

The Limits of Experience: Idealist Moments in Foucault's Conception of Critical Reflection.

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Abstract

In Foucault's theoretical writings, the problem of experience occurs in two shapes: his (earlier) discussions of "limit-experience" and his (later) definition of "experience". In this article, I propose an interpretation of the concept of "limit-experience" in Foucault's historiography according to which experience is *already* limit-experience, and not its static and confining other. I claim that Foucault's concept of experience involves spatially and temporally indexed, rule-governed practices and that his interrogation of experience becomes critical not by referring to some other of reason but by rendering visible the flip side of *the limits of our own space of reasons*. The argument in support of my interpretation of Foucault develops in two parts: 1) Foucault's "methodology" should be seen not as historicizing the transcendental, but as giving it up. 2) This renunciation of the transcendental is nonetheless only intelligible and motivated against the background of the problematic of (the limits of) experience in Kant and Hegel. It thereby becomes possible to provide not a foundation but a justification for a Foucaultian critique of the limits of experience.

Keywords: Foucault, Kant, Hegel, Limit-Experience, Transcendental

Introduction

Discussions of the concept of experience, which Foucault explicitly articulates later in his intellectual trajectory, and its relationship to other philosophical concepts of experience, have gained momentum and significant development since the publication of Béatrice Han's

insightful study on the problem concerning the transcendental and the empirical dimensions of Foucault's work.ⁱ Regardless of one's evaluation of the resolution she provides, it has been clear that an understanding of Foucault's histories as the enactment of some form of *critique* requires a response to the transcendental theme as it is implied by reflection on experience and the conditions that make it possible. However, the concept of limit-experience, which Foucault introduces much earlier in his trajectory, continues to remain opaque, both concerning what it signifies and how it relates to experience *tout court*. Either it tends to fall by the wayside as a regrettable intrusion of the personal into what is otherwise a rigorously impersonal oeuvre; or it persists only as a minor addendum to Foucault's interrogation of experience in terms of its cognitive and normative conditions.

That disjunction, I want to claim, is not accidental; for the concept implies the refusal of certain points which have categorial standing in modernity. Therefore, it is difficult to fully articulate it conceptually. This refusal itself, however, must and can be made intelligible, for Foucault's interrogation of experience becomes critical not by referring to some other of reason but by rendering visible the flipside of *the limits criterial for our own space of reasons*.ⁱⁱ Therefore, an interpretation of "limit-experience" is needed, one that fully takes this into account and according to which experience is *already* limit-experience, and not its static and confining other.ⁱⁱⁱ By the same token, limit-experience is more mundane than some of its lyrical evocations might suggest.^{iv} Moreover, I think that the critical thrust of Foucault's historical discourse lies therein.

My argument in support of such an interpretation articulates two claims: 1) Against those positions which see in Foucault's historiography a critical discourse that is in some sense transcendental, a more faithful characterization of Foucault's trajectory is not so much the conversion into the domain of contingency and particularity of what would otherwise be necessary and universal conditions—historicizing the transcendental—as if all one had to do

were the addition of historical variability to transcendental frameworks or schemes; as it is *giving up* the transcendental in the forms it has taken since Kant, and pressing the consequences of this abandonment for a reflection on history, and by extension subjectivity.

2) The conditions of possibility talk which permeates Foucault's work from the very beginning and culminates with his articulation of a concept of experience is nonetheless intelligible only in relation to the role which the concept of limit plays in Kant and Hegel. In other words, the abandonment of the transcendental standpoint cannot be an arbitrary choice.

Thus, in what follows, I place Foucault's concept of limit-experience in an argumentative dialogue with Kant's and Hegel's problematic of experience in order to sketch an account of why the demand for the transcendental appears inescapable but also why its claim to be exhaustive is deceptive. Experience, then, becomes the site where limits are both imposed and contested. Foucault's historiography is critical to the extent to which it makes intelligible that imposition as well as its (possible) contestation. Finally, one must insist that this sense of critique, far from being a repudiation of reflection, implies a type of self-relation which cannot be grounded in an unreflected given.

Part One: The Limits of Idealism

Kant insists that one must distinguish between the transcendental and the empirical senses of philosophical concepts and that it is imperative not to conflate the two. Even though the distinction begins to fray in Kant's own development of this foundational dualism, one requirement stays in place: that in philosophizing one *must* take up the transcendental standpoint, which is separate from and irreducible to the standpoints we inhabit in everyday engagements or in scientific explanations. Failure to respect this distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, then, becomes the source of dogmatism stemming from the (illusory) transcendent standpoint of pre-critical metaphysics. Therefore, the critical project of

“deducing” the a priori conditions of experience is inseparable from the demand to *justify* the standpoint one occupies in that very deduction.

That critique is intimately connected to a worry about and the demarcation of limits is not news: if Kant is right to frame the question of experience in terms of *our rights*, rather than *its fact*, then nothing empirical or transcendent can limit reason’s claims from the outside; therefore the only legitimate philosophical path—one which would go beyond common sense, without messing about with neurons or rats or questionnaires, as Rorty says (Rorty 1979, 151)—becomes that of reason’s self-critique. The reflexivity of conscious experience, which Kant presupposes and seeks to vindicate transcendently, determines from the outset the direction that critique will take: the problem of knowledge becomes that of self-knowledge. Hence the peculiar circularity of transcendental arguments, by means of which we vindicate our rights to that which we already (take ourselves to) possess in fact. However, if this movement does not merely beg the question, it is because “possible experience” turns out to be the limiting concept.

