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Displacing the Subject of Knowledge

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In the wake of Kantian philosophy the modern dichotomy of subject and object stabilized, and the idea that knowledge was founded upon the structure of “the subject of knowledge” became one of the central themes of nineteenth-century thought. This idea was absorbed into phenomenology, which came to be understood by Husserl as a science describing the functioning of the transcendental subject in the constitution of the world. The twentieth century has seen many attempts to displace this conception of the subject. This paper will examine Foucault’s attempt to replace the subject with concrete “practices” that constitute subjects. Furthermore, the prevalent tendency to transform discourse analysis into a new form of epistemology will be criticized. Paul Veyne’s works on Foucault will be used to exemplify this tendency, and it will be shown how his reading gives rise to a new form of metaphysics which repeats the problematic that Foucault originally aimed to overcome.

In a late text, Foucault formulated three principles of method to summarize his approach to history. First, one should examine supposed anthropological universals as historical constructs. Second, instead of accounting for the possibility of knowledge of objects in terms of a constitutive subject, one should study the concrete practices in which subjects and objects “are formed and transformed” in relation to each other. Finally, one should address “practices” as the proper domain of analysis, where these practices are understood as “a way of acting and thinking at once, that provide the intelligibility key for the correlative constitution of the subject and the object.” (Foucault 1998: 462-3)

Foucault had earlier described his way of proceeding as “regressive” in relation to the Kantian or Husserlian theme of the transcendental. He said that he tried “to assume a greater and greater detachment in order to define the historical conditions and transformations of our knowledge. I try to historicize to the utmost in order to leave as little space as possible to the transcendental.” (Foucault 1996: 99) In the Order of Things, he contrasts his approach to “the phenomenological approach,” asserting that “the historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice.” (Foucault 1994: xiv) In The Archaeology of Knowledge, where he tried to elaborate his method, he wrote that he wanted to “define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme.” (Foucault 2006: 17) In speaking of anthropology here, he meant the idea...
that a historical analysis must in the last resort be grounded in a theory of “Man” understood as subject of knowledge, transcendental ego, etc.

What he tried to formulate was a method for the analysis of discourse which would not aim to reduce or ground this discourse in a theory of the subject. Instead, he aimed to describe “discourses as practices obeying certain rules.” (ibid.: 155) In *The Order of Things*, he had described the regularity shared by natural history, economy and grammar during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how, at the turn of the nineteenth century, “the space of knowledge” came to be rearranged when biology, political economy and philology emerged, sharing a new form of regularity. Without knowing it, the naturalists, economists and grammarians used “the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories.” (Foucault 1994: xi) The archeological method described the way in which specific scientific practices, by using historically specific rules, bring about “the formation of objects” and the formation of “a number of possible subjective positions.” This was not meant to expel the subject from the analysis, but “to define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse.” (Foucault 2006: 78, 119, 221)

We should pay close attention to the transformations that the categories of “subject” and “object” undergo here. In his attempt to displace the founding role of the subject of knowledge, Foucault retained the categories of subject and object as part of his methodological framework. Instead of aiming at a theory of the subject of knowledge in general Foucault described the specific subjective positions that are carved out in discursive practices. In the case of, for example, clinical medicine, the subjective positions are the whole group of functions of observation, interrogation, deciphering that may be exercised by the subject of medical discourse. Objects of knowledge, to take examples from psychopathology, would be hallucinations, speech disorders, sexual aberrations, etc. (ibid.: 201, 45)

Foucault’s methodology in a certain sense mirrors the structure of transcendental philosophy. But instead of attempting a general exposition of the subject and object of knowledge, it studies specific forms of subjects and objects emerging within practices. They are brought down from the heights of philosophical abstraction, and discursive practices are said to provide “the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse.” (ibid.: 201) Foucault is clear that he is not offering a totalizing conception of historical analysis, but rather one analytical approach among other possible ones. There is a prevalent tendency, though, among the readers of Foucault, to disengage the methodological framework of discourse analysis from the concrete historical analyses which it was designed to
serve and transform it into a new form of universalist perspective. This will be exemplified here through the works of Paul Veyne.

In *Foucault Revolutionizes History*, Veyne writes that he wants “to show the practical usefulness of Foucault’s method.” (Veyne 1997: 146) Most significantly, Foucault is said to have shown how to overcome the belief in “natural objects” constant through history. Veyne starts by clarifying the distinctive character of Foucault’s method by means of examples but soon turns to the extraction of epistemological consequences. The objects that we tend to fix our eyes on have but an apparent constancy through time, Veyne tells us. In reality, objects are always correlates of discursive practices. Only in relation to a specific, historically determined, practice can something be said to “be” in a certain way. In abstraction from such a practice, we have but empty words.

Objects seem to determine our behavior, but our practice determines its own objects in the first place. Let us start, then, with that practice itself, so that the object to which it applies is what it is only in relation to that practice […]. The relation determines the object, and only what is determined exists. (ibid.: 155)

When we historicize our objects, we realize that they were only objects in relation to a practice that “objectifies” them, and the same applies to the subject: “consciousness is not constitutive but constituted.” (ibid.: 159, 176) While this does not entail that there is nothing beyond discourse, Veyne is quick to add, the “prediscursive” referents are not “natural objects,” but pure potentiality. We have a “wholly material universe, made up of prediscursive referents that remain faceless potentialities.” (ibid.: 171) Materiality lacks, in abstraction from concrete practices, all determination. Only through a practice that actualizes this potentiality do “objects” and “subjects” appear.

