beliefs and actions of others, and this context restricts the actions they can perform, where the nature of the restrictions depends on the context and the capacities of the individual being considered.

Another philosophical target of Foucault’s is the Hegelian idea of an ulterior, universal basis to rationality. Hegel can seem to have sought a basis for human nature, and so the choices we make, in an immanent account of objective rationality, as opposed to a realm of existential freedom. For Hegel, the subjects is not wholly autonomous because its beliefs and actions are conditioned by an ulterior principle of objective reason. The subject is constituted in part by universal reason, as established
by the dialectical logic that governs the development of mind through history. When we describe the appropriate logic of the subject, we illuminate the dictates of an objective reason, and thus come to apprehend a universal-I or absolute spirit that defines the particular-I or individual subject. Foucault rejects this dialectic when he avows Nietzsche’s belief that "the forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts." There is no universal subject available to sustain an objective concept of rationality that might serve as an interpretative principle for understanding particular individuals.

To reject a Hegelian belief in absolute spirit requires only our analysis of structure. To analyse structure as a product of performance, rather than as self-contained, is not necessarily to see structure as the rational expression of absolute spirit. Although structure appears as the product of many acts of agency, there need be no universal subject informing these acts to ensure they result in the fulfilment of an overall masterplan. We can avoid introducing a universal subject that provides a foundation for the complex results of particular instances of agency. Indeed, if we insist that performances are inherently undetermined, we will dismiss the idea of a logical basis to individual performances; nothing - neither absolute spirit nor anything else - requires individual subjectivity and its complex products to exhibit a given character. We will deny that the progress of finite, human rationality obeys an immanent logic dictated by a universal subject. We will say that postulating absolute spirit as an immanent basis for agency obscures the radical contingency of all our judgements. Individuals can reason only from an inherently limited perspective representing their own, contingent location in space and time.

Yet another target of Foucault’s is the view of the subject associated with liberationist theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich. Here we can
argue that the radical contingency of the subject undermines the notion of a fixed essence to our being that would lead us, at least once we were emancipated, to believe or act in a given way. Even while we oppose Sartrean, Hegelian, and liberationist theories of the subject, however, we still can defend an analysis of the subject couched in terms of capacities and restrictions. Such an analysis would allow for the radical contingency of subjectivity because faculties and restrictions need not prescribe any definite content unto themselves.

We already have begun to sketch an analysis of the subject by ascribing to it a capacity for agency. The subject is capable of acting in a creative, novel manner. Although the subject adopts beliefs and performs actions under the influence of a social structure, the relevant social forces do not determine these performances. What the subject does is a particular result of its decisions, even if these decisions are influenced by the social context. Now we can expand this analysis of the subject by appealing to a capacity for local reasoning as a possible basis for its decisions.

The decisions of the subject can not embody a pure freedom, since, following Foucault, we have opposed Sartrean existentialism. They also can not embody a universal reason, since, following Foucault, we have opposed the Hegelian notion of absolute spirit. However, we can reject these two possibilities and still assert the possibility of local reasoning in a way that Foucault generally seems reluctant to do. Local reasoning refers to the capacity of the subject to adopt new beliefs and perform novel actions for reasons that make sense to it from its particular standpoint, from within its web of beliefs. The particular nature of such standpoints means that we can appeal to them without evoking a natural or universal reason.

Philosophers who reject the possibility of pure or universal reason, as well as pure experience, still often suggest that a concern with consistency is a necessary
feature of all webs of belief. Because an ability to ascribe meaning to innumerable utterances depends on the fact that to assert them is to deny the contrary, the existence of a language and the holding of beliefs presuppose norms of consistency governing the use of language or the formation of beliefs in any given context. The capacity for local reasoning embodies this norm. It does not imply that subjects always will follow this norm so as to adopt beliefs or to act in a way that is rational given their view of the world. Rather, it suggests that agents are capable of such reasoning, and so that we have to allow for their reasoning in understanding why they come to believe what they do and why they act as they do.

So, we can conclude that the subject is an agent capable of local reasoning. The subject can act in novel ways for reasons that reflect the consistency of the web of beliefs he or she has formed against the background of various social influences. They can exercise their agency, however, only within restrictions fixed by the natural and social environment around them. In this view, Foucault’s work has succeeded in changing man or the subject without killing him. Foucault undermines the notions of autonomy, universal reason, and liberation characteristic of many modern analyses of the subject. However, we can oppose such notions and still defend a concept of the subject as an agent capable of local reasoning.