Kant turns geographer in a beautiful section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* titled “On the impossibility of a skeptical satisfaction of pure reason that is divided against itself”^v:

The sum total of all possible objects for our cognition seems to us to be a flat surface, which has its apparent horizon, namely that which comprehends its entire domain and which is called by us the rational concept of unconditioned totality. It is impossible to attain this empirically, and all attempts to determine it *a priori*...have been in vain. Yet all questions of our pure reason pertain to that which might lie outside this horizon or in any case at least on its borderline. (CPR, A759-760/B788-789)

Hume, Kant continues, is at fault for merely limiting “our understanding without drawing boundaries for it,” (A767/B795) whereas the critique of pure reason should prove from principles “not merely the **limits** but rather the determinate **boundaries** of [itself]”

(A761/B789). Because skepticism fails to appreciate this distinction, it can never be “itself satisfying for questions of reason, but [it is] preparatory for arousing its caution and...securing it in its rightful possessions” (A769/B797).

The clearest expression of how bounds differ from limits is found in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*:^{vi} “Bounds (in extended beings) always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place and inclosing it; limits do not require this, but are mere negations which affect a quantity so far as it is not absolutely complete. But our reason, as it were, sees in its surroundings a space for the cognition of things in themselves, though we can never have determinate concepts of them and are limited to appearances only” (352). Therefore, “in all bounds there is something positive” (354), and we know this because “transcendental ideas have urged us to approach [the limits], and thus have led us...to the spot where the occupied space (viz., experience) touches the void (that of which we can know nothing)” (Ibid.). The bounds of pure reason, then, as limits of pure reason in a positive sense, can be conceptually determined and known.

Critique is that activity of thought which already leads to that “point or line of contact” (Ibid., 353) between the inside and the outside, and therefore, already in Kant, the determination of our rightful claims to knowledge requires spatial metaphors, to the extent that the very reflexivity of reason implies talk of an inside and an outside. In other words, Kant is already a cartographer, since he recognizes the necessity of mapping the boundaries of knowledge^{vii}. If such a mapping is possible, however, experience already points beyond itself, not because we could *have experience* (sensuous intuition) of that which transcends experience, but because our reason inherently forms concepts of totalities of conditions. The bounds of experience cannot be grasped from the outside—since that space is void, uninhabited, or inhabited only by illusory monsters—but we can know them from the inside. How then do I place myself on the borderline?

For Kant this requires an intricate balancing act—and it is possible to see the beginning of the interminable oscillations of the analytic of finitude here, at the limits of critique^{viii}. I want to mention two moments: First, “[e]xperience, which contains all that belongs to the sensory world, does not bound itself; it only proceeds [from one conditioned thing to another]...But the setting of a boundary to the field of experience...is still a cognition which belongs to it even at this point, and by which it is neither confined within the sensible nor strays beyond the sensible, but only limits itself..to the relation between what lies beyond it and what is contained within it” (Ibid., 360) In other words, experience does not tell me where it ends—its boundary is not empirical—but I can know a priori *that* and *where* it ends.

Second, I can know the outside only from the inside because the space of experience is constituted by *our* categories, where “we” are rational beings with discursive intellects and sensible intuitions. Even though the inside and the outside touch only liminally, they are anchored in the double status of man as transcendently determining and empirically determined, that is, as subject and object of knowledge. Hence Kant’s separation of the transcendental and the empirical standpoints as two irreducible dimensions of human finitude is linked up with the anthropological theme, to the extent that each standpoint is both attached to and distinct from its counterpart.

However, and already in the idealist conception itself, the reflexivity of experience comes under a certain amount of strain which it cannot contain, since self-relation is possible only through relation to some other. The Hegelian rejoinder expresses the pressure which the subjects’ placement in a social situation and in relation to one another creates. If self-consciousness presupposes recognition, and if genuine mutual recognition requires a genuinely universal basis of recognition, then the subject must be conceived as a community of mutually recognizing individuals.^{ix} The fundamental institutions of such a community will be legitimate, *because* they will embody universal recognition. Hence the force of Hegel’s

transformation of the Kantian opening: cognitive experience is itself a social institution, and rationality is ultimately explicable in terms of recognition. The subject of experience becomes Spirit, i.e., *a socially self-determining subject*.

If, as Hegel says, “[self-consciousness] can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and [if] it must carry out this negation of itself in itself” (PS, 109), the dialectical relation thereby articulated expresses a necessary presupposition of (individual) subjectivity: the object cannot ground the subject, because its negation entails its destruction; therefore only another subject can ground the subject, since it alone can potentially *negate itself* without destroying itself. And recognition or acknowledgement is precisely the Hegelian name for this non-destructive self-negation. Moreover, its necessity and universality is underwritten by *the determinate negation* of the alternative moves available to socially interacting agents. Therefore, Hegel, if successful, would achieve an immanent grounding of subjectivity and the legitimacy of its epistemic and practical activities, not through a denial of its dependence on some other, but precisely by insisting on the mutual implication of dependence and independence.