In a more recent work, Veyne describes what he calls “a tacit metaphysical sensitivity” characterizing Foucault’s view of history: that everything we think we know is limited and we cannot even see these limits. And are unaware of their existence.

[W]e are constantly confined by a fishbowl whose containing sides we cannot even see. Given that “discourse” cannot be sidestepped, even if we are particularly fortunate, we cannot perceive the true truth or even a future truth, or what purports to be one. […] [W]e can escape from our provisional fishbowl […]. However, even then, we shall leave one fishbowl only to find ourselves trapped in a new one. (Veyne 2010: 27-8)

In Veyne’s reading we see the detachment of analytical categories from historical analysis. The conceptual framework is treated as the *true philosophical content* and the empirical analysis become
but a way of exemplifying the general mechanics of history. A new epistemology is developed, founded this time not upon a constitutive subject, but upon practices that bring forth subjects and objects. This provokes the question: how, exactly, are we to understand Foucault’s move to the study of the concrete practices through which subjects and objects are “constituted?”

At times Foucault compared his approach to that of ordinary language philosophy. Whereas these philosophers would conduct “a critical analysis of thought on the basis of the way in which one says things,” Foucault said he wanted to pursue a similar line of research within a “more genuine historical context.” (Davidson 1997: 3-5) In such an approach, instead of an analysis of the essence of, say, “naming,” treating it as a universal of language, one would describe the different linguistic practices of naming: of giving something a name, of calling someone by name, of telling someone one’s name, etc. And this description of the “grammar” of the concept, and the clarification of philosophical problems arising out of it, would constitute the true philosophical content, not a “theory” of how linguistic actions are always constituted by “language games.”

The analysis of subjects constituted by practices, as a “regressive” move, I would suggest, should be understood as a rejection of all talk of the position of the subject in general. Just as one should be sensitive to the minute differences in practices of naming, and not assume a common shared essence, so should “subjective positions” always be understood in relation to a “genuine historical context”: specific ways of observing, deciphering or recording. Speaking of “constitution” here might mislead. The point would be that it is only within a specific way of thinking and acting that talk of “subjective positions” can be made sense of at all.

The claustrophobic vision presented by Veyne, of man as “confined” within limiting discourses, is a product of his focusing on the conceptual framework rather than the analysis itself. Whereas it would make sense to say that someone is “limited” if she’s forced to use a specific vocabulary in describing something, say using reproductive biology in describing human love, it doesn’t make sense to say that she’s limited because she has to use language. In order for the metaphor of “confinement” to make sense at all, someone needs to be prevented from doing something that could be done if the shackles were released. But what sense could be made of a freedom from language?

Now someone might claim that all thought and all action necessarily occur within the strictures of a constitutive practice. What kind of claim would this be? It’s not an insight into the nature of things, but rather an avowal of adherence to the methodological framework of discourse analysis. And such a dogmatic privileging of a particular way of conceiving things certainly could be considered a “confinement” of thought.
There seems to be a form of illusion at play in Veyne’s interpretation that shares certain traits with what Kant once called “transcendental illusion.” When we are deceived by transcendental illusion the conditions of knowledge are treated as sources of knowledge on their own, as providing a priori knowledge of “things in themselves.” Kant called this a transcendent use of the principles of knowledge, whereby one attempts to reach beyond the limits of possible experience, and distinguished this from an immanent, strictly empirical, use of principles (Kant 1998: A296/B352-3). What we are dealing with in cases of transcendent use of principles, Kant wrote, is “a natural and unavoidable illusion which itself rests on subjective principles and passes them off as objective.” (ibid.: A298/B354)

Foucault saw the fate of the opening created by critical philosophy as ending in a new form of illusion, which he christened “anthropological illusion,” that is, the illusion wherein the conditions of knowledge are again projected: this time, not unto the world, but back into the being of Man. It was this idea of Man that he wanted to break free from by turning to practices. But in Veyne’s interpretation we witness the emergence of a similar form of illusion. We see once again a transcendent use of methodological principles: they are released from empirical use and treated as providing insight into the very nature of human thought and action as such. The emptiness of the categories of subject and object is interpreted as a metaphysical insight into the nature of an entity called “discursive practice” which constitutes subjects and objects. But within Foucault’s methodology this emptiness is merely the emptiness of analytical categories in abstraction from their empirical application on concrete ways of thinking and acting.

Veyne thus transforms method into metaphysics. There is an entity called “practice” that constitutes subjects and objects. All of us are the products and prisoners of such practices. One can escape one’s practice only by entering a new one. The general structure of the original problematic is reproduced: the subject of transcendental philosophy is replaced with discursive practices constituting subjects. We could say, paraphrasing Husserl, that what we get with Veyne is a description of the functioning of discursive practices in the constitution of the world.

We see in Veyne’s reading a transcendent use of methodological principles wherein they are disengaged from empirical use and mistaken for principles providing a priori knowledge of the nature of the thing under scrutiny. What we are dealing with is a “natural and unavoidable illusion,” as Kant wrote, which rests on principles of methodology and passes them off as knowledge of the thing studied. In this case, knowledge of the very nature of knowledge itself: the process of its historical constitution.
Literature