**Historiography After Foucault**

Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical practices exhibit a powerful hostility to the humanist subject. The main targets of this hostility - existentialism, Hegelianism, and liberationism - often do deploy unacceptable concepts of autonomy and universal reason. Yet Foucault’s hostility to the subject goes too far. So, we have defended, against Foucault, a notion of the subject as possessing capacities for agency
and local reasoning. Tantalisingly we can see signs in Foucault’s late thought of his softening the hostility to the subject implied by his archaeology and genealogy. At the very least his late works appear to evoke the possibility of subjects adopting patterns of behaviour for themselves and opposed to social norms – an aesthetic or ethic that leads to a type of freedom.\textsuperscript{25} How, or if, he would have reconciled these apparent appeals to the subject with his genealogy, let alone his archaeology, remains unclear. Irrespective of how Foucault’s thought developed or might have developed, however, once we allow that the subject is an agent capable of local reasoning, we have to rethink the themes we found characterised his historiography. We have to modify, but not necessarily abandon, the language and emphases typical of Foucault and his followers.

Consider first Foucault’s focus on mentalities, activities, and processes. Our return to aspects of the humanist subject has little import for this focus. From our perspective, a suitable emphasis on the radical contingency of performance entails a similar concern with the ways in which social practices are created, recreated, and also modified, not as a result of a social logic allegedly based on something such as modernisation, functional differentiation, inherent rationality, or intentional design, but as a result of numerous contingent, particular performances. Postfoundationalism implies that those we study, as well as ourselves, do not have pure experiences of the world. Hence, we can not read-off their beliefs or actions from allegedly objective factors about them, such as their institutional position or social class. We can not postulate a natural logic that governs practices or social development. Like Foucault, we have to focus instead on the contingent mentalities, activities, and processes through which diverse forms of social life are constructed, maintained, and adapted. An awareness of the radical contingency of performance prompts us, moreover, to
follow Foucault’s genealogy, as opposed to his archaeology, in highlighting the
decentered nature of forms of social life. Neither mentalities nor the actions and
practices they inform possess an internal essence or logical path of development.
Rather, they arise out of the contingent conjunction, interaction, and often conflict of
their various components. The only significant way in which our concern with
mentalities, activities, and processes would differ from Foucault’s is thus in the
content we would give to such things. A return to the subject would encourage us to
equate mentalities less with epistemes and discourses than with beliefs. Again, a
return to the subject would encourage us to unpack activities and processes in terms of
agency rather than the inner workings of power.

Next consider Foucault’s emphasis on the ways in which individuals are
constructed or normalised by epistemes or regimes of power. This emphasis arose
from Foucault’s hostility to agency. Here we followed Foucault in opposing what we
might call autonomy - the idea that the subject can form beliefs or act in a realm of
pure reason or pure freedom uninfluenced by social forces. As a result of rejecting
autonomy, we should accept with Foucault that subjects necessarily experience the
world in ways that reflect the influence on them of social forces, of power/knowledge.
Hence, we will explore the ways in which social influences permeate beliefs and
actions even on those occasions when the subject does not recognise such influence.
We will trace the weight of history and society as they bear down, often obscured
from view, on utterances, actions, and practices. Moreover, we will remain aware of
how the weight of history thus influences the forms subjectivity takes. A social
inheritance effects the very constitution of the subject, that is, the content and ideals of
self that exist in any given time and place.
Unlike Foucault, however, we defended a capacity for agency such that the subject can adopt novel beliefs that are neither fixed nor properly limited by the social context. We should allow that the subject possesses the capacity to select particular beliefs and actions including novel ones that might transform the relevant social context. This suggests, moreover, that we should conceive of such contexts as traditions rather than epistemes or regimes of power. After all, the concept of a tradition implies that the relevant social structures is one in which subjects are born and which then acts as the background to their beliefs and actions while also allowing for the possibility of their modifying, developing, and even rejecting much of their inheritance. Evoking traditions thus calls us to explore the ways in which social contexts are themselves the products of agency. Technologies of the self are not just modes of self-regulation in accord with alien norms. They are products of our beliefs and actions, many of which reflect our reasoning.