Phenomenology then is the narrative of the strategies that seek to provide a satisfactory relation to self in and through its relation to another. And Hegel’s conception of *determinate negation* expresses how these strategies must fail for internal reasons, and in so doing, bring to light the conditions required for full satisfaction. One moment is key in relation to Foucault: if we take the strategies to be essentially and basically relations of power, Hegel’s “looking on”^x already appears to have anticipated their emergence and disappearance: to the extent that “I” succeed in wresting recognition from “my” other without recognizing it in return, “I” lose the very basis of recognition. Only as freely offered can acknowledgment do the work which mere consumption of an external object could not; but a coerced recognition soon devolves into mere consumption. That is, I lose myself along with my other.

The techniques of examination, then, which occupy Foucault so centrally in *Discipline and Punish*,^{xi} are not too far removed from what for Kant and Hegel is the essence of critique^{xii}: the *self-examination* of reason, whereby its claims concerning that which falls inside the limits of possible experience are justified, but only at the price of renouncing its rights on what falls outside such limits. And transgression is to be *revealed and punished* by the same movement which reason must but cannot forego, through the tangle of contradictions any claim to knowledge beyond possible experience generates. The theme of self-reference is thus inscribed at the core of the critical project. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is the tribunal, and it is reason itself which issues the verdict on its own limits. And as *antinomial*, the contradictions that accrue to transgression indicate not that reason comes up against something other which it cannot grasp, but that reason is at odds with itself because it seeks “firm footing” there where there are no grounds.^{xiii}

One must be cautious, however, not to move too quickly from the centrality of examination to the problem of freedom and domination. Just as something in our experience makes us suspicious toward the intricate balancing act through which Kant links up our freedom to the status of our epistemic and practical rights as rational beings of a certain kind; we must pose the question why to what Foucault says in relation to a key moment in the history of madness, which will be repeated in different configurations in so many limit-experiences: “Freed from the chains that had ensured that it was a pure object of the gaze, madness was paradoxically stripped of its essential liberty, which was that of solitary exaltation; it became responsible for what it knew of its truth, and was imprisoned in its own gaze, which was constantly turned back on itself, finally chained to the humiliation of being an object for itself” (HM, 499). Why should it be humiliating to be my own object, when an entire philosophical tradition locates the very exercise of my freedom there?

It is difficult to answer this question, not least because it concerns the nodal point where questions of epistemology and questions of morality intersect. Perhaps, by way of getting an initial traction on it, one should reverse the question and ask: Why should it be liberating, or an expression of autonomy, to determine oneself? Or rather, why does freedom find its definition in autonomy? The short answer is that, according to the idealist conception of subjectivity, nothing else could count as its determining ground without its having already determined it as such: i.e., nothing could count as a reason unless the subject takes it as a reason, on pain of heteronomy, or determination through another (or any other).

From this perspective, the “humiliation of being my own object” that Foucault *describes* in the above quotation *must also be* a criticism of one possible mode of self-relation; and *as criticism*, it must explicate and defend its own presuppositions. Furthermore, it cannot do this without at the same time adumbrating what could be in some sense a better form of self-relation. And it *must* do this *because* Hegel seems to have anticipated even that strategy which would refuse it, as when he provides the famous description of the Stoic figure: “Whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence, its aim is to be free, and to maintain that lifeless indifference, which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence, alike from being active as passive, into the simple essentiality of thought.”^{xiv}

Foucault the Modern stoic? Perhaps. In any event, a more fruitful way of reading Foucault’s claim passes through his stated aim of conducting a “*critical* ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond...as *work* carried out by ourselves on ourselves as free beings” (FR, 47, my italics). This “critical ontology” is a *genealogy* because “it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking” (Ibid, 44) the ways in which we do. And such a critique of what we are “is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the *limits*

that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Ibid, 50, my italics).

Part Two: The Limits of Experience

The critical ontology of ourselves, then, which Foucault proposes at the end of his trajectory, resonates with the *history of limits* he proposed at its beginning:

We could write a history of limits—of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished, through which a culture rejects something which for it will be the Exterior; and throughout its history, this hollowed-out void, this white space by means of which it isolates itself, identifies it as clearly as its values. ... To interrogate a culture about its limit-experiences is to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history. (HM, xxix)

I want to underline three terms, namely, critical work, genealogy, limit-experience, and briefly discuss each one as the site of a contestation between Foucault and Hegel.

When Foucault identifies his histories as part of “a critical ontology of ourselves”—as work which “we perform on ourselves”—he might be already within the ambit of the progression Hegel narrates in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For the very principle of that narration is the *labor of the negative*, which, moreover, consciousness is said to perform on itself, to the extent that “[c]onsciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself” (PS, 53); and therefore, “consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction” (Ibid., 51). Our classifications of nature and identifications of ourselves change on the basis of the internal failure of previous categorizations of the same: the new criterion presupposes the internal inconsistency of the previous ones, which presuppose undischarged assumptions, which eventually lead to ultimate consensus as the only basis for objective justification. Therefore, rationality is *self-correcting*.

Thus Hegelian phenomenology achieves the truly presuppositionless standpoint, not by excluding every claim which admits of the slightest doubt, and not by reducing every claim to the immanence of transcendental subjectivity, but by including, in advance and exhaustively, the totality of presuppositions. It displays the *immanent rationality* of socialized subjects by articulating the possible strategies through which they aim at full satisfaction and fail. Failure, then, is already accounted for within Hegel's account of what would count as success. The conceptual revisions, which consciousness "performs," are the *self-revision of thought* because their principle is the internal discrepancy between what consciousness takes as its standard of objectivity and the object itself.