As humans, we reach our beliefs and perform our actions against a tradition that influences those beliefs and actions; but as humans we also possess a capacity for agency such that we can reason and act innovatively against the background of a tradition. The concept of tradition thus captures the fact that the subject exists in a social context that influences his or her performances. How should we fill-out this concept of tradition in contrast to that of an episteme? For a start, because tradition is unavoidable only as a starting point, not as something that determines or limits later performances, we should be cautious of representing tradition as an inevitable presence in all the subject does in case we thereby leave too slight a role for agency. In particular, we should not imply that traditions are somehow constitutive of beliefs or actions. Rather, we should conceive of tradition primarily as an initial influence on people, where the content of the tradition will appear in their later performances only
in so far as their agency has not led them to change it, and where every part of it is in principle open to change. In addition, because tradition is unavoidable only as a starting point, not as a final destination, we should be wary of essentialists who equate traditions with a fixed content to which they then ascribe variations. Perhaps there are occasions when we can point to the persistence through time of a core idea. Equally, however, we can choose to concentrate on a tradition with no essential core. We might identify a tradition with a group of ideas widely shared by a number of individuals though no one idea was held by all of them. Or we might identify a tradition with a group of ideas passed from generation to generation, changing a little each time, so that no single idea persists from start to finish.

Consider finally Foucault’s emphasis on the contingent, accidental, and discontinuous nature of the processes in which social practices have arisen. Because the notion of tradition suggests that the subject can modify its inheritance for reasons of its own, it reflects our attempt to move beyond Foucault’s denial of rationality to an acknowledgement of the possibility of local reasoning. Whilst a rejection of the autonomous subject precludes a belief in a neutral or universal reason, the fact of agency enables us to accept local or contextual reasoning - individuals are capable of organising their beliefs in accord with their own notion of best belief.

As a result of rejecting universal reason, we will agree with Foucault that the development of traditions can not be determined by any internal or external logic. We will follow Foucault, though somewhat different reasons, in seeing the unfolding of tradition and history as a contingent, almost accidental, process, devoid of any overall, governing meta-narrative. Because social contexts only influence, as opposed to determining or limiting, performances, we should think of traditions and the ways in which they develop as products of undetermined agency. Subjects are continually
confronting slightly novel circumstances that require them to apply traditions anew, and no tradition can fix its own application. Every time they apply a tradition, they at least implicitly reflect on it, they come to understand it afresh in the light of new circumstances, and in doing so they open it to innovation. The absence of a logic governing the development of a tradition implies, moreover, that any justification of a social practice must be dependent on a particular context. Like Foucault, therefore, we will attempt to show how our present practices are contingent, lacking any trans-historical rationality.

Unlike Foucault, however, we defended a capacity for local reasoning such that the subject can develop its beliefs, and so performing novel actions, for reasons that make sense from its particular standpoint. The capacity of the subject to adopt beliefs and perform actions for reasons of its own implies that we cannot understand changes in mentalities or practices unless we relate them to the reasons people had for initiating them. To accept this is not to suggest that traditions contain an imminent logic fixing their own development. It is, rather, to say that the ways in which people change their beliefs or actions depend on their contingent, local reasoning. Hence, we cannot portray change either as purely random or as explicable in terms of allegedly objective social facts about the individuals concerned. Change occurs in response to dilemmas, where a dilemma arises for individuals when they adopt a new belief that stands in opposition to their existing ones and so forces a reconsideration of the latter. A dilemma might be a factual, theoretical, or moral belief. In accepting a new belief as true, the subject necessarily poses a question of his or her existing beliefs as to how to accommodate it. Dilemmas thus include not only the rare anomalies that prompt major theoretical innovations but also the mundane everyday concerns that prompt almost imperceptible changes of belief. Whenever we take a new understanding to be
authoritative, we pose ourselves a dilemma; and we resolve the dilemma, whether explicitly or not, by changing our web of beliefs so as to accommodate the new understanding.

Dilemmas can not have an objective character: they never present themselves to subjects as a pure experiences or products of pure reason. Dilemmas can be only subjective or inter-subjective: they can arise only in the context of an existing web of beliefs and so tradition. The way people respond to any given dilemma will reflect both its character and that of the tradition against the background of which they do so. The character of the dilemma influences the change because to accommodate the new belief they have to modify their old beliefs to reflect it. The tradition in which the dilemma arises influences the change because to accommodate the new belief they have to hook it on to aspects of their existing beliefs. While the relevant tradition and dilemma thus influence the process of change, they never determine it. The subject might accommodate a dilemma by in various ways. They can decide the adequacy of the way they do so only by asking if they and their fellows are content with it.