One could say, therefore, invoking Adorno, that *critical work*, understood dialectically "is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking" (ND, 5); but add that, for Hegel, the labor of the negative as speculative is precisely *the accumulation of all shapes of consciousness*. What makes absolute knowledge absolute, that is unconditional, is just its inclusion of all conditions that fall short of grasping the identity of subject and object. Hence the overcoming of dissatisfaction through mutual recognition is achieved when we come to realize our complicity with it: if we look rationally at the world, the world will look rationally back (Hegel 1981, 29).^{xv} The immense power of Hegel's thought drives from his refusal to make cognitive and practical satisfaction a question of immediate intuition—say, of *some one thing* called the absolute—rational or otherwise, but the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of one-sided and *internally limited* partial standpoints.

When Foucault claims that "[t]he idea of *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something which fascinates me," (FR, 348) and that it might be possible to articulate a relation to oneself where the main task would be "to build [my] existence as a beautiful

existence” (Ibid, 354), he might be giving voice to the “beautiful soul”^{xvi} denounced by Hegel, precisely because an aesthetics of existence would shun the power of the negative.

Against this Hegelian objection, I want to claim that what Foucault’s invocation of an aesthetics of existence involves is not a denial of or “shrinking from” negation, rational or otherwise, but the denial of the negation of negation. That is, Foucault refuses to grant negativity a primacy in how we come to revise our classifications and identifications of the world and of ourselves. The reason why “aesthetics” so understood nonetheless involves a negative moment is that it is inseparable from problematization: “Problematization doesn’t mean representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It is the totality of discursive and non-discursive practices that introduce something into the game of the true and the false and constitute it as an object for thought” (PPC, 257). Hence, it corresponds to an ineliminable dimension of self-relation, in addition to power and knowledge, in the formation of experience.

In this sense, Deleuze is on the mark in his “negations” when he says that:

“A process of subjectivation, that is, the production of a way of existing, can’t be equated with a subject, unless we divest the subject of any interiority and even any identity. Subjectivation doesn’t even have anything to do with a “person”: it is a particular or collective individuation characteristic of an event...It is a mode of *intensity*, not a personal subject. It is a specific dimension without which we can’t go beyond knowledge or resist power....” (Deleuze, *Negotiations*, pp. 98-99, modified)

Subjectivation aims to trace the contours of “some event” which cannot be that of the interiority of subjectivity, whatever its modalities. But when Deleuze continues to say that subjectivation is a question of the constitution of ourselves as a self “beyond knowledge and power,” the claim goes awry in its assertion of the positivity and possibility of a region “beyond power and knowledge”.^{xvii} In that sense, there is nothing beyond power and knowledge. But rather than ontologizing that nothing as the *Dasein*, or for-itself, or

transcendental subject, Foucault inserts it into the interstices of the articulation of knowledge and power, as that self-relation which is not sufficiently consistent or substantial for it to provide a self-grounding.

For example, Foucault's problematization of Greek antiquity does not aim to establish a metahistorical continuity: "What must be grasped is the extent to which what we know of [the generality of problems in a tradition]...constitute[s] nothing but determinate historical figures, through a certain form of problematization that defines objects, rules of action, modes of relation to oneself" (FR, 49). Therefore, it is not a question of anthropological invariants or chronological variations; nor is it a "deduction" or justification of transformations. In that sense, it differs from Hegel's interest in Greek antiquity. When Hegel reads Sophocles, for instance, he is concerned with showing how the Greek ethical life *had to* collapse under the weight of its own contradictory presuppositions, because it could not account for and provide the free individual subjectivity which it nonetheless demanded.^{xviii}

Moreover, when Hegel approvingly quotes Sophocles to the effect that "[b]ecause we suffer, we acknowledge we have erred" (PS, 284), this forms one of the dialectical reversals through which Spirit is led to a progressively more inclusive and adequate conception of what individuality demands; that is, to a more satisfactory conception of itself. Foucault's "genealogy of the modern subject," however, is not interested in legitimation, which is the primary concern for Hegel's recourse to history. The realization of freedom through the dialectical implication of the universal and the particular, *as* Hegelian experience, is simultaneously the *retrospective justification* of the path Spirit has traversed. Since the changing relation between subject and object requires that the subject redefine who it is *and* what its object is in response to its failed attempts at relating itself to its other, experience is at once a recognition and a misrecognition. And the negative thrust of this dialectical movement accentuates the failure of any isolated moment to arrive at a coherent self-understanding.

However, the teleological development of Hegelian experience means that speculative discourse, which articulates the positive moment of this process, comes to full objectivity only when experiences are given an appropriate narrative order in memory. Narrative recollection, the Hegelian *Erinnerung*, exemplified by the path traversed by consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is open to contingency, while *retrospectively and at the same time* imposing a closure. It is therefore the sublation of contingency *and* necessity. We thereby shift away from a transcendental deduction toward an account of the *genesis* whereby social institutions are achieved as a *result*. And it is this genetic account that bears the weight of justification, since we can no longer appeal to transcendental conditions.

There is a sense in which Foucault's historiography, the *History of Madness*, say, would be a *Phenomenology of Spirit* without the last chapter^{xix}; or a sense in which *The Order of Things*, for instance, would be a "socialized" *Science of Logic*, listing the unfolding of the most fundamental concepts structuring social reality: not "Being, Nothing, Becoming..." but "Resemblance, Order, History...." That would be Hegel's infinite proximity to any inquiry which historicizes the transcendental and conceives of knowledge and action on the basis of social institutions, i.e., as social practice. But genealogy's refusal of the standpoint of legitimation also constitutes an infinite distance to the extent that it is not so much a historicizing of the transcendental as its renunciation. History then becomes "the concrete body of becoming; with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant reality of an origin" (EW, 2: 373).

If "truth or being lies not at the root of what we know and what we are but the exteriority of accidents" (Ibid., 374), then no amount of retrospection will pick up the contingency of the moment of emergence and convert it to a rational necessity. The "hazardous play of dominations" (Ibid., 376-377) thereby revealed takes place in a non-place,

because there is no common place where the adversaries confront one another. However, I think it would be a mistake to take such an invocation of the “endlessly repeated play of dominations” as a celebration of violence: it rather designates the unavailability of a ground, i.e., an epistemic or practical reason, which could justify or serve as a basis for mutual recognition. In other words, it should be understood as framing our interactions by a concept of interpretation that is deprived of the recourse to an absolute standpoint: there are no criteria for our criteria, but only further practices; that is, only interpretations of interpretations.

Historical inquiry then becomes “*wirkliche Historie*” (Ibid., 379f): It refuses totalization and closure; it does not seek subjective recognitions or reconciliation; and it gives up teleological imposition of unity. But perhaps the best way to describe the stakes of “effective history” is: “The dead. The body count. We don't like to admit the war was even partly our fault 'cause so many of our people died. And all the mourning's veiled the truth. It's not ‘lest we forget,’ it's ‘lest we remember.’ That's what all this is about — the memorials, the Cenotaph, the two minutes' silence. Because there is no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.”^{xx}

The genealogist, then, is the one who will say “That's what all this is about,” or: “[he] will know what to make of this masquerade...he will push [it] to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. No longer the identification of our faint individuality with the solid identities of the past, but our ‘unrealization’ through the excessive choice of identities” (EW, 385-386). And so it will be an “experimentation on ourselves” (Ibid., 388).

But if history displays only the endless replacement of domination by domination, what sense could one give to “That's what all this is about,” and how can one understand the call to experimentation with the limits that define us, without contingency collapsing into

mere arbitrariness? Does not the very concept of rule rule out experimentation so understood? In short, is it only a question of will?

Foucault's giving up of the transcendental standpoint is *not* a repudiation of reflection; it is rather motivated by the conviction that the moment of self-relation entailed by reflection cannot be anchored in any unreflected given. And that includes appeals to immediate intuition, or will, or power, where these are taken as merely given to thought from the outside. There is no unconditioned standpoint, transcendental or empirical, which would provide a refuge for thought outside of the practices constitutive of its forms. And that also implies the inseparability of the forms of thought from what is thought. Therefore, the abandonment of transcendental reflection is at the same time a radicalization of self-reflection.^{xxi}

Against the insistence on the separation between the transcendental and the empirical as constitutive for thought as such, one must offer a different type of reflection on limits and rules, and their normative hold on how we think and speak and act. This different type of reflection is not the opposite of what would be its transcendental counterpart; and, in the light of what I have said above concerning Kant and Hegel, it is possible to understand why it nonetheless appears, from the transcendental perspective, as mere stammering or stumbling, that is, somehow self-defeating. You cannot respond to Zeno by walking from here to there; or refute Berkeley by kicking a stone.^{xxii} But you can formulate alternative ways of thinking about experience such that it would already be limit-experience. The rules with which Foucault is concerned are not only descriptions of regularities of behavior in a given context. They govern perceptions, actions, and statements without, however, being explicit prescriptions or causal connections. This partially explains why there can be no empirical verification of Foucault's claims, since the rules he seeks to describe are those which govern what counts as empirical verification. The necessity at issue, however, is neither eidetic nor transcendental. We may no longer want to call this a rule—in which case historical a priori, or

episteme, or conditions of acceptability, or *dispositif*, or criteria will do. The crucial point, by any other name, is that they presuppose neither anchoring in intentions of speakers nor integration in a totality of relations.

The Hegelian rejoinder is not far off: “The main point that has to be made is that antinomy is found not only in the four particular objects taken from cosmology, but in all objects of all kinds, in all representations, concepts, and ideas” (EL, 42) What this implies is:

The being that is kept firmly distinct from the determinacy, *being-in-itself*, would be only the empty abstraction of being. In being-there the determinacy is one with being and is at the same time posited as negation; this determinacy is *limit*.... Thus, otherness is not something-indifferent outside it, but its own movement. (EL, 148)

The limit, therefore, is not something external to what it limits, to the extent that as a *determinate* something, it is what it is only within, that is, on the basis of its limit. From this perspective, then, the Kantian attempts at inscribing critique within the stable framework of a series of dualities—concept/intuition, intelligible/sensible, etc.—are futile, since liminality permeates existence. Limit, therefore, is both constitutive of what it limits *and* its negation. It is dialectical, i.e., *as constitutive*, it is a nothing that *is*; or again, something is in itself the other of itself.