By moving away from concepts such as regime of power and technology of the self to those of tradition and dilemma, we would make fairly substantial changes to a Foucauldian historiography. We would examine the way discourses came into being as a result of subjects grappling with various dilemmas against the background of earlier, inherited traditions. Although we thus would delineate the thought and practice of an era in terms of social traditions or discourses, we would unpack these traditions in terms of the local, intersubjective reasoning of those involved, not a semiotic code or arrangements of power. A concept of power would remain valuable, however, both as a way of indicating the weight of tradition on subjects, and secondly as a way of accounting for the privileged dissemination of one or more traditions that
are present at any given time. In this view, we might begin to ask about the rational or ideological nature of changes within discourses, rather than losing the distinction between the two as does Foucault.²⁷

Conclusion

Is man dead? Has he changed in some way? Or was the debate a storm in a tea-cup now best forgotten? Foucault prompts us to confront the question of what a rejection of foundationalism means for the way we think about ourselves. His persistent critique of the subject - his denial of agency and rationality - informed an exhilarating series of archaeological and genealogical works as well as shorter essays of theoretical reflection. These works and essays typically embodied a dramatic shift of emphasis within the human sciences, a shift characterised by a focus on mentalities, the construction of the subject, and the accidental in social life. Reflection upon his hostility to the subject suggested, however, that he often did not adequately separate out possible positions: his critique of autonomy tended to slide into a denial of agency, and his critique of objective rationality tended to slide into a denial of local reasoning. While autonomy and objective rationality are difficult ideas to defend once we adopt a postfoundationalist position, we encounter substantial theoretical problems if we also try to operate without ideas of agency and local reasoning.

To overcome the problems we thus found in Foucault's critique of the subject, we should allow for agency and local reasoning. Introducing such humanist themes leaves much of Foucault's approach intact even as it requires a shift away from some of his most characteristic concerns. To some extent, we might suggest, Foucault foreshadowed this shift in his late work with his concept of pastoral power, his advocacy of aesthetics of existence, and his explicit concern with human freedom.
Nonetheless, there remains much to do in reformulating Foucault’s insights to render them consistent with an overt acceptance of agency and local reasoning. A reworked Foucauldian approach would remain very different from the dominant historiography. It would continue to embody hostility to pure experience and pure reason and so an emphasis on the contingent processes through which our concepts construct our world. It would continue to oppose naturalism and inevitability in the human sciences, replacing them with a concern to decentre institutions through a study of concepts and the ways they operate in various micro-practices. It would continue to analyse the ways in which social influences operate on individuals, their actions, and the social practices they develop, even on occasions when they appear to be making themselves. Yet a reworked Foucauldian approach also would depart from his archaeology and genealogy. It would conceive of micro-practices and social influence in a way that was consistent with agency and local reasoning. It would focus on the traditions people inherit and the dilemmas that prompt them to modify these traditions. It would avoid giving the appearance that individuals are the mere playthings of regimes of power.


5 Foucault, Order of Things, p. XXII.


7 Ibid., pp. 153-54.

8 M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, p. 150. What follows also draws on his inaugural lecture to the Collège de France. See M. Foucault, "The Discourse of Language", published as an appendix to Foucault, Archaeology.


12 Compare the distinction between Foucault as an archivist exploring strata and as a cartographer mapping the non-stratified as developed by G. Deleuze, Foucault, trans. S. Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1988).


16 Ibid., p. 220.

17 Indeed one of Gordon's collaborators argues that liberalism requires political subjects to become self-activating and free agents so as to make them “governable”. See G. Burchell, “Peculiar Interests: Civil Society and Governing ‘The System of Natural Liberty”’, in Burchell et. al., eds., Foucault Effect, p. 119. Agency clearly appears here less as an expression of individual creativity than as a form of power that
imposes itself upon the individual and does so in accord with the needs of the state.

18 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 184.

19 Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, p. 216.

20 On the continuities in Foucault’s work, and their relation to a quasi-structuralist epistemology see G. Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). We can recognise the persistence of structuralist themes in his genealogy and still point to developments and a certain distance from structuralism as is done by Dreyfus & Rabinow, Michel Foucault.


26 On the ethical implications of opposing autonomy while defending agency see M. Bevir, “Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency Against Autonomy”, Political Theory 27 (1999), 65-84.