Dialectical thought internalizes the transgression of limits as alteration—one form of which will be conceptual revision. But as speculative, the infinity implied by this movement is distinct from “spurious/negative” infinity. Genuine infinity is not the movement from one mediation to its other and back, “one damn thing after another,” as one might say; rather, it “remains at home with itself in its other” (Ibid.) The teleology of reason, in its historical transposition, is this movement through figures of self-alienation, until we arrive at the satisfaction of self-reconciliation. It is in this sense that Hegel can confidently claim that “every genuine philosophy is idealism” (Ibid, 152), to the extent that genuine satisfaction—

epistemological, practical, and aesthetic—is not possible unless one comes to accept the ideality of every finite determination.

Moreover, this movement is rationally motivated, to the extent that it is the achievement of a “we”: a community of mutually recognizing free individuals, who determine for themselves and through the inadequacy of their past practices, a shared form of life. There is no alternative to community so understood, since its very historical achievement is supposed to have already accounted for *anything* that could even *count as its other*. If, as Hegel says, “*something* is first *finite* and secondly *alterable*, so that the finitude and alterability belong to its being” (EL, 148); and if, moreover, it is precisely for that reason that it can be infinite; then, otherness as such cannot be comprehended on the basis of an exclusion: exclusion is always already inclusion; such is the trick of reason.

I want to situate Foucault’s limit-experience on this line, but “beneath the sun of the great Nietzschean quest, [to] confront the dialectics of history with the immobile structures of the tragic” (HM, xxx). The strange “histories” Foucault writes, then, are the site of this confrontation: “...in the history of madness [sic.] I was investigating the way in which a culture can determine in a massive, general form the difference that limits it, I am concerned [in *The Order of Things*] with how...a culture experiences the propinquity of things, how it establishes the *tabula* of their relationships and the order by which they must be considered” (OT, xxiv). And he can write those histories because “[f]rom the limit-experience of the Other to...the conceptions of the Same, what is available to archaeological analysis is...the threshold that separates us from Classical thought” (Ibid.)

When Foucault invokes Borges as having motivated *The Order of Things*, and starts by quoting the “Chinese encyclopedia,” which divides animals into “(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame...(k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera,

(m) having just broken the water pitcher...” (OT, xv)^{xxiii}, this is because the fundamental question of a history of the same concerns the ground on (the basis of) which we establish the validity of our classifications, as “when we say that a cat and a dog resemble each other less than two greyhounds do, even if both are tame or embalmed, even if both are frenzied, even if both have just broken the water pitcher” (OT, xix). What justification do we have when we designate *that* “table of categories” impossible?

What Borges’s “fable” shows, in the guise of a merely exotic taxonomy, are the *limits of our own classifications*, the network of necessities according to which we cannot think *that*. This confrontation with limits is the source of Foucault’s “laughter,” which “shatters all the familiar landmarks of [his] thought” (OT, xv). But why laugh?

What Foucault does is to refer the massive number of events constituting our history to the level of fundamental experience, which is to be understood in terms of the spatially and temporally indexed, rule-governed practices criterial for a group of people. This provides a better grid of historical intelligibility, where “better” means: capable of discerning the *historical singularity* of events and *critical interrogation* of their conditions of emergence. I want to add: it also explains the uneasiness we feel before this “laughter,” since it seeks to articulate a type of affirmation which is grounded neither in the recognition of truth understood as correspondence to an independent reality, nor in the mutual recognition of subjects understood as rational autonomous beings.^{xxiv} It forgoes both the quasi-transcendental presuppositions of communicative action and consensus, and the dialectical development and rational reconstruction of a self-realizing community.

Gillian Rose claims that “[n]either positive nor negative, [Foucault’s] affirmation is without determination or characteristic; it does not represent an encounter with the power of another but an ecstasy of blind laughter or blinding tears, which...is simply that old familiar

despair” (Rose 1991, 207). But I think she is mistaken, for two reasons: First, this affirmation does not deny reflection, or self-relation, or even negation, but only a particular conception of negation which seeks to recover “what we have lost over the last half-century...in the second degree, by means of the analysis of...analyses” (AK, 202). Therefore, it is neither a question of what one could call writing the history of reason in terms of a reason without history, nor the denial of subjectivity, but of “[freeing] history from the grip of phenomenology,” as well as denying satisfaction to “all transcendental narcissism” (Ibid., 203). In other words, it is only the denial of the dilemma according to which a particular conception of rationality would seal itself against all empirical conditioning in advance, and say: “either it does not reach us or we claim it” (Ibid., 206).

Second, there *is* something of despair in Foucault’s laughter; he says as much himself: “The uneasiness that makes us laugh when we read Borges...” (OT, xviii) And just what should be so bad about “that old familiar despair”? The “uneasiness” is related to the “distress of those whose language has been destroyed: loss of what is ‘common’ to place and name” (Ibid., xix). Some aphasiacs, Foucault informs us, are consistently unable to arrange colored skeins of wool into any coherent pattern on top of a table:

[A]s though that simple rectangle were unable to serve in their case as a homogenous and neutral space in which things could be placed....Within this space in which things are normally arranged and given names, the aphasiac will create a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets....But no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again...so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups, then dispersing them again....” (Ibid., xviii)

I know of no better description of how Foucault’s historiography itself patterns its “material,” and therefore of the experience of reading his histories. Foucault the aphasiac? Perhaps. But perhaps this form of historical aphasia is precisely our fundamental experience.

The interstices separating and juxtaposing our categories is where monstrosity lurks. These monsters are not exactly on the order of what is fictional—*fabula*, or fabulous—since that has its own place in our categories. Rather, what is *liminal* about experience, thereby making it already limit-experience, is the utter contingency of the practices, discursive and non-discursive, that sustain our classifications and identifications. No transcendental ground, not even a historically modulated one, can account for the ways in which we think and act and speak, if “accounting” is understood as rational legitimation. In that sense, there is no accounting for the ways in which we count—on one another, but also on the world. If it is Borges’s *fiction* which helps us to this “realization,” it is not surprising that there is something fictional about Foucault’s histories. For it is possible to assert that, not unlike Borges, he too “dispenses with the least obvious, but most compelling of necessities; he does away with the *site*, the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed” (OT, xvii). But if history so understood *does* something more than what we, perhaps too easily, call “fiction,” it is because it makes it possible to see “a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous” (Ibid., xvii-xviii)

There is something tragic about this, and even tragedies have a denouement. But perhaps tragedy here should only be understood in its contrast with both dialectics and rational reconstruction: it is the denunciation of that rationality which transforms differences into oppositions, in order then to make negation determinate and thereby vindicate teleology in modernity. The work so constructed is rather “... the problematization of something which is real, but that problematization is something which is dependent on our knowledge...techniques, social relations and economical processes” (FL, 418). A historical critique of this type is necessarily unsatisfactory, since it disavows both transcendental and empirical grounding; and therefore, it is necessarily problematic and fragile, since it depends *only* on what it criticizes, making its cooptation possible in principle.

But perhaps this fragility is precisely what harbors its *indeterminate negativity*. Kant invoked the transcendental as precisely that dimension of thought which, once religion loses its hegemony and natural purposes lose their credibility, makes freedom theoretically possible and practically necessary. But its grounding in a formal categorial framework—it matters little whether that is inscribed in a doctrine of faculties or the norms of communicative action—secures the enlightenment of good reasons only to blind us to how we can also be *blinded by good reasons*. Foucault’s “experience”, however, as that place without ground where normative (power) and cognitive (knowledge) conditions are articulated as both governing and immanent in practices, enables us to understand how no sense can be given to reasons independently of social sanctions. It thereby renders visible the limits on what can be recognized as capable of being true or false, or what can count as a possible object for normative evaluation. The intelligibility of experience so understood is neither transcendently constituted nor empirically given, but intimately tied up with the internal connections between its elements.

The flip side of this, however, is that satisfaction cannot be achieved simply by deciding to no longer take up the transcendental standpoint. Giving up the transcendental cannot simply be an expression of caprice but has to offer some *reasons* why. But this requirement threatens to bring the entire panoply of modern philosophy in through the back door, and make Foucault a captive of the same analytic he disclaims. The above account goes part of the way toward motivating that renunciation: it is a matter of no longer taking as central *any* item as transcendently determining and empirically determined, where this decentring is a matter of denying *the epistemological functions* it performs in the modern episteme. It is also necessary to follow the consequences of giving up the transcendental and articulate a response to what is thereby lost. It is Foucault’s rearticulation of the concept of experience as limit that can meet this challenge. However, what *is* missing in Foucault’s

accounts is a more finely-tuned attention to how norms achieve their hold on us and the conditions for their transformation. I think this requires a different kind of engagement with psychology and psychoanalysis than the one Foucault provides.

ⁱ The principle works I have in mind are: Han (2002); Oksala (2005); Allen (2007); Djaballah (2008); Thomson (2008; 2010); Koopman (2010)

ⁱⁱ A full defense of this claim would require a more detailed analysis of what Foucault might mean by ‘practice’ and what it might be to interpret this as ‘criterial’. At stake is whether a comprehensive and consistent development may be provided of the definition Foucault offers in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, p. 4 : “What I planned, therefore, was a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture.” In other words, I think that the three “domains” of knowledge, normativity, and subjectivity, the correlation of which *is* experience, provides us with a non-subjective account of experience in terms of temporal and context-bound rules determining what counts as necessary and what must appear as impossible for a particular group in a given period, articulating both cognitive and normative practices, and implying a necessary moment of self-relation. The present study only focuses on that aspect of this project according to which a history of the same, far from being *categorially and in principle* separated from a history of the other, forms with it an imbrication. Foucault, therefore, is partly justified to offer the interrogation of experience as that which retrospectively gives coherence to his histories. I say “partly”, because some of his earlier methodological claims are thereby rendered redundant.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Limit-experience’ itself has a convoluted history, and its interpretation in relation to Foucault usually elicits comparison with Karl Jaspers and his concept of *Grenzsituationen*, cited in Webb (2009), p. 15; Bataille and ‘inner experience’. These comparisons often draw on Foucault’s own brushes with ‘limit-experiences’: a not very successful discussion is in James Miller, *The Passion of Foucault*, and a more nuanced and careful discussion can be found in Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault” in *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, pp. 62-79. Jay also mentions the invocations of similar “experiences” during the inter-war period in Germany, specifically Ernst Jünger’s *Kampf als innere Erlebnis* (1922), p. 73. Heidegger, of course, has something to do with all such occurrences of ‘limit-experience’ in the twentieth century; see, for instance, his discussions of anxiety in section 40 (p. 228ff) and of authentic being-towards-death in section 53 (p. 304ff) in *Being and Time*. Habermas’s hasty charges of *Lebensphilosophie* against Foucault are in part intelligible against this backdrop. The conception articulated in the present study differs from these by emphasizing the imbrication of limit-experience with Foucault’s (much later) definition of experience.

^{iv} So, in what follows, I refrain from discussing figures such as Blanchot, Bataille, Sade, and Klossowski, which are typically (and rightly) associated with this concept in the writings of Foucault. The claim I advance, however, resists the confinement of limit-experience to “literature” or to one *particular* kind of experience. In this sense, *any* experience potentially *is* limit-experience. Under what conditions this potentiality may be actualized, and why it fails more often than not, is an important question implied by the claim I defend here. But it is also beyond the scope of the present study.

^v CPR A758-769/B786-797, where it is a question of “the discipline of pure reason in polemical use” no less.

^{vi} “On the Determination of the Bounds of Reason,” 350-365 (I cite the marginal pagination.)

^{vii} For “Foucault as cartographer,” see Deleuze 1988, p. 23ff. By insisting that the dimension of self-relation in Foucault’s concept of experience can only be motivated against the background of this problematic in Kant and Hegel, I am proposing a different interpretation of “cartography” than is found in Deleuze. For the importance of spatial reasoning in Foucault, see Flynn 2005.

^{viii} A detailed discussion of Foucault’s articulation of the analytic of finitude is given by Han, *op. cit.*, Part 1. Contrary to her claim that Foucault’s reflectively methodological claims also fall prey to the oscillations he describes, I want to read the analytic of finitude *as a critical argument* in *The Order of Things*, as offering not yet another transcendental or quasi-transcendental argument to the effect that the target epistemic moves are impossible *in principle*, but that we have good reasons to give up trying because they are no longer attractive; and that’s because the endless oscillations they generate at best show us that they are not fruitful research programs, and at worst perpetuate a misrecognition of the practices they claim to ground. Therefore, I interpret what the extension of the “analytic” so described might be as not so much specific doctrines as determinate epistemic strategies. So, for instance, the reason why there are few if any logical positivists today is due not so much to its definitive refutation in its global goal and particular details, since there are programs that are sympathetic to and continue aspects of positivism; as it is to its repeated failure to provide the principle (of verification) which its method nevertheless requires.

^{ix} PS, pp. 104-111.

^x PS, pp. 54-56

^{xi} DPfr, pp. 201, 217ff, 220, 260-264

^{xii} My discussion of a continuity between Kant’s account in the transcendental deduction and the function which Hegel attributes to his phenomenology in the system follows the thesis advanced by Robert B. Pippin in *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) especially chapter 2. Even though I think that his stress on the epistemological issues connecting Kant and Hegel at times occludes other dimensions of Hegel’s thought, I find his development of the “apperceptive theme” through German Idealism lucid and compelling. However, the distinction he sometimes wants to make between an “epistemological Hegel” and a “social-historical Hegel” can no longer be maintained on Hegelian terms, since no sense can be given to “reasons” which would abstract from their entanglement with “social sanctions”. The transposition of the theme of legitimation into the domain of history in Hegel is discussed in what follows.

^{xiii} Kant says: “[our] unquenchable desire to find a firm footing beyond all bounds of experience” (CPR, A 796/B824), and he writes about “the humiliation reason feels” when its pure use yields no positive results and when it therefore “requires discipline”.

^{xiv} PS, p. 121 And of course Hegel’s claim that such a shape of consciousness could only appear in a time of universal fear and bondage *and* culture finds its echoes in not uncommon interpretations of the mood of post-war Paris. One could insist that Foucault, in the passage at issue, is only describing a particular configuration, namely the birth of the asylum in contrast with Classical confinement, and that his concern is precisely that asymmetrical relationship between psychiatrist as medical authority and the patient as object of knowledge (HM, 499f). However, the question then becomes why that description should have any value beyond its own boundaries, and more importantly, why *that* relationship should seem paradigmatic of epistemic and practical interactions in modern societies at large.

^{xv} The full translation by Nisbet reads: “Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship.”

^{xvi} See PS, pp. 383ff, 400, 406-407

^{xvii} I think Deleuze is partially aware of this in “Desire and Pleasure,” *FI*, pp. 183ff. Also see *Foucault* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p. 94ff

^{xviii} See, among others, PS, pp. 284f.

^{xix} Cf. Gutting, “Foucault and the History of Madness” (1994), p. 66

^{xx} From the film adaptation of Alan Bennett’s *History Boys* (2006).

^{xxi} This is also why Foucault’s “experience” should be placed in the problematic “defined” by the figures of Kant and Hegel, and not by Husserlian phenomenology. The principal reason for this is that there can be nothing in Foucault’s “methodology” corresponding to intellectual intuition, which, I think, is indispensable in any account of the latter. Cf. Oksala, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

^{xxii} A wonderful presentation of these paradoxes are: “The Perpetual Race Of Achilles and the Tortoise” and “A New Refutation of Time,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* (Penguin, 2000).

^{xxiii} Borges’s account is in “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language,” *Selected Non-Fictions, op. cit.* pp. 229- 233

^{xxiv} See, for instance, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2, ed. J. Faubion (New Press, 1998) p. 74 I owe this reference to Lynne Huffer.

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